In the fall of 1775 Dr. George Milligen-Johnston reflected upon the events of the past summer that had transformed the colony of South Carolina from a state of disgruntled loyalty to one of militant rebellion. The doctor found his neighbors' rebelliousness difficult to comprehend. Forced to flee his post as surgeon to His Majesty's troops in the Carolinas, he could find no reasonable explanation for the actions of the colony's leaders. "South Carolina was at this period the most thriving Country perhaps on this Globe and might have been the happiest, but," he lamely concluded, "the Demon of rebellion took possession of their hearts." One might well understand the doctor's confusion. Prior to 1775 South Carolinians were in many ways the most unlikely of rebels. The men who led the resistance to the British Parliament and who would eventually lead the colony into independence had little to gain and much to lose from such a hazardous undertaking.¹

Nor was the doctor the only person surprised by the colony's sudden radicalization. The previous spring the royal government had been sufficiently convinced of South Carolina's loyalty (or passivity) to outfit a surveying ship to chart Charleston harbor, even as other ships full of red-coated soldiers departed to suppress rebellion in Massachusetts. Yet somehow, in defiance of these expectations, South Carolina joined the cause of the Revolution that summer. This essay, by attempting to perceive the events of that pivotal year in South Carolina's history in a new light, will suggest what the "Demon" that forced the planters' hands may have been. The out-

¹ Dr. George Milligen-Johnston, "Additions [of 1775]," to his pamphlet, A Short Description of the Province of South Carolina (London, 1770), reproduced with "Additions" in Chapman J. Milling, ed., Colonial South Carolina: Two Contemporary Descriptions by Governor James Glen and Doctor George Milligen-Johnston (Columbia, S. C., 1951), 109. The author wishes to thank William W. Freehling, Jack P. Greene, and Julie Hardwick for their helpful criticisms of this paper.

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break of the Revolution in South Carolina and in the other southern colonies precipitated an internal crisis. Though they had resisted British “enslavement” in the decade before 1775, slaveholder patriots were now threatened by the enslaved blacks who were their own “domestick enemies.”

One circumstance that the doctor, or the British ministry, might have expected to dampen the planters’ appetite for rebellion was that in South Carolina, alone among North American colonies, black slaves made up a majority of the population. The African presence in the colony had moved one visitor to remark in 1737 that “Carolina looks more like a negro country than like a country settled by white people.” The society that resulted from this peculiar situation provided the ruling white minority with wealth and self-confidence but also instilled a contrary dependence and fear. As its patriot fireband Christopher Gadsden explained, South Carolina was a “very weak Province, . . . and [the] great part of our weakness (though at the same time 'tis part of our riches) consists in having such a number of slaves amongst us.”

The approximately eighty thousand slaves who lived in the colony in 1769 were concentrated on the rice and indigo plantations of the lowcountry and in the city of Charleston, with the result that they outnumbered the white population of this coastal region by more than three to one and by larger ratios in many individual lowcountry parishes. In St. John’s Berkeley, for example, the seventy-six free white males living in the parish in 1762 were surrounded by over one thousand adult male slaves. Moreover, the wealthier planters’ attachment to the social pleasures and cooling breezes of Charleston led them to forsake their country estates for months at a time, accentuating the numerical imbalance in the countryside and leaving many rice plantations to be managed solely by their overseers. Evidence suggests that despite a law that every plantation must have one white male present for every twenty-five slaves, the scarcity, expense, and unre-

2 The surveying ship Cherokee departed the Isle of Guernsey on June 19, 1775, carrying surveyor William Gerard DeBrahm and reached Charleston on September 7. Within two weeks it had been impounded by the colony’s royal governor, and DeBrahm and his assistants were put ashore. Louis DeVorsey, Jr., ed., DeBrahm’s Report of the General Survey in the Southern District of North America (Columbia, S. C., 1971); British “enslavement” in South Carolina Gazette, June 27, 1774 (first quotation); the full quote is: “We have but too much reason to apprehend that schemes have been formed to excite our domestick enemies against us,” from the Declaration of Causes of Taking up Arms, July 6, 1775 (written by Thomas Jefferson and John Dickinson), reproduced in S. E. Morison, ed., Sources and Documents illustrating the American Revolution, 1764–1788, and the formation of the Federal Constitution (Oxford, Eng., 1923), 144 (second quotation).

liability of white overseers resulted in blacks on some plantations living without any white supervision at all.\(^4\)

The considerable degree of autonomy that the black slaves of colonial South Carolina exercised in their daily lives was a source of concern for their masters. Planters worried whether the wealth they enjoyed was worth the risk they ran in surrounding themselves with such "very dangerous Domestics, their number so much exceeding the whites." Perhaps a few would have agreed with the visitor who wrote "that man can enjoy but little happiness who is under continual apprehensions from his slaves . . . ." Throughout the eighteenth century Charleston newspapers printed stories of slave rebellion and violence. As a result, whites could read accounts such as that of Thomas Fleming’s slave who "took an opportunity and killed [his] overseer with an axe," or of "that desperate villain, the negro Cain, who attacked and dangerously wounded his master, Mr. Isaac McPherson and several of his family . . . and made his escape.\(^5\)

The violent resistance of some slaves to their masters’ authority created problems that often occupied the members of the colony’s General Assembly. For instance, the planter Alexander Fraser petitioned the assembly in 1766 that "some time the last summer a stout young Negroe man belonging to the Petitioner did arm himself with a Scymeter and broke into his Dwelling house. That he afterwards sent in several impudent messages to him such as threatening to get a Gun either out of the House or by way laying a Waggon in order to destroy some of his people and a defiance to take him alive." Some nights later, in the early hours of the morning, the slave "came into the plantation to put his scheme into execution." Fraser finally managed to shoot this renegade who, even after being discovered, refused to flee but stood "armed upon the Defensive.\(^6\)

News of such episodes could be very troubling to those who sought to play down the risk of slave revolt by arguing that slaves were con-

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\(^6\) Journal of the Commons House of Assembly, December 18, 1766 (South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, S. C.; hereinafter cited as SCDAH).
tent or submissive. In fact, few colonial slaveholders believed that; instead, they described blacks as “a fierce, hardy and strong race” and wrote of those “dangerous Enemies, [our] own Negroes, who are ready to revolt on the first Opportunity, and are Eight Times as many in Number as there are white Men able to bear Arms.”

To lessen such anxieties over the possibility of a slave rebellion and to compensate for a lack of direct supervision over blacks, slaves captured after committing violent crimes against whites or convicted of plotting to revolt were put to death in gruesome public spectacles. In 1769, for example, a slave woman accused of poisoning her master was burned at the stake on the Charleston green. Other slaves convicted of rebellion or violent resistance were commonly gibbeted and left to die of thirst and exposure. Even after death their corpses continued to be instructive, as was that of Caesar, a slave executed in 1739 for trying to lead a band of runaways out of the colony and who, after being hanged, was “hung in Chains at Hang-Man's Point opposite to this Town, in sight of all Negroes passing and repassing by water.”

White South Carolinians justified this barbarity by claiming that “the laws of self-preservation rendered such executions necessary” and trusted that the “Example of Justice . . . [would] deter other Negroes from committing such Insolencies and Crimes for the future.” Whites hoped that displays of their retaliatory power would lead black spectators to conclude that the dangers of rebellion were too great to risk.

