

Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* ©1999

“Men like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Patrick Henry live in American memory as the proud exemplars of a supremely confident gentry class. Historians have long assumed it was that very confidence that emboldened Virginia gentlemen to lead their colony — and twelve of her sisters — out of the British Empire. . . . The gentry’s self-assurance, we are told, rested on a firm foundation: gentleman such as Washington and Jefferson “exercised almost unchallenged hegemony” over other classes in the province [slaves, Natives, small farmers]”

“Starting in the 1960s, those two notions - that the gentry was brimming with confidence, and that it was in complete control of its relations with Indians, smallholders, slaves, and even British merchants — were challenged. . . . historians . . . have shown that, although the old image of gentlemen exerting enormous influence over those groups was not false, none of them was the gentry’s puppet. In fact, each had its own ability to pull strings. One arena in which they powerfully influenced gentleman was imperial politics. In complex ways, and without intending to, Indians, merchants, and slaves helped drive gentleman . . . into rebellion against Britain. In addition, small farmers exerted direct and deliberate pro-Independence pressure upon gentlemen.”

“From 1763 to 1776, Indians, merchants, slaves, and debtors helped propel free Virginians into the Independence movement in three distinct ways. First, the free Virginian’s efforts to influence imperial policy were contested by Native Americans, British merchants, and enslaved Virginians. The elimination of government as an instrument or ally of merchants, Indians, and slaves was one reason for white Virginians to rebel against Britain. Second, free Virginians were attracted to the most important resistance strategy of the prewar period — the commercial boycott against Britain — because it seemed likely not only to impel Parliament to repeal laws considered oppressive by White Americans but also to reduce Virginians’ debts to British merchants. Third, the thoroughgoing boycott adopted by the First Continental COngrees in October 1774 transformed Virginia’s society and economy in unexpected ways. It presented opportunities to enslaved Virginians and put extraordinary pressure upon the colony’s small farmers. In responding to those opportunities and pressures, slaves and farmers challenged the authority of the provincial gentry. Those challenges indirectly helped induce gentleman to turn the protests of 1774 into the Independence movement of 1776.”

Tomorrow in class you will need to present the answers to these questions in class. Be prepared to write them on the board and to take questions from your peers on this document. You are the expert!

Reading Questions

1) What do historians normally assume about the leaders of Virginia before and during the Revolution?

2) What have later historians, starting in the 1960s, had to say about that?

3) According to Woody Holton, what caused the Revolution?