

AMERICANA

A 400-Year History of American Capitalism

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Three TAXES

In 1754 the May 9 issue of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* carried a cartoon of a snake cut into eight pieces. The head of the snake was labeled “N.E.” for New England, while the other seven pieces represented the various British colonies in America, with the tail South Carolina. Below the drawing was a caption in large letters: JOIN, OR DIE.

Accompanying what was perhaps America’s first political cartoon was an editorial by the newspaper’s publisher, Benjamin Franklin, calling for unification against a common enemy: the French. Years earlier, Franklin had elaborated on this need for a united colonial defense in private, but the events of the previous year had caused him to be far more outspoken in his drive for union.

Over the past winter, ongoing territorial disputes between the British and the French around the Ohio River had suddenly escalated beyond posturing. In addition to geopolitical prestige, at stake was control of the Indian fur trade in the American interior. The Ohio River, which flowed into the Mississippi River and could take cargo all the way down to French-controlled New Orleans, was seen as vital and strategic to French interests in North America. Located in close proximity to existing British colonies, the vast, sparsely peopled lands of the Ohio Country—sparsely populated by white settlers, that is—were equally the target of the British. Using a familiar template, the King had authorized a group of Virginians to form the Ohio Company, granting it the right to settle

half a million acres and sell this land to other private investors. Given that the primary economic activity of the French in the region was trading with the Indians, they had established trading posts where Indians could bring their furs. To protect this valuable trade, they started building forts to support a military presence. In response, with commercial interests and colonial interests often one and the same, the Virginians built their own presence to rival that of the French.

In an ongoing effort to pressure the French positions, Virginia’s lieutenant governor and Ohio Company speculator Robert Dinwiddie entrusted a young soldier with leading missions into the contested areas. Starting that winter in 1754, twenty-two-year-old George Washington, in carrying out his objectives, encountered both French and Indian factions in the wilderness, with each side maintaining a tenuous peace while making military moves. In the spring, much of the activity concerned a fort that the French had built on the banks of the Ohio River. On the morning of May 28, mistakenly assuming that nearby French soldiers had intentions to fight, the group led by Washington fired on the French. The incident marked the official start of a prolonged war—known in America as the French and Indian War, to include French-aligned tribal combatants—between France and Britain in North America.

Franklin’s JOIN, OR DIE cartoon and editorial from weeks earlier now seemed prescient heading into the summer, as French forces took the upper hand. Blaming the military confidence of the French on “the dis-united states of the British Colonies,” and considering himself fully a British subject, Franklin went on to suggest that the “enemies have the very great advantage of being under one direction, with one council, and under one purse.” As a remedy, a conference in Albany was planned for July to discuss a unified defense among several of the colonies. Franklin’s notes from this time outline ideas on a common colonial system of taxation to fund the common interest, manage all relations with Indians, and defend the coastline—all to be approved by the British Parliament. But the conference, attended by seven of the colonies, ended without any resolution or alliance.

Namely, there already existed a unifying element—all of the colonies were a part of Great Britain, however distant, with the empire responsible

for the collective security of its disparate parts. Therefore, the colonies did not need direct association with one another to bind them. Rather than a coordinated response undertaken by the colonies, each colony separately was expected to supply soldiers and tax revenues to the collective aims of the British military in North America.

In Franklin's Pennsylvania, this wartime taxation caused problems. In the American colonies, local legislative assemblies had long played an important role in governance. With governors appointed by the King, this duality of the executive and legislative functions had balanced local interests with sovereign ones. Pennsylvania, however, had a less representative governing structure than colonies like Massachusetts and Virginia, a fact that stemmed from its founding. Back in 1680, to cancel a debt of £16,000 owed by the King to the Penn family, 45,000 square miles west of the Delaware River had been granted to William Penn—this became Pennsylvania. Upon his death, the proprietorship of the colony went to Penn's sons. Though Penn had ceded some authority to a colonial assembly, all unsettled lands in Pennsylvania remained in the ownership of the Penn family. Once the French and Indian War started, Pennsylvania's assembly had passed legislation to tax its citizens to finance participation in the war, and the language included taxing the property interests of the Penns. The Penns balked. Far from unifying the colonies, Franklin found himself in a crisis, opposing the most powerful interest in his own state.

To subvert the power of the Penn family, Franklin headed to England for a period in the late 1750s to represent the Pennsylvania assembly. Ironically, in his attempt to turn Pennsylvania into a colony like Massachusetts and Virginia, Franklin looked to enlarge the power of the King and Parliament's authority in order to sever the provincial authority of the Penns as the proprietors of Pennsylvania.