Lacking the manpower to control the slaves as closely as they wished, lowcountry planters resorted to unsettling substitutes: they retaliated fiercely against slaves who ran away or struck back, but they also allowed their slaves a degree of autonomy and control over their daily work routine. In this way slaves were encouraged to accommodate themselves to their lot, and an attempt was made to interest them in the success of the plantation by offering rewards for good work. The relationship between planters and slaves more closely resembled a continuous if unequal struggle than it did the

7 Alexander Hewatt, An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Colonies of South Carolina and Georgia (2 vols.; London, 1779), II, 71 (first quotation); James Glen, A Description of South Carolina (London, 1761), 88 (second quotation).
8 South-Carolina Gazette, August 1, 1769; for an example of gibbeting alive see ibid., August 29, 1754; ibid., April 12, 1739 (quotation); in another instance a runaway who was killed resisting capture was decapitated, and his head was fixed “on a Pole, and set it up on a Cross-Road” near Ashley ferry, twelve miles from Charleston. Peter H. Wood, Black Majority, 283.
slaves' complete submission to an overwhelming force. Both slaves and masters contended for control over the slaves' labor and, to a lesser degree, their daily lives; neither side completely had its way. In fact, domination, by its very nature, is not imposed by one side against a passive other, for, as Shula Marks has perceptively noted, "Even while demanding obedience, and provoking resistance, domination operates not simply through coercion but also through concessions that themselves are shaped by the nature of resistance. These in turn become the basis of consent as well as of further struggle by the dominated." The inhabitants of South Carolina, white as well as black, were shaped by their relationship to each other and to the institution that both separated them and bound them together. White authority defined black life. Black resistance defined and transformed white authority. The result was an endless cycle of adaptation, resistance, and concession. 10

The operation of the South Carolina slave system and the actions of the lowcountry society cannot be understood unless the contentious nature of the master-slave relationship is recognized. In colonial South Carolina the black majority was not merely a passive laboring force that was acted upon but rather was itself a principal actor. Slaves, as much as their masters, sought to protect their own interests and could, within the confines of their condition, vary their actions as they interpreted and reacted to changing circumstances and opportunities.

The slave who chose to contend against the authority of the master class had several possible courses of action. Arson, or other willful destruction of the master's property, was one alternative; a work stoppage or slowdown was another. The method of slave resistance most disconcerting to masters, however, was running away. Runaway slaves troubled the white population of the lowcountry because such action represented an obvious and, to whites, frightening decision for self-mastery on the part of the slave. Although it involved a desperate risk (runaways were often killed while fugitive or when caught were whipped, manacled, or maimed as punishment), running away, or even threatening to do so, was the slaves' most potent instrument for protecting their interests against the inclinations of their masters to treat them as mere property.

The slaves struggled to gain a wider degree of control over their

lives, while the planters’ main concern was to “persuade” the majority of their slaves that accommodation, or at least the day-to-day struggle of nonviolent contention, was a wiser policy than was desperate rebellion. Hugely outnumbered, South Carolina whites feared that if ever they were faced with widespread rebellion and defiance, their authority would collapse. In such an instance the planters’ fortunes and very likely their lives would be lost, surrounded as they were by a black population with every reason to desire revenge. Worried whites foresaw two ways in which the balance that preserved their regime could be overthrown.

First, it was feared that the propensity of individual planters to abuse their slaves by gratuitous cruelty or by overwork in the pursuit of greater profits might set the entire colony at risk from any ensuing revolt. In the Negro Act of 1740, the South Carolina Assembly attempted “to restrain and prevent barbarity being exercised towards slaves” by prohibiting mutilation and “other cruel punishment” in favor of whipping, “putting irons on,” or imprisonment. Other parts of the act penalized owners for failing to provide their slaves with adequate food and clothing. Although rarely enforced, such ordinances sought to place the security of the slave society above the freedom of the individual slaveholder.11

The other threat was disorder, whether from within or without. If weak links appeared in the chains of authority that masters used to dominate their slaves, observant slaves could be expected to take full advantage. As long as the terrible penalties for rebellion were sure and swift, only a few slaves each year would dare to risk it, and South Carolina planters could maintain their control. However, if internal division or external invasion lessened the white minority’s power to punish, revolt might become a far more attractive alternative for many slaves. In such an event, slaveholders feared that even a relatively small-scale insurrection could spread unchecked and the slave society upon which their way of life depended would be swept away in a deluge of black rebellion and defiance.

For this reason, it was feared that disunity or enmity among white inhabitants might inspire a slave uprising or that dissident whites might ally with blacks in order to gain power. For instance, when in 1756 the British government expelled the French Acadians from Nova Scotia and more than a thousand of them were sent to South Carolina, white Carolinians worried that the newcomers would “join with the Negroes.” Charles Pinckney, a member of the colonial council, anticipated that the Acadians would encourage the slaves “to rise

upon their masters and cut their throats in hopes of obtaining freedom.” In this context, where differences among whites bred mistrust and fear of slave revolt, it is not surprising that the colonial assembly was “famous” for its “harmony” or that Henry Laurens, a prominent assemblyman, found “domestic broils . . . more awful and more distressing than Fire, Pestilence, or Foreign Wars.”

With this understanding of the careful balance that preserved the power and wealth of South Carolina’s ruling elite, one can perhaps more readily sympathize with Dr. Milligen-Johnston’s attempt to blame the colony’s rebelliousness on a “Demon.” The behavior of the colony’s radical leaders, the same wealthy slaveholders who had led the colony in more peaceful times, seemed to fly in the face of common sense. By rebelling against Britain these men were instigating division and disorder and were risking an uprising of the slaves that surrounded and outnumbered them.

Despite such a powerful reason to avoid any change in the domestic status quo, South Carolina’s leaders decided to risk these calamities in the summer and fall of 1775. How can one explain the conservative who becomes a radical; the slaveholder, a revolutionary? To understand this transformation one must recall that if the white minority of the lowcountry did not desire change, others in the colony did. Perhaps the true revolutionaries of that year were those black slaves who, in the state of confusion that followed the outbreak of war with Britain, chose to throw their individual and collective weight on the side of the king in an effort to instigate change at home or to gain liberty for themselves elsewhere. The actions of South Carolina’s whites can be seen as a response to this black initiative and an effort to preserve the existing domestic system.

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12 Governor James Glen to the Board of Trade, April 11, 1756, from Knepper, “Political Structure of Colonial South Carolina,” 37 (first quotation); Charles Pinckney to the Board of Trade, 1756, from John Donald Duncan, “Servitude and Slavery in Colonial South Carolina, 1670–1776” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 1971), 813 (second quotation); Christopher Gadsden to the Public, July 17, 1784, in Walsh, ed., Writings of Christopher Gadsden, 207 (third and fourth quotations); Henry Laurens to Christopher Rowe, February 8, 1764, in George C. Rogers, Jr., et al., eds., The Papers of Henry Laurens (11 vols. to date; Columbia, S. C., 1968– ), IV, 165 (fifth quotation); on this point see also Robert M. Weir, “‘The Harmony We were Famous For’: An Interpretation of Pre-Revolutionary South Carolina Politics,” William and Mary Quarterly, 3d Ser., XXVI (October 1969), 473–501.

