

Lord Dunmore moves his flotilla into the Chesapeake Bay

After Virginia Governor Lord Dunmore's naval bombardment on New Year's Day 1776, and the subsequent burning of the town by the Patriots, Norfolk was completely destroyed and uninhabitable. Dunmore found himself in a very precarious position. He had thousands of mouths to feed and no reliable source of supplies. His ships in the Elizabeth River were easy targets for the Patriots' accurate rifle fire from ashore. It was only a matter of time before cannon might make their appearance and add to the mayhem already caused by Patriot sharpshooters. Although reinforcements were in route, the conditions aboard the ships soon posed a bigger problem than the Patriots. In addition to food and other resources being in short supply, disease was running rampant on board the vessels.

Most of the meals on board were dependent on seized cargo vessels and fish the formerly enslaved soldiers could catch. With the Patriots controlling the adjoining countryside, foraging for supplies was not possible and fewer ships were coming into port that might be carrying vital supplies. Disease continued to spread, including reports that distemper was raging. Dead bodies, and possibly even dying individuals, were reportedly thrown overboard nightly from Dunmore's ships.

Ultimately, as Patriot cannon appeared along the Elizabeth River, Dunmore decided to move his flotilla, overloaded with Loyalist refugees, out of Norfolk and to a safer area. On May 22, 1776, Dunmore's flotilla, having grown to some 90 ships, moved into Hampton Roads. Their new destination was Gwynn's Island at the mouth of the Piankatank River on the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay. With the Elizabeth River and Hampton Roads now clear of British vessels, the Patriots initially had more freedom to move in and out of the Bay. Soon the British sloop-of-war Otter was ordered to Cape Henry to hinder the movement of Patriot vessels and to prevent an attack on Dunmore's flotilla as it transited.

Despite being somewhat of a refugee, Lord Dunmore still attempted to exercise his authority as Colonial Governor. He sent a letter that was received by Patriot commander Col. William Woodford, demanding the return of various Patriot prisoners on parole who had failed to return on May 19, in violation of the terms. Among the prisoners "missing" were Princess Anne County residents James Nimmo, John Nimmo, Jonathan Woodhouse, and John Woodhouse.

After debarking at Gwynn's Island the situation continued to deteriorate for Dunmore. Patriot forces besieged his flotilla and the encampment. The scarcity of needed supplies, particularly fresh water, rampant disease, and the lack of medical care would eventually force Dunmore to quit Gwynn's Island in July 1776 and leave Virginia.