By this time the French and Indian War had grown into a larger war of empires in Europe. Spain, England, and France, along with other European states in various phases of ascent and decline, entered the conflict. The Seven Years' War spread to nearly every theater that had the presence of the competing colonial empires. In 1763, when the war concluded, Great Britain emerged as a substantial victor and the world's

leading power. In America it had managed to push its border substantially westward. But victory had a price: The British Treasury, despite the tax revenues collected during the war, had accumulated additional debts of over £60 million over the seven-year period.

Understandably, the British Empire now sought to pay down the sizable cost of its past war through every means available to it, including imposing a part of the financial burden on its colonial holdings. At the same time, it now needed to maintain a standing army of ten thousand troops in America to protect its hard-won gains from the war. In 1765, to finance debt repayment and the army, the British Parliament passed the Stamp Act applicable to the American colonies. Up to this point, while duties on exports and imports had been a primary tax mechanism, the colonies had faced relatively little interference in the governance of their internal affairs. The Stamp Act, however, looked to substantially alter this condition. With hundreds of individual provisions, the act called for a stamp duty—for the act of stamping an official seal on a piece of paper, not to be confused with postal stamps—to be paid when any educational degree or certificate was issued, when wine was sold, when attorneys or other professionals were licensed to practice, when land was surveyed, when documents were filed at court, when ships were commissioned, when leases were signed, when bills of sale were issued, when advertisements were placed in newspapers, and so on. Virtually any activity that required any type of contract, document, publication, or government filing had a stamp duty attached to it. The act was sweeping in its reach. In the American view it was invasive, and resistance would begin to foment.

TO DANIEL DULANY, the son of a wealthy Maryland politician, educated in England, the constitutional issue seemed clear. To him, the English constitution—which itself was a framework interpreted through various documents, acts of Parliament, judicial precedents, and historical understandings rather than a single document—was based on balancing three forces: “Monarchy, Aristocracy, and Democracy.” Over the centuries, English law had evolved to the point where the clear role of “laying

taxes" belonged to the House of Commons, "the representative of the people"; to Englishmen this vital role was a function of democracy. In one way or another, various local districts and constituencies had members in Parliament. For any bill related to taxes to become effective, the House of Commons had to approve it by a majority before presenting it to the King for approval and execution. Writing less than five months after the passage of the Stamp Act, Dulany raised a series of questions in an influential pamphlet he had printed. Calling it "an essential principle of the English constitution, that the subject shall not be taxed without his consent," which was gained through direct representation in Parliament, Dulany asked: Who represents the colonies?

Throughout 1765 and into 1766, instigated by theorists like Dulany, the objections to "taxation without representation" had hardened, especially as the American colonists saw themselves as Englishmen. In Virginia's House of Burgesses, its legislative assembly, a young Patrick Henry made his first notable agitations against the Crown, urging passage of a resolution holding that representation was the only "security against a Burthen-some Taxation," that it was the "distinguishing characteristic of British freedom." Newspapers throughout America published the text of the resolution after it passed in the House of Burgesses.

Massachusetts took things a step further. Its legislature called on the other American colonies for collective action—strength in numbers—proposing a congress in New York to discuss the response. With attendance by nine of the thirteen colonies, the congress prepared a set of "Declarations of our humble opinions" as to the "Essential Rights and Liberties of the Colonists." While professing that all subjects "owe the same allegiance to the Crown," it then with greater specificity detailed its economic grievances. What the incursive threats of the Indians and French could not do a decade earlier—unify colonial interests with a single voice—intrusions into the pocketbook would. Some of the tensions spilled into the streets, with riots against royal authorities.

While the actions of this congress and legislative bodies such as Virginia's had no binding effect, the collective reaction in America led the British Parliament to actively reconsider the Stamp Act less than one year after its passage. As part of the deliberations in understanding the

near revolt in America, Parliament summoned its most famous citizen, then in London, to explain the state of affairs in the colonies.

In lengthy testimony that must have lasted hours, Benjamin Franklin answered dozens of questions in the House of Commons. He took great pains to distinguish the general compliance of the colonists with external taxes, such the duties on goods and commodities, from the tension caused by internal taxes.

Q. You say the colonists have always submitted to external taxes, but object to the right of Parliament only in laying internal taxes. Now can you show that there is any kind of difference between the two taxes?