13 The actions of South Carolina whites during the British-slave conspiracy scare of 1775 have previously been explained in several ways. Contemporary British officials, who knew that no British-slave conspiracy was planned, felt that no one could have genuinely believed it was ever a real possibility. Therefore they believed the entire affair was created by deceitful South Carolina Patriots as a pretext to allow them to take control of the government, arm the militia, and radicalize the colony. Such a view fails to recognize the “fog” of mistrust and ignorance of British intentions within which Carolinians, white and black, had to decide and act. Robert M. Weir has suggested that this and the earlier Christmas conspiracy of 1765–66 were the results of a sort of spontaneous combustion in the white community, sparked by a
Prior to 1775 disputes between South Carolina and the royal ministry were confined to quarrels between provincial and imperial elites. The landed and mercantile gentry of South Carolina resisted, through their assembly, the measures of the British Parliament intending to tax their wealth or to limit their authority. The colonial leaders believed that their accustomed control over the internal affairs of South Carolina was threatened, but their opposition did not mean that the planters were bent upon revolution. In January 1775 Henry Laurens explained to an English friend that South Carolina's political leadership sought only a "Reasonable Liberty" within the empire. "Independence," he wrote, "is not the view of America not a Sober Sensible Man wishes for it." Laurens gauged the prevailing opinion among Charleston whites when he noted that "some are Red-hot & foolishly talk of Arms & there is another extreme who Say that implicit obedience is the Surest Road to a redress of Grievances—the great majority of numbers lie between." Therefore, although determined to stand up for their rights, most South Carolina whites would maintain that position only so long as such a stance remained nonviolent and nonrevolutionary.

In previous disputes with Britain, the colony's leaders perfected a means of resistance that was both peaceful and effective. By uniting with the other American colonies in a boycott of British manufactures, South Carolina whites defended their liberty while preserving domestic tranquillity. From past experience, white Carolinians felt they had only to wait until economic and political pressure compelled the royal government to retreat. A letter written in London and printed in the South-Carolina Gazette reported that while the royal ministers "are loath to give up their tyrannical power . . . they must if the colonies are steadfast . . . If the colonies are firm for one year, and neither import or export, it would establish American freedom . . . ." David Ramsay, resident in Charleston in 1775, later described the mood of that spring: "This was the third time that a scheme of non-importation had been adopted. From its success on two former occasions, and an apprehension that the trade of America was neces-

"collective neurosis" among whites caused by the tension accompanying a state of near rebellion in the fall of 1765 and the spring of 1775. See Robert M. Weir, ""Liberty and Property and No Stamps": South Carolina and the Stamp Act Crisis" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Western Reserve University, 1966), 279. This essay presents evidence that such fears among slaveholders of "slave activism" in their moment of crisis were not groundless. Whites' fear was not "neurotic" but was based upon a knowledge gained through long acquaintance of slaves' ability to interpret events and react to favorable opportunities, in this case that offered by the British ships in Charleston harbor.

14 Henry Laurens to Johann Rodolph Von Valltravers, May 22, 1775, in Rogers et al., eds., Papers of Henry Laurens, X, 134 (first and second quotations); Henry Laurens to Richard Oswald, January 4, 1775, ibid., 22 (third quotation).
sary to the inhabitants of Great Britain, it was generally hoped the obnoxious acts would soon be repealed. . . . During the first three months of the year 1775, hopes were entertained that Great Britain would follow the same line of policy which before had led her to repeal the stamp act.” His countrymen, Ramsay was certain, had not intended revolution. “A bloodless self-denying opposition,” he felt, “was all that South Carolina designed, and was all the sacrifice which, as she supposed, would be required at her hands.”

At its first meeting in January 1775, the South Carolina Provincial Congress voted to enact the Continental Congress’s nonimportation agreement and appointed a General Committee of Charleston patriots to oversee its introduction and enforce compliance. After appointing February 17 as a day of public fasting and prayer, the Provincial Congress adjourned itself until it should be recalled by the General Committee.

Having taken their stand, South Carolina’s leaders waited anxiously for word from London. “We wait to know,” Henry Laurens wrote, “we can do nothing of ourselves—we are dastards in offence, and God knows we have little power to resist by arms.” News was eagerly asked of every ship that arrived in the harbor; the hopes of white Carolinians rose and fell according to the latest rumor. In early April the South-Carolina Gazette reported that “the latest accounts from England, by way of New York, are of a few days later date, and seem somewhat more favorable, than those we had by the Eagle packet boat.” As the pressure on both sides of the Atlantic mounted through the spring of 1775, the first cracks appeared, not in the resolve of the British ministry, but at home, in the chains of authority with which the white minority attempted to bind their slaves. The first signs of trouble came in February, when Peter Hinds was accused by the Charleston Grand Jury of “entertaining and admitting Negro Preachers in his House and on his grounds, where they deliver doctrines to large Numbers of Negroes, dangerous to and subversive of the Peace, Safety, and Tranquility of this Province.” In May a city resident hinted at what slaves may have heard at such gatherings. Charleston slaves, he wrote, “entertained ideas that the present contest [with Britain] was for obliging us to give them liberty.” Therefore when a letter arrived on May 3, from Arthur Lee, a Virginian in London, “informing them that it had been proposed to [the] Ministry

15 South-Carolina Gazette, January 2, 1775; David Ramsay, Ramsay’s History of South Carolina, from its First Settlement in 1670 to the Year 1808 (2 vols. in 1; Newberry, S. C., 1858), I, 132 (both quoted passages); for more detail on Ramsay see Arthur H. Schaffer, “Between Two Worlds: David Ramsay and the Politics of Slavery,” Journal of Southern History, L (May 1984), 175–96.

to grant freedom to such Slaves as should desert their Masters and join the King's troops,” South Carolina whites took alarm.\(^\text{17}\)

Before South Carolina patriots had time to reconsider the wisdom of their present course of action in light of these dangerous developments, Charleston was thunderstruck by news that war had already begun three weeks earlier in Massachusetts. The initial reaction to the outbreak of hostilities with Britain was ill-disguised panic. Henry Laurens described the ruling emotion among the white inhabitants as a combination of “Fear, & Zeal in a delirium.” Lulled into false security by the successful and nonviolent outcome of previous disputes with Britain, the colony had unflinchingly pursued resistance to such lengths that many now felt that it could not safely retreat.\(^\text{18}\)

In an age filled with notions of conspiracy, many Carolinians feared that Lexington revealed “the accursed design of the British ministry, to endeavor to quell the American troubles by the law of arms.” It was widely believed that once the machines of war had been set in motion, they could not be halted and that warships might already be enroute to Charleston. On May 29 the Gazette printed an extract of a letter from London in which the author claimed that “there is gone down to Sheerness, seventy-eight thousand guns and bayonets, to be sent to America, to put into the hands of N*****s [negroes], the Roman Catholics, the Indians and Canadians; and all the . . . means on earth used to subdue the Colonies.” The letter was dated February 10, well before Lexington, which supported the idea of a general British offensive against America and suggested that hostile sails might appear off Charleston bar at any moment.\(^\text{19}\)

Moreover, as the letter also indicated, Britain had become an external enemy, and white Carolinians began to worry about a possible alliance between their external foe and their “domestick enemies,” the colony’s black slaves. Word of fighting in New England arrived on the heels of rumors of British support for slave uprisings, and from the start the two were linked in the minds of frightened low-country slaveholders. Perhaps nothing could have corroded the ties

\(^{17}\) Henry Laurens to Ralph Izard, March 10, 1775, Henry Laurens Papers (microfilm; State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison; hereinafter cited as SHSW); South-Carolina Gazette, April 5, March 27, 1775 (third quotation); Drayton, Memoirs, I, 148 (fourth quotation); Alexander Innes to Lord Dartmouth, May 16, 1775, in B. D. Bargar, [ed.], “Charleston Loyalism in 1775: The Secret Reports of Alexander Innes,” South Carolina Historical Magazine, LXIII (July 1962), 128 (fifth quotation); for the arrival of Lee’s letter in Charleston on May 3 see Drayton, Memoirs, I, 231.

