Tensions in Virginia lead to the Gunpowder Incident, April 20, 1775

On this day in history, April 20, 1775, tensions in Virginia lead to the Gunpowder Incident in Williamsburg, Virginia, when Governor John Murray confiscates the colonists' gunpowder. Tensions with England had been increasing for several years, but when Boston was occupied, her port shut down and the Massachusetts Assembly disbanded in 1774, the colonists rose up in one accord to resist Parliament.

In September, 1774, the First Continental Congress brought representatives from twelve colonies together to form a joint response, one of which was to recommend that all the colonies organize their militias and store up arms and ammunition in case of war. As the Congress met, Royal Governor of Massachusetts, General Thomas Gage, confiscated the colonials' supply of gunpowder in Charlestown, in an incident called the Powder Alarm, which brought militia from all over New England to march toward Boston. When it was learned there had been no bloodshed, however, the incident died down.

Virginians organized their military companies and stored up ammunition as well, much of it in the public powder magazine in the capital, Williamsburg. Meanwhile, Lord Dartmouth, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, suggested that the governors of all the colonies should take action to prevent these growing supplies from being used against royal officers.

The incident that pushed Governor Murray to action may have been Patrick Henry's "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" speech, delivered on March 23, 1775. All the soldiers in Virginia had been sent to Massachusetts after the Powder Alarm, but there were still several Royal Navy ships in the area. Governor Murray secretly brought 20 marines on shore on April 19 and ordered them to confiscate the gunpowder in Williamsburg the following night.

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On the evening of April 20th, the marines began removing the gunpowder, but local citizens noticed and sounded the alarm. Peyton Randolph, the Speaker of the House of Burgesses and first President of the Continental Congress, had to persuade the gathering crowd not to burn the governor's mansion down. The local council demanded the return of the powder, explaining it was their property and not the property of the royal government. Murray said he took it because he didn't think it was safe where it was located because of rumors of a slave uprising. The crowd then began to disperse.

Word had spread into the rest of the colony, however, and militia groups gathered in numerous locations. Murray threatened to burn Williamsburg to the ground and release all the slaves in Virginia. On the 29th, a large force of 700 men at Fredericksburg was persuaded by Randolph not to march on Williamsburg. On May 2, about 150 men in Hanover County under Patrick Henry did march toward Williamsburg. Violence, however, was averted when Carter Braxton persuaded the government to pay £330 for the confiscated gunpowder.

The Gunpowder Incident happened the day after the Battles of Lexington and Concord began the American Revolution, but before word of these battles arrived in Virginia. This incident shows that the Revolution could have just as easily broke out in Virginia, or numerous other places in the colonies. The entire incident caused Governor Murray to fear for his safety and move onto a navy ship in the York River, effectively ending royal rule in Virginia. Efforts were made over the next year to reestablish royal governance in the colony, but Murray fled permanently in August the following year.