Franklin: I think the difference is very great. An external tax is a duty laid on the commodities imported, that duty is added to the cost, and when it is offered for sale, makes a part of the price. If the people do not like it at that price, they refuse it. But an internal tax is forced from the people without their consent, if not laid by their own representatives. The Stamp Act says we shall have no commerce, make no exchange of property with each other, nor recover debts; we shall neither marry nor make our wills, unless we pay such and such sums, and thus it is intended to extort our money from us, or ruin us by the consequences of refusing to pay it.

FRANKLIN THEN WENT on to subtly threaten a boycott of English manufactured goods, suggesting that America would accelerate its pace toward self-sufficiency in this regard as well. Tellingly, by the latter half of the testimony, the inquisitors asked Franklin to distinguish between American and British interests, especially in matters of security and warfare. One asked if America would submit to a tax in the event of another European war. Franklin offered a qualified "as far as their circumstances would permit" rather than a patriotic "yes."

Hearing this, prescient voices surmised that if the protests in America

were able to subvert authority this time, it was foreseeable that the colonists would one day repudiate all British authority. To capitulate now in the face of "insurrections of a most dangerous nature in open defiance of His Majesty's government" would have grave consequences. Arguments against the repeal held that the entire Stamp Act amounted to less than one percent of annual wages for the colonists. Adding to the indignity was that much of this revenue was to maintain the defenses in North America, to defend the colonies. Opponents of the repeal called for the Crown to hold steadfast in the face of protests by the colonists.

But the Americans had their supporters: British merchants, traders, and manufacturers feared any boycott of their goods in America, especially as the population in the colonies continued to grow as a market at a rapid rate. In a commercial nation trafficking the trade of its empire across seas and continents, this source of British wealth had its voices in Parliament and managed to win. The Stamp Act was repealed less than ten months after it was passed in 1766. But far from defusing tensions, this marked the beginning of the end, the Americans having tasted the power of collective action.

ON A COLD NOVEMBER DAY IN 1773, the shipping vessel *Dartmouth* sailed into Boston Harbor. On board were several tons of tea from the British East India Company. Over the next twenty days, the ship's cargo would become the subject of a tense standoff.

During the seven years between the repeal of the Stamp Act and the arrival of the *Dartmouth*, issues of taxation and regulation had continued to sour the relationship between the colonies and the British. Once Parliament accepted the American aversion to internal taxes, it then attempted various methods of extracting tax revenues, as it had for decades, through traded goods upon entry into colonial ports. Seeing the extent to which Franklin had acceded to the British right to tax trade as external, the incoming chancellor of the exchequer, Charles Townshend, looked to implement a more sweeping set of duties. In 1767, the year after the repeal of the Stamp Act, the Townshend Act went into effect.

By this point, American merchants had seen the effects of the Sugar

Act, which, despite its highly specific name, had imposed a wide set of restrictions on both the export and import of goods including lumber, iron, coffee, molasses, and even textiles. By applying duties on various commodities going in and out of America, the act made clear that in addition to raising revenues, the British government would be able to regulate trade by increasing or decreasing prices. In effect, a high duty placed on incoming goods could make certain imports cost prohibitive. Conversely, a high export duty could make American exports uncompetitive in foreign markets. In either case, by controlling access in and out of America, it became clear that Parliament could adjust the duties to favor British merchants and producers to the detriment of both the colonists and foreign traders.

Within months of the passage of the Townshend Act, boycott movements against British goods gained momentum throughout the colonies. From Philadelphia to Boston, local agitators and organizers started pressuring merchants and wholesalers who sold British goods to cease the trade. In addition, towns and villages began movements to ensure citizens didn't consume British-made goods. The idea was to have British firms face substantial falls in revenue, at which point British business interests would lobby Parliament for relief. At the same time, for certain commodities such as tea, a habit that large segments of American colonists had grown accustomed to, there was the option of buying the commodity from smugglers, bypassing all duties. For Dutch traders, supplying their tea from China, America became a growth market.

By 1770 the boycotts seemed to have made an impact. The British government was barely able to collect enough revenues to pay for its civil administration in the colonies, much less its standing army. But it was an economic disaster for both sides, and while contested principles remained, the situation started easing due to financial pressures.