\(^{18}\) Drayton, Memoirs, I, 232; Henry Laurens to John Laurens, June 8, 1775, in Rogers et al., eds., Papers of Henry Laurens, X, 166 and note.

\(^{19}\) Resolutions of the General Committee of Charleston [May 12, 1775], in Drayton, Memoirs, I, 253 (first quotation); also Henry Laurens to John Laurens, May 15, 1775, writes of “the force & stratagems of the British Ministry,” in Rogers et al., eds., Papers of Henry Laurens, X, 119; and South-Carolina Gazette, May 29, 1775.
of loyalty that still bound South Carolina whites to Britain so quickly as a fear that its ministry might be in secret league with their slaves.

The fear of a British-slave conspiracy strengthened the colony’s willingness to resist. Patriot leaders were hesitant and divided about the practicality of attempting to repel a British military attack, but no one could dispute the necessity of arming and patrolling to prevent a slave uprising. The slave scare demanded immediate action and swept all along in the rush of “Fear, & Zeal in a delirium.” When the initial panic subsided, the lives and fortunes of most South Carolina whites were already committed to resistance.

Thus one loyalist observer wrote, “Upon the news of the affair at Lexington . . . the people of Carolina were thrown into a great Ferment. . . . An Opinion prevailed,” he added, that the ministry planned “to Employ the Indians and to Arm the Negroes for the Service of the Government.” Another witness, amazed at the violent reaction, described “the fears of the people . . . that His Majesty’s ministers and other servants instigated their slaves to rebel against their masters and to cut their throats.” Such reports were “credited by the ignorant and unwary, strong as proofs of Scripture writ.” The same correspondent also depicted the currents of rumor that fanned across the lowcountry and spread the panic: “Reports were daily circu-
lated that the Negroes of this plantation had refused to work, that in another they had obtained arms and were gone into the woods, that others had actually murdered their masters and their families etc.” The fact that such rumors universally proved to be “without foundation” had little effect, for before one rumor could be quashed the attention of the populace was directed to another. In this way, within days of the news of war, “massacres and insurrections were words in the mouth of every child.”

South Carolina whites were quick to set in motion their accustomed response to such fears, but this time there was an important difference. In this case not the royal government but the Provincial Congress was called upon to lend authority to the emergency measures. Since it had first convened the previous January, the South Carolina Provincial Congress had never claimed a legislative power superior to that of the royally sanctioned colonial assembly. Now the role of the congress and its adjunct, the Charleston General Committee, in protecting the colony from the menace of slave rebellion lent them a new legitimacy and authority. On May 12 the General Committee

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proclaimed that “the threats of arbitrary impositions from abroad— & the dread of instigated Insurrections at home—are causes sufficient to drive an oppressed People to the use of Arms” and called out the militia to protect the province. “They had,” one royal official wrote, “decency enough to send two of their body [the General Committee] to the Chief Justice Mr. Gordon, the eldest Councillor then in town.” However, they came “not to ask his leave, but to acquaint him with their intentions; for the Guard was ordered, and mounted that evening.” Lieutenant Governor William Bull, when he came to town the next day, could only give his assent to an action about which he had not been consulted.21

Under the orders of the Charleston General Committee “the Inhabitants” of the city were “ordered . . . to do Patrole Duty and to Mount Guard every night.” Meanwhile, “the militia thro’out The Province was armed and drawn out . . . .” In June the reconvened Provincial Congress, perhaps remembering the Stono Rebellion of 1739, recommended that city residents bring their arms and ammunition to church so that they would be ready to respond to a Sunday uprising. By mid-May Charleston was filled with “the daily & nightly sound of Drums & Fifes,” and in June a Charleston newspaper reported that “the nightly Meetings and Riots of the Negroes are entirely suppressed.”22

As in earlier conspiracy scares, a panel was created to examine those persons, black and white, who were suspected of complicity in the feared insurrection. In early June, as if to create the proper atmo-

21 Henry Laurens to John Laurens, May 15, 1775, in Rogers et al., eds., Papers of Henry Laurens, X, 118 (first quotation); Alexander Innes to Lord Dartmouth, May 16, 1775, in Bargar, [ed.], “Charleston Loyalism,” 218 (second quotation). Bull’s actual role in the affair may have been more active than this account indicates. John Stuart, Indian agent for the southern colonies, believed that Bull, in May 1775, in an attempt to ingratiate himself with South Carolina Patriots, leaked the content of a letter that General Thomas Gage, British commander in Boston, had written to Stuart. Stuart had told the lieutenant governor about the letter in confidence. Gage’s letter had contained the ominous prediction that “should you [South Carolina] proceed [to] much greater lengths [of resistance] it may happen that your Rice and Indigo will be brought to market by Negroes instead of white People.” This letter, Stuart thought, had provided the Patriots with the “proof” of a British-slave conspiracy necessary to convince them of the necessity for action. However, Lieutenant Governor Bull may have had a different motive (if he was indeed guilty of Stuart’s charge). As a resident planter and native Carolinian, Bull might have been frightened by Gage’s jocular warning, and perhaps he believed he was justified in warning his fellow planters to take precautions against a slave uprising. In any case, if Bull did reveal the information, grateful Carolina patriots were careful to preserve his anonymity. See Alden, [ed.], “John Stuart Accuses William Bull,” 315–20.

sphere for the examination of the suspects, two white men who were reported to have remarked about the "good news" when they heard that Negroes, Roman Catholics, and Indians were to receive British arms, were singled out for punishment by the General Committee. They were "tarred, feathered carted about the streets and then put on board a Vessel bound for England." The General Committee, having assumed command of the provincial militia, began to function as judge, jury, and executioner and to undertake to enforce order.\(^{23}\)

Henry Laurens described to his son the "trials of Several Negroes Suspected and charged of plotting an Insurrection," which were held the second week in June. The trials concluded at the end of a week with "two or three white people . . . Committed to prison upon Strong Negro Evidence" and "one or two Negroes . . . Severely flogged & banished."\(^{24}\)

However, investigations and punishments did not always quell fears, and the evidence brought against one of the black suspects could be expected to create a great stir "in a Town where the Inhabitants are as suddenly blown up by apprehensions as Gun powder is by Fire." The suspect in question, Thomas Jeremiah, was a free black man who worked as a harbor pilot. This was an important job because Charleston harbor was notoriously difficult for large sailing ships to navigate safely. In times of war, Carolinians had long believed the intricate channel to be the city's strongest defense against seaborne attack.\(^{25}\)

Included in the testimony gathered against Jeremiah was that of a black man named Sambo, who reported that several months earlier while he was working on the city's waterfront, Jeremiah has asked him, "Sambo, do you know anything of the war that is coming?" He had replied no and then asked, "What shall we poor Negroes do?" Jeremiah answered, "Jump on shore, and join the [British] soldiers," for "the war was come to help the poor negroes."\(^{26}\)

Even more frightening to the magistrates and more damaging to Jeremiah was the testimony of Jemmy, a slave whom Jeremiah denied knowing but who was shown to be his wife's brother. Jemmy claimed that at the beginning of April, while working at the waterfront, he

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\(^{24}\) Henry Laurens to John Laurens, June 18, 1775; Henry Laurens to John Laurens, June 23, 1775, both in Rogers *et al.*, eds., *Papers of Henry Laurens*, X, 184 (first quotation), 191 (second quotation); in this last letter Laurens suggests the slaves were punished "for example Sake" and not because they were guilty of any serious crime.


