

= Gunpowder Incident =

The Gunpowder Incident (or Gunpowder Affair) was a conflict early in the American Revolutionary War between Lord Dunmore , the Royal Governor of the Colony of Virginia , and militia led by Patrick Henry . On April 20 , 1775 , one day after the Battles of Lexington and Concord (and well before news of that event reached Virginia) , Lord Dunmore ordered the removal of the gunpowder from the magazine in Williamsburg , Virginia to a Royal Navy ship .

This action sparked local unrest , and militia companies began mustering throughout the colony . Patrick Henry led a small militia force toward Williamsburg to force return of the gunpowder to the colony 's control . The matter was resolved without conflict when a payment of £ 330 was made to Henry . Dunmore , fearing for his personal safety , later retreated to a naval vessel , ending royal control of the colony .

= = Background = =

Military tensions began to rise in the British colonies of North America in 1774 when a series of legislative acts by the British Parliament known as the Intolerable Acts began to be implemented in the colonies . The colonies , in solidarity with the Province of Massachusetts Bay , which had been singled out for punishment by those acts in the wake of the Boston Tea Party , had organized a Congress to meet in September 1774 . During the meeting of the First Continental Congress word arrived of a militia uprising in Massachusetts that became known as the Powder Alarm . In early September , General Thomas Gage , the royal governor of Massachusetts , had removed gunpowder from a powder magazine in Charlestown (in a location now in Somerville) , and militia from all over New England had flocked to the area in response to false rumors that violence had been involved . One consequence of this action was that the Congress called for the colonies to organize militia companies for their defense . Another was that Lord Dartmouth , the Secretary of State for the Colonies , advised the colonial governors to secure their military supplies , and prohibited importation of further supplies of powder .

In early 1775 , Virginians began to organize militia companies and seek out military supplies (weapons , ammunition , and gunpowder) to arm and equip them . Lord Dunmore , Virginia 's royal governor , saw this rising unrest in his colony and sought to deprive Virginia militia of these supplies . It was not until after Patrick Henry 's " Give me liberty or give me death " speech at the Second Virginia Convention on March 23 that Dunmore " [thought] it prudent to remove some Gunpowder which was in a Magazine in this place . " Although British Army troops had been withdrawn from Virginia in the wake of the Powder Alarm , there were several Royal Navy ships in the Virginia waters of Chesapeake Bay . On April 19 , Lord Dunmore quietly brought a company of British sailors into Williamsburg and quartered them in the governor 's mansion . Dunmore then ordered Captain Henry Collins , commander of HMS Magdalen , to remove the gunpowder from the magazine in Williamsburg .

= = Removing the gunpowder = =

On the night of April 20 , Royal Navy sailors went to the Williamsburg powder magazine , loaded fifteen half barrels of powder into the governor 's wagon , and transported it to the eastern end of the Quarterpath Road to be loaded aboard the Magdalen in the James River . The act was discovered by townsfolk while underway , and they sounded an alarm . Local militia rallied to the scene , and riders spread word of the incident across the colony . Dunmore had as a precaution armed his servants with muskets , and it was only the calming words of Patriot leaders , including the Speaker of the House of Burgesses , Peyton Randolph , that prevented the assembling crowd from storming Dunmore 's mansion . The city council demanded the return of the powder , claiming it was the property of the colony and not the Crown . Dunmore demurred , stating that he was moving the powder as protection against its seizure during a rumored slave uprising , and would eventually return it . This seemed to satisfy the assembled crowd , and it dispersed peacefully .

Unrest however persisted in Williamsburg and spread throughout the countryside . After a second crowd was convinced to disperse by Patriot leaders , Dunmore reacted angrily , warning on April 22 that if attacked , he would " declare Freedom to the Slaves , and reduce the City of Williamsburg to Ashes . " He also told a Williamsburg alderman that he had " once fought for the Virginians " but " By God , I would let them see that I could fight against them . "

By April 29 , militia mobilizing in the countryside had learned of the battles at Lexington and Concord . Nearly 700 men mustered at Fredericksburg , and decided to send a messenger to Williamsburg to assess the situation before marching on the capital . Peyton Randolph advised against violence , and George Washington , a longtime leader of the Virginia militia , concurred . In response to their advice , the Fredericksburg militia voted by a narrow margin not to march . However , militia from other parts of the colony did march to Williamsburg . The Hanover County militia , led by Patrick Henry , voted on May 2 to march on Williamsburg . Henry dispatched a small company to the home of Richard Corbin , who was the Deputy Collector of the Royal Revenue in Virginia , in a bid to force him to pay for the powder from Crown revenue in his possession ; the remainder of the Hanover County militia , numbering about 150 , marched toward Williamsburg , arriving about 15 miles (24 km) away on May 3 . That day Dunmore 's family escaped Williamsburg to Porto Bello , Lord Dunmore 's hunting lodge on the York River , and from there to the HMS Fowey , lying at anchor in the York River .

Corbin was not at home ? he was in Williamsburg , meeting with Dunmore . Henry was advised by Carter Braxton , Corbin 's son @-@ in @-@ law and a Patriot member of the House of Burgesses , not to enter the city , while Braxton rode into the city and negotiated a payment . The next day , May 4 , Henry received a bill of exchange for £ 330 signed by a wealthy plantation owner , as payment for the powder (he refused the offer of payment from Crown accounts) . Henry then departed to take his place as a member of Virginia 's delegation to the Second Continental Congress , promising to deliver the money to " the Virginia Delegates at the General congress " . On May 6 Dunmore issued a proclamation charging Henry with extortion of the £ 330 , and forbidding the citizenry to assist Henry in any way . Henry was offered protection by several counties , and was escorted by several companies of militia to the Maryland border as he made his way to Philadelphia .

= = Aftermath = =

The incident burnished Henry 's reputation while worsening Dunmore 's popularity . Although his family briefly returned to Williamsburg on May 12 as a sign of good faith , relations between Dunmore and the House of Burgesses continued to deteriorate . On June 8 , Dunmore and his family fled the governor 's mansion in the middle of the night and took up residence aboard the Fowey . The Burgesses had been deliberating the Conciliatory Resolution , a proposal that was an attempt by the North Ministry to divide the colonies . In the wake of Dunmore 's flight , the Burgesses rejected the proposal .

Dunmore continued to make vigorous attempts to regain control of the colony , but after a decisive defeat of British forces at Great Bridge in December , he was reduced to raiding operations and eventually abandoned the colony for good in August 1776 . Virginia 's government was first taken over by a Committee of Safety , chosen by the Third Virginia Convention in July 1775 ; Patrick Henry became the independent state 's first governor in July 1776 .