The coalitions of port cities such as Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, along with their respective merchant groups, had faced the growing pressure of complying with the ongoing boycott. But as the nonimportation agreement between several of the port cities was expiring, most refused to renew their obligations. Compounding the weakness of the coalition was that British manufacturers and exporters,

suffering as well by having their products boycotted, were able to lobby Parliament into removing most of the Townshend duties. But not wanting to appear weak by completely reversing course, Parliament left the Townshend duties on tea untouched.

For the next couple of years, with the duties on British tea continuing, the smuggled tea from Dutch sources remained cheaper and plentiful throughout most of the American colonies.

Exacerbated by the low volumes of British tea imported into America, the mighty British East India Company's preexisting financial problems became worse. Just as the Virginia Company had once been entrusted as a commercial proxy of the King, the British East India Company had been given vast monopoly rights over all British trade to the east of the Cape of Good Hope, a point near the southernmost tip of Africa—a vast area that included China and India. One of the company's trading roles was to procure tea across ports in China and sell it to wholesalers in London. Upon the tea's entry into England, it was taxed. The wholesalers then either sold the tea internally or packaged it for export to other countries. When it was exported, it was taxed once again. With the addition of the duties upon entering and leaving Britain, British tea was already uncompetitive before it left the port in London. Paradoxically, this had a beneficial effect in America. With the addition of the Townshend duty, the price of British tea was high enough that it didn't sell as much as it otherwise could have, which then caused the Treasury to not collect much tax by way of the Townshend duty on tea.

The British East India Company, seeking relief from the British government, made a host of financial concessions in exchange for a large loan of £1.4 million. But in addition to the loan, it received one significant benefit: The British East India Company would be allowed to sell Chinese tea directly to the American market, bypassing the entry and export duties in the ports of England. The only tax the tea would face would be the Townshend duty upon entry in America. This would make British tea much cheaper and more competitive in the American market, meaning that the British government was going to collect significant sums of taxes through the Townshend duty. The first shipment under

this new structure was found in the cargo holds of the *Dartmouth*, now sitting in Boston Harbor.

The issue was simple. Allowing the tea to clear customs in Boston meant acceptance of the tax. It meant acceptance of the British East India Company's role in the tea trade. Increased revenues to the royal administration in the colonies meant an enlarged presence of officials and soldiers. The cheap tea was an expensive proposition. And once it entered Boston, it would enter everywhere else. So a group of men in Boston decided to hold the ship at bay.

The ship owner's representative, on the other hand, wanted to get the goods off the *Dartmouth* to load a new shipment back to London. Each day lost was revenue forgone. But a growing dockside protest, along with prominent citizens such as Samuel Adams, John Adams, and John Hancock, wanted to force the ship to return to England with all of the tea on board. Under English law, this would have caused the tea to be surrendered—a loss for the ship owner, as he was responsible for the goods on board up to the point of delivery. To counter the seeming impasse, the customs officials and royal governor simply elected to wait the crowds out to trigger a default. Upon the ship's twentieth day in port, the customs authorities would have the right to seize the cargo for failure to pay the duties—after which the intended recipients could simply pay the past-due duties and receive the shipment of tea.

Knowing this, as the twentieth day approached, a crowd of more than five thousand had gathered. With each passing hour, the possibility of consenting to the establishment of the British East India Company's role in the American market was coming closer. By this time, two other ships, the *Eleanor* and the *Beaver*, had also made it into harbor holding as much tea as the *Dartmouth*. In the evening, groups of men with painted faces climbed aboard all three vessels. With crowds of spectators on the wharves, the men systematically took hatchets to the crates of tea. Over the next few hours, with the authorities standing down, they dumped forty-five tons of tea overboard. In the shallow areas of the harbor, mountains of tea piled up and then receded into the freezing December waters of the bay.

As the tea washed away, for many so did all hope of any reconciliation with the mother country. Within a few months, the British retaliated. Many in England, including the King, traced the boldness of the Bostonians to the repeal of the Stamp Act, a move that they now viewed as a fundamental error in the management of their colonies. This time the British closed the port of Boston, effectively putting the Massachusetts economy under siege starting in the spring of 1774. A few miles from its harbor, the first shots of the Revolutionary War would be fired within a year.

IT DIDN'T TAKE long for the political ramifications of the events in Boston to be felt in Virginia. Its most privileged sons began debating, studying, and analyzing this potential call of history. While only fifteen years earlier the only common bond between Massachusetts and Virginia had been the thread that connected all parts of the British Empire, the colonies were discovering a unified identity apart from being English. The realization that unfolded through the 1760s and early 1770s was that they needed one another.