\(^{26}\) Wood, "Taking Care of Business," 284.
was approached by Jeremiah, “who declared he had something to give Dewar a run-away slave belonging to Mr. Tweed, and wished to see him, and asked Jemmy to take a few Guns to the said Dewar, to be placed in Negroes hands to fight against the inhabitants of this Province.” Jemmy further testified that Jeremiah claimed “to have the chief command of the said Negroes; that he . . . said he believed he had Powder enough already, but that he wanted more arms” and that “he would try to get as many as he could.” Although such testimony revealed Jeremiah to be “most Criminal,” the court was reluctant to execute him at once and, perhaps in the hope that he might be persuaded to name his accomplices, confined him to the Charleston workhouse “till further proof could be got against him.”27

At the same time, a “Court of Justices [of the peace] and Freeholders” in St. Bartholomew’s Parish to the southwest of the city ordered the execution of George, a slave preacher who had been convicted of “exciting & endeavouring to bring ab[ou]t a General Insurrection.” Thomas Hutchinson, a local justice of the peace, received information from “Jemmy, a Slave belonging to John Wells,” that John Burnet, a white man, and fifteen area slaves had been “preaching for two Years last past to Great crouds of Negroes in the Neighborhood of Chyhaw [Chehaw], . . . Particularly at the plantation of Mr. Austin—In the Woods—and other Places—that at these assemblies he had heard of an Insurrection intended & to take the Country by Kill-ing the Whites, but that John Burnet was to be Saved as their Preacher.”28

In a fascinating account that allows a glimpse of a slave cosmology that intertwined the sacred and the religious with current political developments, the informant revealed that “he Jemmy, heard the Prisoner George Say that the old King had rec[eive]d a Book from our Lord by which he was to Alter the World (meaning to set the Negroes free) but for his not doing so, was now gone to Hell, & in Punishm[en]t—That the Young King, meaning our Present One, came up with the Book, & was about to alter the World, & set the Negroes Free.” Evidence such as the testimony brought against Thomas Jeremiah and George suggests that even if the expectation of a British-slave alliance was unfounded, it was one slaves and masters could share.29

27 Ibid., 285 (first and second quotations); Henry Laurens to John Laurens, June 18, 1775, in Rogers et al., eds., Papers of Henry Laurens, X, 184 (third quotation); Dr. George Milligen, “Narrative of his Experiences,” 111 (fourth quotation).

28 Thomas Hutchinson to the Council of Safety [Henry Laurens], July 5, 1775, in Rogers et al., eds., Papers of Henry Laurens, X, 206–8. The procedure of trying slaves before magistrates’ courts in this period, as was done to Jeremiah and George, is detailed (for Georgia) in Betty R. Wood, “Until He Shall be Dead, Dead, Dead: The Judicial Treatment of Slaves in Eighteenth-Century Georgia,” Georgia Historical Quarterly, LXXI (Fall 1987), 377–98.

29 Hutchinson to the Council of Safety, July 5, 1775, in Rogers et al., eds., Papers of Henry
The British-slave conspiracy scare during the spring of 1775 eventually ran its course. The public administration of "justice" to slave suspects would, it was thought, subdue any blacks aspiring to rebellion in the near future. With the whites now "upon... guard" against a possible slave uprising "and the militia... by parties trained every day," lowcountry planters began to feel that they were "pretty well guarded against domestic wars." Therefore the panic gradually subsided until Henry Laurens could write, "The rumors and whispers of insurrections are no more heard."30

Emerging from the storm of the previous eight weeks, the Charleston gentry could take stock of how far they had been driven from the position of cautious, nonviolent resistance they had assumed at the beginning of May. At that time, the Provincial Congress and the Charleston General Committee had not presumed to challenge the authority either of royal officials or of the regular colonial assembly. By July, however, the congress, the committee, and the newly created Council of Safety directly ruled the colony. The authority of the old regime was cast aside and ignored. In April, South Carolina patriots had sought to maintain only a "bloodless, self-denying opposition" against Britain; now the Provincial Congress authorized raising three regiments of regular troops to defend the colony against external or internal threat.31

When the slave conspiracy crisis broke, the transfer of authority took place in an instant, without violence or debate. The congress and the committee acted because royally sanctioned authority, itself suspected in the conspiracy, could not be trusted to undertake the proper measures and prompt action required to suppress the rumored slave uprising.

This need for action was made immediate by the widely held belief that perhaps in this crisis the white minority's external enemy did not have to infiltrate or invade the colony in order to make contact with his black ally. It was feared that royal officials already in the colony might attempt to enact the "accursed design of the British ministry" and indeed might have already prepared for the destruction of the colony before the war had begun. Thus John Stuart, Indian agent for the southern colonies, found that a few days after news of war reached Charleston, "a report was propagated everywhere throughout the province that I had sent to call down the Cherokee and Catawba Indians." This rumor, Stuart continued, "so irritated the people as to render my friends apprehensive that my person was in

Laurens, X, 206-8.
30 Henry Laurens to James Laurens, June 24, 1775, in Henry Laurens Papers (microfilm), SHSW.
31 Ramsay, History of South Carolina, I, 132.
danger.” When Stuart fled the colony for the safety of St. Augustine on May 26, a warrant for his arrest and an armed posse sent by the Charleston General Committee followed him.32

Suspicion also fell upon the royal governors of the southern colonies. Governor Josiah Martin of North Carolina, for instance, wrote that “a most infamous report . . . [was] propagated among the people that I had formed a design of arming the negroes and proclaiming freedom to all such as should resort to the King’s standard.” Nor was South Carolina’s new governor, Lord William Campbell, spared. Upon arriving in Charleston on June 19, he found that “it was . . . reported and universally believed that to effect [a slave insurrection] . . . 14,000 stands of arms were actually on board the Scorpion, the sloop of war I came out in.” “Words . . . cannot express,” he added, “the flame that this occasioned amongst all ranks and degrees; the cruelty and savage barbarity of the scheme was the conversation of all companies . . . .”33

However, such fears were not completely without foundation, for one royal governor had actually threatened to arm slaves to defend royal authority. John Murray, earl of Dunmore, governor of Virginia, had rashly threatened this policy to a gathering of Virginians the previous April. “My declaration that I would arm and set free such slaves as should assist me if I was attacked,” he explained to his superiors, “has stirred up fears in them which cannot easily subside as they know how vulnerable they are in that particular.” Word of Dunmore’s offer to arm the slaves had spread throughout the South by early June and perhaps created a notion that he had inadvertently revealed a concerted and secret plan of action. This suspicion, when coupled with Lee’s letter, led to a distrust of all southern royal governors.34

Such profound distrust was a severe handicap in the governors’ efforts to maintain control over events during the crisis of that spring and summer. Governor James Wright of Georgia perceptively foresaw that the rumors, “however absurd and improbable” that the governors “have it in view . . . to liberate the slaves and encourage them to attack their masters,” would have “an exceeding bad effect.” He predicted that it “will involve us all in the utmost distress.” Nor is it

33 Governor Josiah Martin to Lord Dartmouth, June 30, [1775], in Davies, ed., Documents of the American Revolution, IX, 211; Governor William Campbell to Lord Dartmouth, August 31, [1775], ibid., XI, 94.
34 Governor Lord Dunmore to Lord Dartmouth, June 25, [1775], ibid., IX, 204. South Carolina’s new governor, William Campbell, was well aware of South Carolina’s vulnerability in this area when he wrote to Lord Dartmouth on July 20, 1775: “I leave it to any person of common sense to conceive what defence they can make in a country where the slaves are five to one,” ibid., XI, 51.
surprising that Carolinians who could believe that the king "was . . . promising every Negro that would murder his Master and family that he should have his Master's plantation" or could write that the "Creatures" of the ministry had plotted "Insurrections of our Negroes attended by the most horrible butcheries of Innocent Women & Children," found it difficult to treat their royal governor with loyalty and affection.35

