

Virginia votes to declare independence, May 15, 1776

On this day in history, May 15, 1776, Virginia votes to declare independence from Great Britain with the passage of the Virginia Resolution. Tensions had been rising in Virginia, as in the other colonies, for years. Things began to get serious in 1773, when the Virginia legislature tried to pass legislation condemning the Townshend Acts and the regime of taxes and tax collectors the Acts created. In response, Royal Governor John Murray, Earl of Dunmore shut the Assembly down, only to have the members convene independently.

In June 1774, Murray reopened the Assembly shortly after the passage of the Coercive Acts, which shut down Boston Harbor and the Massachusetts government in response to the Boston Tea Party. Murray quickly closed the Assembly again when the legislators called for a day of fasting and prayer over the state of things between the colonies and Great Britain.

The Continental Congress, which first met in September of that year, recommended to all of the colonies that they begin storing up arms and ammunition and preparing for war. Patrick Henry gave his fiery "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" speech to the House of Burgesses in March, 1775, and this may have pushed Governor Murray into confiscating the colonial arms cache in Williamsburg, which nearly caused the war to break out right there when the militia gathered to recover it. Eventually the arms were given back to the colonists, but Murray fled to a warship on the York River for his own safety.

At this point, the Royal government was virtually dead and Murray engaged in the use of force to try and reestablish it. He sent raiding parties against the homes of patriots and encouraged slaves to rebel against their masters and join him. All this outraged the people of Virginia and brought them to the end of hoping things would change from Britain.

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When the House of Burgesses met again on May 15, 1776, they passed a resolution instructing their delegates to Congress to call for a formal declaration of independence from Great Britain. The resolution came to be called the Virginia Resolution and states that the colonists tried over and over to work amicably with Parliament to redress their grievances. Since Parliament responded by raising an army against them, sending foreign mercenaries into their midst, encouraging their slaves to rebel and so on, they were left with two alternatives, either “an abject submission to the will of those overbearing tyrants, or a total separation from the Crown and Government of Great Britain.”

The Virginia Resolution also calls for Congress to reach out to foreign nations in search of allies against Great Britain and to begin working on a plan of confederation to join all the colonies. It also calls for the creation of a state Declaration of Rights and a new state constitution. The Declaration of Rights was largely written by George Mason and adopted by the Virginia Convention on June 12. A new Constitution was written by the convention and adopted on June 29th.

The directives of the Virginia Resolution were carried to Philadelphia and presented to Congress by Virginia delegate Richard Henry Lee on June 7, 1776. As we all know, Congress voted on Lee's resolution on July 2, 1776, with a vote to declare the colonies' independence from Great Britain once and for all.