

## **Dunmore's Proclamation - Martial Law and Freedom for Enslaved**

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On November 7, 1775, Virginia's royal colonial governor, Lord Dunmore, aboard his flagship the *Dunmore*, printed and signed a Proclamation imposing a state of martial law in Virginia. The Proclamation also offered freedom to any indentured servants or enslaved Virginians who were willing to fight for the King of England against the Patriots. It is important to note that he did not offer freedom to indentured servants or enslaved Virginians who served Loyalists; only those who served rebels. The decree was printed using a printing press seized in Norfolk in September 1775.

The declaration of martial law was to be expected, given the deterioration of Dunmore's authority in the colony and the growing strength of the Patriot resistance. The promise of freedom for "all indentured Servants, Negroes, or others", who joined the British Army was perhaps both a bold and a desperate move. Most historians agree that the proclamation was chiefly designed for practical rather than moral reasons.

Formally proclaimed on November 15 after his victory at the Skirmish at Kemp's Landing, its publication set off a stampede of "freedom seekers," prompting between 800 and 2,000 slaves (from both Patriot and Loyalist owners) to run away and enlist with Dunmore. It also raised a furor among Virginia's slave-owning elites (including those who had been sympathetic to Britain), to whom the possibility of a slave rebellion was a major fear. The formerly enslaved escapees Dunmore accepted were enlisted into what was known as Dunmore's "Ethiopian Regiment."

The only notable battle in which Dunmore's regiment participated was the Battle of Great Bridge in early December 1775, a decisive British loss. Dunmore's dream of a massive army of persons of African descent was ultimately unrealized, as his forces were decimated by outbreaks of smallpox and typhoid fever almost as soon as they started gathering in cramped Royal Navy ships and encampments. When Dunmore finally left the colony in 1776, he took only 300 of the formerly enslaved troops with him. That was all that remained of those who had flocked to his promise of freedom.

Other British commanders over the course of the American Revolutionary War followed Dunmore's model in enticing enslaved persons to seek freedom and security. In particular, the 1779 Philipsburg Proclamation, which applied across all the colonies, was more successful. By the end of the war, at least 20,000 enslaved persons, had escaped from bondage to the British lines.