

Lord Dunmore's "Floating City" Outside Norfolk

For Princess Anne County residents, the events in Virginia that helped propel the eventual downfall of Royal Governor John Murray, Lord Dunmore, seemed to happen far away in the colonial capital of Williamsburg. His removal of the gunpowder from the magazine for "safekeeping" on board the HMS Magdalen on the James River on April 20, 1775, was the tipping point in Dunmore's reign. Facing significant public backlash, Dunmore's promise to pay for the powder resulted in only a short reprieve in the growing unrest. While not the only contributing factor toward his growing unpopularity, it was this incident that propelled the movement toward independence in Virginia, forcing Dunmore to take more drastic measures to try and maintain control.

By early June 1775, Dunmore was forced out of Williamsburg and onto the safety of the HMS Fowey. Dunmore attempted to govern Virginia afloat, under the protection of the Royal Navy, and initiated events that would bring the growing conflict to Princess Anne County.

On the Elizabeth River, near Norfolk, Dunmore assembled an impressive flotilla (essentially a "floating city") of small naval vessels, merchant ships armed for Dunmore's purposes, and others laden with supplies. On board were a growing number of Dunmore supporters and Loyalists who feared for their safety ashore. Norfolk was a key city in Virginia with a bustling port and large merchant community. Controlling Norfolk was the equivalent of controlling the mercantile economy of Virginia. The presence of Dunmore's flotilla had the effect of "blockading" Kemp's Landing. This severely impacted the economy of Princess Anne County, impeding all imports and exports.

Dunmore seized cargo and vessels belonging to known patriots, quartered his troops ashore in commandeered homes, and hid runaway slaves. Such activity was reported in the *Virginia Gazette or the Norfolk Intelligencer*, a newspaper published by John Holt in Norfolk. Holt's publication was not flattering to Dunmore and his naval commanders. On September 30, Dunmore sent a contingent of 15 armed men ashore to seize Holt's press. This would be the first of many raids across the region to counter the spreading Patriot narrative.