By July 1775 the lowcountry leadership of South Carolina was in a strained position that became increasingly difficult and at last impossible to maintain. The wealthy planters and merchants who had sat in the colonial assembly and who now guided the Provincial Congress were in the confused position of conservatives who had been forced by circumstances to become revolutionaries. They did not, however, want to commit themselves or their colony to irrevocable change. "The Opulent and Sensible," one British observer reported, "wish to avoid such desperate measures." The Provincial Congress said as much itself when it pledged that "no love of innovation" or "lust for independence" influenced its decisions. A demonstration of the confused emotions that prevailed in Charleston that summer was provided on June 9 when, in the midst of a slave conspiracy scare in which the British ministry was feared to have played a sinister part, the city paused to celebrate the king's birthday.36

The effort made to keep up normal appearances did not always succeed, as for example on June 19, when the new governor arrived in Charleston. Although Lord Campbell was suspected of bringing with him arms for the colony's slaves, he was greeted with customary ceremony. "With the tacit permission of the Provincial Congress," the city militia was drawn up to receive his Lordship as he came ashore. Contrary to the usual acclamation however, the soldiers and citizenry "preserved a sullen silence."37

That evening the new governor discovered for himself the reality behind the façade when he was stopped on the street by a militia sentry. Although the governor was nominally in command of the provincial militia, the sentry was not impressed by the authority of Lord Campbell's rank. He politely informed his Lordship that he had his orders from the General Committee and was "not to know the Governor." Thus while the governor's title was acknowledged with all due


37 Drayton, Memoirs, I, 257.
courtesy and protocol, his authority was quietly taken away; while the appearance of normality was maintained, the established government in the colony was overthrown.\textsuperscript{38}

White Carolinians' attempt to walk the line between revolution and normality left Governor Campbell in a "very difficult and embarrassed state." Although he "took possession of the government in the usual manner," he soon found that "the powers of government . . . [had been] wrested out of . . . [his] hands." The continued meetings of the colonial assembly were a mere charade. The assembly adjourned itself every morning, reconvened a few blocks away as the Provincial Congress, and carried on with the real business of government where the governor could not interfere.\textsuperscript{39}

When, after two months in the workhouse, Thomas Jeremiah was brought to trial for his part in the feared conspiracy of the previous spring and sentenced "to be hanged and afterwards burned," the governor's attempts to intervene on Jeremiah's behalf provoked a storm. After reviewing the trial transcripts the governor sought a reprieve. "My blood run cold when I read on what grounds they had doomed a fellow creature to death," he wrote and entreated the Council of Safety to revoke the sentence. When word of his efforts got out, Campbell reported, it "raised such a clamour amongst the people as is incredible, . . . they openly and loudly declared if I granted the man a pardon they would hang him at my door." Warned that if he pardoned Jeremiah he "would raise a flame all the water in Cooper River could not extinguish," the governor desisted, and the gruesome sentence was carried out on August 18.\textsuperscript{40}

As long as the governor remained quietly and ineffectively at his post, South Carolina's slaveholder revolutionaries could continue to uphold their pretense of normality and stability. Yet the violent response provoked by Campbell's attempt to play an active part in support of a condemned black rebel indicates the suspicions that still

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 258.

\textsuperscript{39} Governor William Campbell to Lord Dartmouth, July 2, [1775], in Davies, ed., \textit{Documents of the American Revolution}, XI, 34 (first quotation), 32 (second quotation); Governor William Campbell's Address to the Assembly, August 15, 1775, reproduced in Edward McCrady, \textit{The History of South Carolina in the Revolution, 1775-1780} (New York and London, 1901), 59 (third quotation), 55.

\textsuperscript{40} Governor William Campbell to Lord Dartmouth, August 31, [1775], in Davies, ed., \textit{Documents of the American Revolution}, XI, 95 (first and second quotations), 93 (third and fourth quotations); see also Milligen, "Narrative of His Experiences," 110-11; and also Henry Laurens to John Laurens, August 20, 1775, in Rogers et al., eds., \textit{Papers of Henry Laurens}, X, 320-22. Apparently the governor and the attorney general questioned whether Jeremiah, a free black man, could be tried under the Negro Act, which they argued (wrongly) was intended only for slaves. Also, Robert Smith, rector of St. Philip's Church in Charleston, secured a recantation from Jemmy of his testimony of the previous June against Jeremiah. However, Henry Laurens, president of the General Committee, remained "fully Satisfied that Jerry [Jeremiah] was guilty of a design & attempt to encourage our Negroes to Rebellion
surrounded him. The fear persisted that the governor, in order to obtain real power, might seek to ally himself with the lowcountry whites' domestic rivals. Hence when the Provincial Congress received reports in mid-September that the governor had been in contact with the rapidly increasing Loyalist movement in the backcountry, a motion was made for his arrest and was only narrowly defeated. The next day, September 15, Governor Campbell, concerned for his safety, dissolved the colonial assembly and abandoned his Charleston house for the security of the royal navy sloop Tamar, then in the harbor.41

At the end of September the General Committee sent a deputation to the governor, then on board the Cherokee, a royal surveying ship that he had appropriated, and urged him to return to the city. They assured him that as long as “your Excellency shall take no active part against the good people of this Colony, in the present arduous struggle for the preservation of their civil liberties, we will . . . secure to your Excellency that safety and respect . . . which the inhabitants of Carolina have ever wished to show the representatives of their Sovereign.” But Lord Campbell refused to remain in the city as a symbol that nothing had changed when, as he replied to the address, the people were “in actual and open rebellion.” Thus the efforts of the Provincial Congress and the Charleston General Committee to retain the bonds that tied the colony to Britain while taking control of the government proved futile. The royal government ceased in Charleston, and the break with the old order was made manifest.42

After September what remained of the royal government of South Carolina lay at anchor in Charleston harbor, where the governor commanded a small flotilla consisting of the Tamar and the Cherokee, both small navy sloops, and the Swallow, an armed packet boat. The governor's fleet, although modest, was the only naval force in the colony and effectively blockaded Charleston. Moreover, the fleet could bombard the city waterfront if it chose and, with this threat, forced the inhabitants to supply the ships with provisions.43

Observant slaves, working on the wharves of Charleston or on rice plantations in the vicinity, soon learned that two governments claimed to be the rightful rulers of the colony. The writ of one, the Provincial Congress, ran throughout the coastal districts and in

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41 McCrady, History of South Carolina, 55–56; Drayton, Memoirs, II, 30–35, 40.
42 “Address of the General Committee of Charleston to the Governor of the province of South Carolina,” September 29, 1775, in Drayton, Memoirs, II, 92–93 (first quotation on p. 93); Governor William Campbell to Henry Laurens [president of the General Committee], September 30, 1775, ibid., 93–94 (second quotation on p. 93).
43 McCrady, History of South Carolina, 69.
Charleston. The authority of the other, the royal governor and his adherents, held sway only within the narrow confines of Charleston harbor.

