

# THE SCOTTISH EARL WHO PAVED THE

By Andrew Lawler

Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, issued on January 1, 1863, is rightly considered one of the most important decrees made by an American president. By freeing enslaved people under rebel rule, Lincoln gave the Union a clear moral compass in its fight against the Confederacy and encouraged Black men to enlist in the war effort. Yet the famous document's origins can be traced back to a surprising source in the early days of the American Revolution.

King George III appointed John Murray, the Fourth Earl of Dunmore, as royal governor of Virginia in 1771. The Highlander aristocrat arrived in its capital of Williamsburg to oversee what was



John Murray, 4th Earl of Dunmore

then the largest, most populous, and wealthiest of the thirteen colonies in British North America. He quickly purchased land and slaves, and he became fast friends with many of Virginia's elite, especially George Washington.

On April 19, 1775, growing tensions with Britain exploded into violence at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts. Less than two days later, the governor seized the colony's gunpowder stores in Virginia's capital. When armed patriots threatened to attack his home in retaliation, he warned that any attempt to harm a British official would

prompt him to "declare freedom to the slaves and reduce the city of Williamsburg to ashes." Given that two out of every five Virginians were enslaved, this posed a major challenge to white patriots. The crisis soon passed, however, before Dunmore acted on his threat.

In June, he fled Williamsburg, and in July the governor established a loyalist base near the port of Norfolk, and enslaved Virginians seeking liberty flocked behind British lines. Dunmore had only a handful of redcoats and Royal Navy ships, so these Black refugees offered his only hope for building an army to counter the expanding patriot militia. On November 7, Dunmore drafted his emancipation decree but waited until a propitious time to publish it. A week later, a multiracial force made up of redcoats, white loyalists, and enslaved Black men defeated a larger patriot militia at Kemp's Landing, in what is now Virginia Beach. One Black man, armed only with a sword, wounded and captured the white militia leader.

In the wake of the victory, a delighted Dunmore issued his proclamation declaring free those indentured servants and enslaved people who were under the control of the patriots and "able and

willing to bear arms" with "his Majesty's troops." The decree, printed on his shipboard press, was widely distributed around the Chesapeake Bay, and newspapers went on to reprint the document, which was circulated throughout the colonies.

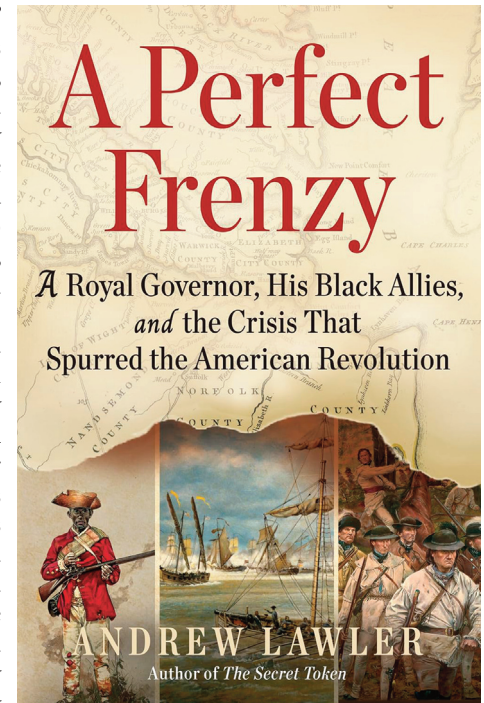
What filled enslaved people with hope outraged many white Americans. A *Virginia Gazette* writer lambasted "the baseness of Lord Dunmore's heart, his malice and treachery" and warned that the families of those who escaped could expect to suffer "the fury of the Americans." Any person captured in flight

could expect torture, imprisonment, and even death. In countless shacks, barns, attics, basements, and cabins throughout Virginia and beyond, those held in lifetime servitude engaged in whispered debates and endured heartbreaking leave-takings. Choosing a chance at liberation over continued captivity was very possibly a life-or-death decision.

Well over a thousand people throughout the colonies chose to flee. "Slaves flock to him in abundance," one patriot leader wrote. John Hancock, president of the Continental Congress, informed George Washington of the decree, which threatened to fill British ranks with men eager to fight for their freedom. Dunmore's former friend responded that "the fate of America" depended largely on defeating Dunmore. "If, my dear sir, that man is not crushed before spring," he told Richard Henry Lee in Philadelphia, "he will become the most formidable enemy America has—his strength will increase as a snowball by rolling; and faster, if some expedient cannot be hit upon to convince the slaves and servants of the impotency of his designs."

The proclamation forced Washington to reverse his stance refusing to reenlist Black men in the Continental Army. The governor, meanwhile, formed Lord Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment, the first Black unit in British history. In December, these troops and British redcoats suffered a major defeat at Great Bridge, south of Norfolk, at the hands of a larger patriot army, and were subsequently forced to retreat to ships in the harbor. The regiment remained active in Virginia until August 1776, when disease and patriot attacks forced them to depart for New York, where a large British force was poised to invade. The Black soldiers fought at the Battle of Long Island and eventually were subsumed by the Black Pioneers, an army engineering and construction battalion created by General Henry Clinton.