In the interior of Virginia, over one hundred miles from the colony's capital in Williamsburg, was one of the many rolling hills of Albemarle County. On one especially scenic peak stood the home of Thomas Jefferson, one of Virginia's most fortunate sons. His standing came from his inherited wealth, but his fulfillment came from the rigors of an intellectual life that few other men of gentlemanly leisure found as satisfying. From childhood Jefferson had been educated in philosophy, languages, and literature. His home, Monticello, was filled with books. He planned additions and renovations based on the most beautiful structures of Europe on a near-constant basis. His meals and domestic needs were attended to by uniformed household slaves. His wine cellar had bottles that rivaled the best collections of the finest French homes. In his younger days he too had indulged in the more routine Virginian pastimes of foxhunting, horse racing, and card playing. In short, men like Jefferson were raised to be aristocrats, the American landed gentry.

While George Washington's eight-thousand-acre estate at Mount

Vernon was a working farm that at its peak produced thousands of pounds of tobacco annually, its main residence, with its back to the soothing flow of the Potomac River, was the point of pride. Sitting amid brilliant gardens and fruit orchards, teeming with slaves trained as craftsmen and artisans, this grand home was the center of Washington's life and pleasure in 1774.

Given such material surroundings, how and why did such men become sudden revolutionaries? What was to be gained?

In the answers, ironies abound. Virginia, much like Massachusetts, had been largely self-governing for decades. Virginia's legislative body, the House of Burgesses, along with its governor, had operated the colony with limited interference from the King. At the same time, England itself was far from being an absolute monarchy. From the time of King Charles I's execution in the 1640s, the monarchy had slowly ceded most of the legislative functions to Parliament, a representative body of the people. Indeed, the poignancy of "no taxation without representation" was that Englishmen living in the motherland had some democratic ability to give or withhold consent to the taxes that they were subject to; the colonists wanted the same capacity. To continental Europeans, the unruly Englishman was far too irreverent and free to be considered the proper subject of any monarch.

Thus, the early seeds of democracy in America were not a repudiation of absolutism as much as a clamoring for the same equality enjoyed by free Englishmen across the Atlantic. But the British reaction in shutting down the port of Boston signaled a guaranteed regression of rights in the colonies. If Massachusetts capitulated in the face of British force, the Townshend taxes on tea would be fully in effect throughout the American colonies and become an opening for every other form of economic regulation. The taxes would then finance a much larger English bureaucracy, along with royal governors with far greater power and authority than ever before. In the colonists' eyes, there was no turning back to the semiautonomous days of colonial self-governance if the British subdued Boston. The British were going to dramatically increase their power in the colonies, rationally so given the political volatility, unless they were stopped.

Yet Virginia had an additional set of factors that subtly led to its involvement. Unlike Massachusetts or the northern colonies, Virginia was a net exporter: It sold more to England than it bought. Its thousands of small tobacco farmers sold their crops to be bundled with those of the largest planters. The largest planters then maintained direct relationships with agents and factors in England. Over the course of decades, however, the relationship had turned into one of dependence. The wealthiest planters had become nearly captive to their overseas factors, especially when tobacco prices were weak, but the relationship had often been smoothed out by the laxity of English credit granted to the planters. The planters, in turn, used this credit to procure the English luxuries that had become the standard mode of Virginia living at the top. By the 1770s, individual Virginians were deeply indebted to British creditors. Nearly half of the £4 million owed by the colonies to British lenders was owed by the tobacco planters of Tidewater Virginia.

Washington, in letter after letter to his British factor, Robert Cary, complained about both the low prices offered for his tobacco and the high prices of luxuries charged to his account—the combination resulting in such debts as to be “an irksome thing to a free mind.” This state of affairs put the “high-tempered” tobacco planter in the “comfortable circumstance of squaring his political convictions with his economic interests,” meaning liberty from England also implied freedom from its creditors.

With the port of Boston under siege by British forces as a result of the Boston Tea Party, the colonies called for a Continental Congress to assemble in Philadelphia in September 1774 to discuss a collective response. To prepare for the event, as a representative in the Virginia House of Burgesses, thirty-one-year-old Jefferson began work on a document titled *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*. In contrast to the Mayflower Compact signed by the Pilgrims, which called for absolute obedience to both God and King, Jefferson's piece called His Majesty merely “the chief officer of the people, appointed by the laws, and circumscribed with definite powers, to assist in working the great machine of government.” Jefferson went on to recount that the initial American settlements

had been financed entirely through private funds of “individual adventurers,” with the risks borne by private interests and the lives of men. Yet as the colonies had made themselves into territories of some commercial importance, the power of the King in the colonies had grown. And at this hour, a century and a half later, this growth was culminating in the perverse fate that the men in the colonies an ocean away had more limited rights than the free men in England. The document made its way to the Virginia House of Burgesses, to interested readers like John Adams in Massachusetts, and then to the First Continental Congress, which dissolved soon after.