At the mouth of the harbor, Sullivan's Island also lay under the governor's control, for the ships under his command dominated the half-mile-wide channel that separated the narrow island from the mainland. At this time Sullivan's Island was covered with palmetto and oak trees and consisted largely of salt marsh on the landward side and sand dunes to the sea. Its most prominent feature was the quarantine or "pest-house" that had been built on the island for the reception of newly arrived slaves. Now, as the governor and his followers took their exercise upon its shore, it became, both symbolically and in fact, the last piece of royal ground in the colony.44

South Carolina was not the only colony that found itself in such a peculiar predicament. Government Dunmore of Virginia had been living aboard a navy frigate in Chesapeake Bay since the previous June. If white Carolinians wondered what effect the presence of a "foreign" government in Charleston harbor would have upon their slaves, they could look to the experience of Virginia. It was perhaps to this end that the South Carolina and American General Gazette carried an item from Norfolk, Virginia, that informed Charleston readers that the citizens of that town had "been much disturbed lately with the elopement of their — [negroes], owing to a mistaken notion which has unhappily spread amongst them, of finding shelter on board the men of war in this harbor."45

Having openly broken with the royal government yet unable to force the ships of the royal navy from their anchorage, the slaveowners of Charleston were in a dangerous position. To the city's slaves the king's ships and Sullivan's Island represented a refuge that their masters could not reach. It was ironic that Sullivan's Island, which for decades had introduced countless blacks to the horrors of slavery, now offered a breach in the confines of the slave society and a gateway to freedom. No less ironic perhaps was the fact that the military forces and the ministers of the royal government, to which lowcountry whites had always turned for the support of order and authority, now operated in the colony as forces of disorder and anarchy.

Such promise, or menace, was only gradually realized, for the colonists did not know how long the governor and his ships would

44 Josiah Smith, Jr., refers to the "pest-house" on Sullivan's Island in a letter to James Poyas, January 10, 1776, Josiah Smith, Jr., Letterbook (Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N. C.); Peter H. Wood has called Sullivan's Island "the Ellis Island of Black Americans" because an estimated 40 percent of the slaves imported into the mainland colonies between 1700 and 1775 first touched American shores there. Wood, Black Majority, xiv.

45 South Carolina and American General Gazette, September 8, 1775.
remain in the harbor or how they would receive escaped slaves. The first test came at the end of October when the Council of Safety wrote to Captain Edward Thornborough of the Tamar and reported to him that they had information that Shadwell, a runaway slave from the city, was employed on board his vessel. They were willing to credit the entire affair to the slave's passing himself off as a freeman as long as he was promptly returned to his owner. The hoped for cooperation did not materialize, however, and after a futile exchange of letters, the Council of Safety concluded that the slave was secreted on board the Cherokee under the protection of Governor Campbell and could not be reclaimed.46

South Carolina slaveholders began to realize that their blacks had an open escape route, and one Charleston resident soon discovered that some slaves possessed a powerful determination to take advantage of it. On November 4 Joshua Eden was confronted by one of his slaves, of whom Eden wrote, “Though he is my Property, he has the audacity to tell me, he will be free, that he will serve no Man, and that he will be conquered or governed by no Man.” After this splendid speech, Eden's slave ran off, possibly to join the governor on Sullivan's Island.47

Three days later, on November 7, Governor Dunmore of Virginia at last made good on his threat of the previous April. Declaring a state of rebellion to exist in Virginia, he called upon those loyal to the king to rally to him at Norfolk. His promise to give Virginia's slaves their freedom if they would come and bear arms for the king made him anathema to southern patriots. South Carolina whites were “struck with horror” when they heard of Dunmore's proclamation, which stoked fears that Britain might incite a race war in an attempt to subdue the colonies. Edward Rutledge, sent from Charleston to the Continental Congress to halt the drift toward independence, claimed that Dunmore's act accomplished more “to work an eternal separation between Great Britain and the Colonies, – than any other expedient, which could possibly have been thought of.”48

Perhaps attempting to keep South Carolina slaves ignorant of Dunmore's proclamation, Charleston newspaper editors did not publish news of the event. Such efforts at concealment were considered futile, however, for “Negroes,” two lowcountry planters reported, “have a wonderfull art of communicating Intelligence among themselves.” By this method, they predicted, news could “run several hundreds of Miles in a week or a Fortnight.” The same men gave a

46 South-Carolina Gazette, November 7, 1775.
48 On Dunmore's proclamation see Benjamin Quarles, The Negro in the American Revolu-
"melancholly" estimate that if an offer like Dunmore’s were to be made to the slaves of Georgia and South Carolina, within two weeks “20,000 Negroes would join” the British camp.49

Governor Campbell refrained from issuing his own version of Dunmore’s bombshell. However, at the end of November, Captain Tallemache, commander of the Scorpion, a recent addition to the governor’s squadron, responded defiantly to a charge that he was harboring escaped slaves. He not only did not deny the accusation but replied that he might easily have five hundred more blacks if he had given asylum to all who had sought it. Such actions were justified, he claimed, because the colonies “were all in actual rebellion” and that it was therefore his duty “to distress America by every means in his power.”50

Whether slaves were encouraged by these developments or merely by the continued presence of the governor’s flotilla (which, it began to appear, might linger in the harbor indefinitely), the number who escaped to the king’s ships or to Sullivan’s Island seems to have risen rapidly after the middle of November. In December, possibly in an effort to persuade blacks that the promise of freedom behind the British lines was an illusion, the South Carolina and American General Gazette published an account from Virginia “that Lord Dunmore h[as] sen]t to the French or Spanish West Indies to [be] sold two Sloops full of Negroes, who had gone on board the Men of War, with the foolish Expectation of obtaining their Freedom.” In spite of such “disinformation,” one resident later estimated that by mid-December, nearly five hundred fugitive slaves were already encamped on Sullivan’s Island, where, according to another account, “huts were building for them in the woods.”51

Throughout December, reports vividly demonstrated the “exceeding bad effects” that the British presence in the harbor and the “den for runaway slaves” on Sullivan’s Island were having on the black population of the vicinity. In Christ Church Parish, adjacent to Sul-

49 The two lowcountry planters were “Mr. Bullock and Mr. Houstown, Two Gentlemen from Georgia,” delegates to the Continental Congress, whose “melancholly Account” was reported by John Adams in his diary entry of September 24, 1775, in L. H. Butterfield, ed., Diary and Autobiography of John Adams (4 vols.; Cambridge, Mass., 1961), II, 182–83 (quotation on p. 183).


51 South Carolina and American General Gazette, December 22, 1775. The idea that Charleston’s newspapers may have sought to influence the opinion of the area’s slave population is suggested by the fact that in this instance, when whites presumably would like to dissuade their slaves from seeking refuge with the governor, the word “Negroes” is spelled
livan's Island, a black man was tried for "inticing other slaves to desert on board the man of war . . . ." In Charleston itself, the militia intercepted five blacks trying to escape in canoes to the protection of the Cherokee, and one white resident overhead an evening conversation "between a mulatto fellow and some slaves belonging to the inhabitants of this town, inticing them to go on board the King's ships in the road; one of which [slaves]," he added, "is since missing . . . ." What was perhaps most alarming, Scipio Handley, a free black fisherman, was discovered to be carrying messages between the governor and the town. After his capture, this black spy was sentenced to death "for acting against the Congress."52

At the same time information was received that the British were cooperating with South Carolina's escaped slaves in active measures against the colony. Henry Laurens wrote bitterly to Captain Thornborough that "we have daily complaints from the inhabitants on the sea-coast, of robberies and depredations committed on them by white and black armed men, from on board some of the ships under your command." Similarly, Laurens wrote to a fellow patriot that "Lord William Campbell had gone great lengths in harbouring & protecting Negroes on Sullivants Island from whence those Villians made nightly Sallies and committed robberies and depredations on the Sea Coast of Christ Church [Parish]."53