Clinton went on to release his own emancipation document on June 7, 1779, from his headquarters in Phillipsburg, New York. The proclamation promised "to every Negro who shall



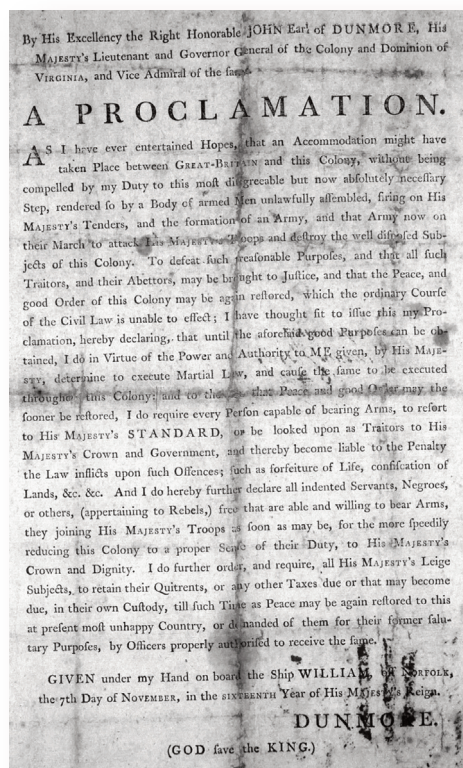
A Perfect Frenzy by Andrew Lawler

# WAY FOR LINCOLN'S EMANCIPATION

desert the Rebel Standard, full security to follow within these lines any occupation which he may think proper." There was no explicit promise of full emancipation, nor did Clinton issue a provision for Black men to take up arms, but it gave Dunmore's decree the stamp of official British policy.

During six years of fighting, about 20,000 Black men fought for the British, compared to some 5,000 who joined the patriots. Aside from Dunmore, however, British commanders were reluctant to provide their Black recruits with weapons, whereas Black patriots often fought alongside whites and proved militarily more effective. With the 1783 Treaty of Paris, Britain agreed to return those formerly enslaved to their white owners. "I have thirty missing, many of which I understand are dead, but there are still some that are very valuable," Virginia governor Benjamin Harrison wrote that year to General Washington, adding that he hoped his friend could ensure their recovery.

But General Guy Carlton, the British commander at the end of the war, outraged Harrison, Washington, and other planters when he argued that those in bondage had been freed by the British during the war and therefore could not be counted as confiscated property. Over the protests of Washington and the Continental Congress, Carlton's staff signed some three thousand certificates ensuring the freedom of formerly enslaved people and granting them the right to emigrate. Most sailed on British ships to Nova Scotia, although some ended up as far away as Germany and Australia.



Lord Dunmore's Proclamation

Long after the Revolution was won, Dunmore remained a notorious villain among white Southerners. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, many feared that Lincoln—who was born two weeks after the earl's death—would follow in the hated earl's footsteps. Even a staunchly pro-Union Maryland paper advised the president against a reprise of Dunmore's controversial decree. That

"scheme of very questionable wisdom" had produced "violent irritation without affording adequate benefits."

Those who opposed slavery were also aware of the earl's precedent. In 1863, Massachusetts senator and fervent abolitionist Charles Sumner noted in a speech that the royal governor's decree was the first in a series of proclamations that gave Lincoln the legal cover he needed to emancipate those enslaved in enemy territory. "Slavery should be struck to save precious blood," Sumner argued, noting that "in our Revolution, this appeal was made by three different British commanders—Lord Dunmore, Sir Henry Clinton, and Lord Cornwallis." Sumner, who no doubt made the same argument privately to the president in 1861 and 1862, insisted these examples vindicated freeing those enslaved by rebels.

Like Dunmore, Lincoln knew that emancipation would spark an outcry from whites on both sides, yet both realized that African American troops could turn the tide in their favor. At a July 22, 1862, Cabinet meeting, Secretary of State William Seward urged Lincoln to wait for a battlefield victory so that the proclamation did not seem "the last resource of an exhausted government . . . stretching out its hand to Ethiopia." The president ultimately drafted a document that, like Dunmore's, cast not as a moral statement but as "a fit and necessary war measure."

The next month, he penned a public letter to Horace Greeley designed to assure white Americans that emancipation was a step of last resort to win the conflict. "If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave, I would do it," he wrote. "What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union."

When Union troops repulsed Confederate forces outside the Maryland town of Sharpsburg near Antietam Creek on September 17, 1862, Lincoln seized the moment, much as Dunmore had done after his victory at Kemp's Landing. "I made a solemn vow before God, that if General Lee was driven back from Pennsylvania," the president told his Cabinet soon after, "I would crown the result by the declaration of freedom to the slaves." He also was careful to make no public mention of Dunmore, lest his move further infuriate whites.

Both decrees were highly conditional. Dunmore had promised to free only people enslaved by patriots, and then only those capable of fighting. Lincoln's document liberated only those enslaved in rebel states, and then only in areas not occupied by federal troops, a limitation designed to avoid a constitutional challenge in the courts. Lincoln did not require enslaved people to fight in exchange for freedom, as the earl had done, but he did provide a path for them to serve the Union under arms. "[S]uch persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service."

Nearly two hundred thousand Black men ultimately flocked to the Union standard, providing desperately needed troops to defeat the Confederates. Dunmore's effort to beat the rebels of his day may have failed, but it set the stage for Lincoln's more famous proclamation that helped save the Union, finally putting the United States on the path to abolish slavery.

*(Andrew Lawler is author of A Perfect Frenzy: A Royal Governor, His Black Allies, and the Crisis that Spurred the American Revolution, published in January 2025. For more, see [www.andrewlawler.com](http://www.andrewlawler.com))* 