From here sentiment hardened into momentum, but shots were yet to be fired. Many intended to prevent this civil war, while others saw bloodshed as inevitable, most resoundingly in Patrick Henry's stark terms, “give me liberty or give me death.” In the meantime, a Second Continental Congress of the colonies was called to meet later in the spring of 1775. But on Wednesday, April 19, in the Massachusetts towns of Lexington and Concord, after months of tension, British troops and the colonists fired on each other. Despite what would later be considered the opening act of the Revolutionary War, political forces in the colonies were more than a year away from fully coalescing and declaring independence.

Perhaps more than the shots fired in Massachusetts, events hundreds of miles to the south in Virginia seemed to cross the point of no return, beginning with an act by the colony's royal governor, Lord Dunmore, that threatened the most valuable property of the Virginians.

One day after the battles of Lexington and Concord, but without any possible way of knowing about the conflict, Dunmore ordered a large cache of gunpowder removed from the control of the Virginians and onto a Royal Navy vessel. At the time, the Virginians had been far more concerned about a slave insurrection than about any impending British hostilities. With slaves composing two fifths of Virginia's population, this was no idle fear. And a few recent actions by militant slaves had caused the Virginians to be on alert. When Dunmore removed the gunpowder, the Virginians took it as a blatant effort to diminish their capacity to put down a potential revolt. A group of Virginians then

marched to the home of Governor Dunmore to protest. Dunmore, angered at the prospect of having his authority questioned, threatened to liberate Virginia's slaves, the labor force of southern fortune.

The liberation of slaves by the British had been a festering concern of the Virginians since 1772. In *Somerset v. Stuart*, a case before Britain's highest court, the ruling dramatically limited the rights of British slaveholders in England. The decision was regarded by slaveholders in America with considerable alarm. To many of the slaves themselves, hearing gossip of the more progressive view of the British court, the British seemed the liberators and the Americans the oppressors.

Within weeks of Dunmore's seizure of the gunpowder, the men of Virginia had managed to intimidate Dunmore to the point of fleeing his home to the safety of a navy ship. When the Second Continental Congress prepared to convene in Philadelphia in May 1775, significant hostilities, independent of each other, had taken place in both Virginia and Massachusetts, the two most populous colonies in America. Attended by Washington, Adams, Franklin, Jefferson, Henry, and the other leading men of the Revolution, the conference this time saw the rhetoric escalate and coalesce into plans for a collective colonial defense. Washington, with his military résumé, in a hall of men primarily skilled in the letters, was selected to assume supreme command of the unified Continental Army.

The Declaration of Independence, authored by Jefferson, was more than a year away. But the war had started. Dunmore, reacting to the developments, issued a proclamation declaring all slaves taking up arms against the colonial agitators to be free. As the war raged on for the next few years, a number of Jefferson's slaves at Monticello and Washington's at Mount Vernon would seek their liberty by fleeing to British ships and encampments. Even at the late hour of 1781, months before the British surrender at Yorktown, when the British naval ship *Savage* docked at Mount Vernon, seventeen of Washington's slaves fled to freedom. After the Treaty of Paris in 1783 gave official British recognition of the independent American colonies, Washington was tasked with asking the British to return all of the slaves who had escaped. Despite British reluctance to the further surrender of their honor, eight of Washington's escaped slaves were returned to him.

The sanctity of this property translated directly into political power for the Virginians. The next phase of negotiations among the colonies, to form a more perfect union through the American Constitution, allowed each slave to count as three fifths of a person for purposes of allocating representatives to each state. Propelled by the electoral math of free men and slave property, given that Virginia was nearly as black as it was white, Virginia went on to control thirty-two of the first thirty-six years of the American presidency. Washington's eight years were followed by four years of John Adams from Massachusetts. Then three more Virginians—Jefferson, his protégé James Madison, and his neighbor James Monroe—would each serve for eight years, extending into 1825. Thirty-six years later, Virginia would again declare its independence, this time from America itself, choosing to preserve its economic interests over the Union.