Governor Campbell and his subordinates were probably not "harbouring & protecting" escaped slaves as part of a concerted scheme to employ the slaves to overthrow their masters. They most likely acted out of frustration and a capricious desire to "distress" the colony that they could no longer rule. If so, this was of small comfort to

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52 The committee of safety for the borough of Norfolk, Virginia, complained to the Virginia Convention on August 3, 1775, of the "exceeding bad effects among the Slaves, from the neighborhood of the [British] Men-of-War," in Peter Force, ed., American Archives, Series 4 (9 vols.; Washington, 1840), III, 373 (first quotation). The "den for runaway slaves" on Sullivans's Island is described in "an extract of a letter to a gentleman in Philadelphia dated Charleston, February 7, 1776," ibid., 950 (second quotation); "Journal of the Council of Safety," 233 (third quotation), 88, 103, and 63 (fourth quotation); while awaiting execution, Handley was smuggled a file by a friend, broke his irons, jumped two stories to the ground from his cell window, and escaped. After making his way to Barbados he later returned and served with the British army in Georgia. In 1783 he appeared in London to apply for compensation for goods worth £97, including "one fishing boat" and "10 Hogs," that were lost when he fled Charleston in 1775. "Memorial of Scipio Handley, a black," in "Transcript of the Manuscript Books and Papers of the Commission of Enquiry into the Losses and Services of the American Loyalists . . . ." Vol. 53, pp. 166–68 (New York Public Library), microfilm, SCDAH.

53 Council of Safety [Henry Laurens] to Captain Edward Thornborough, December 18,
lowcountry whites. To them, the ministers of the royal government seemed to sport with the prospect of slave revolt and to threaten the colony with "the horrible scenes of . . . domestic butcheries."54

While South Carolina slaveholders may not have been surprised that their slaves had responded to the lure of freedom that the governor's forces seemed to offer them, British actions "enticing" and "protecting negroes who fly from their masters" astounded and shocked them. "Humanity must revolt," John Rutledge proclaimed, at the ministry's plans "to make the ignorant domesticks subservient to the most wicked purposes."55

That "captains of British ships of war and Noble Lords" should engage in such perfidious deeds "disgrace[d] . . . their master and . . . their cause," thought Henry Laurens. To many slaveowners it seemed as if the empire had turned upon its head. Previously they had appreciated Britain's support for law and order, but now the forces of the Crown seemed a font of lawlessness and confusion. Virginians scornfully christened Dunmore "King of the Blacks" to describe his new role as lord of misrule. In a similar vein Laurens wrote of Britain's policy toward the slaves: "What meanness! What complicated wickedness! . . . O England, how changed! how fallen!"56

Adrift in the harbor, out of power and frustrated, British officials appeared to be acting just as South Carolina whites had long feared such a political minority might. Unable to regain their lost influence through the support of the white population, the British apparently had decided to "join with the negroes" in order to achieve their ends. In thus "enticing" the black slaves into the political dispute, the British threatened a most frightening "innovation" in the eyes of low-country whites, who were determined to destroy what Henry Laurens termed this "alarming evil" before it could destroy them.57

1775, "Journal of the Council of Safety," 94–95 (first quotation); Henry Laurens to Richard Richardson, December 19, 1775, in Rogers et al., eds., Papers of Henry Laurens, X, 576 (second quotation). On December 6, "Michael Bates, overseer upon Mr. John Ash's plantation near Haddrell's Point, informed the Council, of a robbery which had last night been committed on the plantation . . . by a man-of-war's boat, with a number of armed men, blacks as well as whites. . . ." The same plantation was raided again one week later. "Journal of the Council of Safety," 62–63, 84.

54 Henry Laurens to William Manning, February 27, 1776, Henry Laurens Papers (microfilm), SHSW (third quotation).
56 Henry Laurens to John Laurens, August 14, 1776 (photocopy), in the office of the Papers of Henry Laurens, Department of History, University of South Carolina, Columbia, S. C. (first and third quotations); Williamsburg Virginia Gazette, November 16, 1775.
Carolina patriots were reluctant to come to blows with the British forces at anchor in their harbor, but they were not so hesitant about striking out at slaves who had run away and were “skulking about on Sullivan’s Island.” Lowcountry slaveholders worried that the continued presence of the “den for runaway slaves” on Sullivan’s Island worked to undermine their authority over their remaining blacks. They worried even more that Governor Campbell might begin to copy Dunmore’s policy of arming and declaring free all slaves within his reach. With these thoughts in mind, the Council of Safety decided that it was “absolutely necessary” to destroy the fugitives’ camp.  

Accordingly, a detachment of soldiers from South Carolina’s three new regiments were ordered “to proceed with all secret expedition” to a point on the coast opposite Sullivan’s Island. Once there, the soldiers were to wade across the channel to the island “there to surprise, seize, and apprehend a number of negroes who are said to have gone over to the enemy.” On the evening of December 9, the brightly uniformed officers and men appointed for the expedition crossed the Cooper River and made their way silently toward their objective. When they reached the Sullivan’s Island channel, however, it was discovered to be too deep to be forded safely, the attack was called off, and the troops were marched back to the city.

Foiled in their attempt to assault the fugitives’ camp with a large force, the Council of Safety resorted to a raiding party sent in boats to attack the island. “Disguised as Indians,” the raiders surprised the runaways in their camp “early in the morning” of December 18. As Henry Laurens described it, “The Company of Foot Rangers or 54 of them under the command of Lieut[enant] Withers made a descent on that Island burnt the House in which the Banditti were often lodged brought off four Negroes killed three or four & also took White prisoners four Men three Women & three Children destroyed many things which had been useful to those wretches in the Houses—many of the Men of Wars Water Casks, a great loss to them, exchanged a few Shot with Some of the Men of Wars Men & came off unhurt.” The successful raid, Laurens hoped, “will serve to humble our Negroes in general & perhaps to mortify his Lordship not a little.”

After months of stalemate, South Carolina patriots at last “fell upon an expedient” to force the governor and his ships from the harbor. By mounting cannon on the mainland opposite Sullivan’s Island,

58 Windley, ed., Runaway Slave Advertisements, III, 479 (first quotation); Moultrie, Memoirs, I, 113 (third quotation).
59 Orders to Major Charles Cotesworth Pinckney from Colonel William Moultrie, December 9, 1775, in Moultrie, Memoirs, I, 113.
60 South Carolina and American General Gazette, December 22, 1775 (first quotation); Henry Laurens to Richard Richardson, December 19, 1775, in Rogers et al., eds., Papers of Henry Laurens, X, 576 (second and third quotations).
they could command the channel, pass troops over to the island, and mount guns there. Cannon emplacements on Sullivan's Island could then threaten the British warships at their anchorage. These steps, and the concurrent decision to risk the consequences of refusing future demands from the British squadron for fresh water and food, rendered the warships' position untenable. In early January, therefore, the governor and his little fleet sailed out to sea, taking with them "a considerable number" of escaped slaves.61

On February 11, barely a month after Governor Campbell's departure, the Provincial Congress, declaring "that the present mode of conducting [public] affairs is inadequate to the well governing [of] . . . the colony" because it did not sufficiently guarantee "peace and good order," appointed a committee of its members to draw up a "plan or form of government" that would secure these aims. At the same time, the congress made it clear that the new government was an expedient to remain in force only "during the continuance of the present dispute between Great Britain and the colonies."62

The committee reported back to the congress with the first draft of the new constitution on March 5, and after debating the matter for three weeks, the congress passed the measure on March 26. It was a fundamentally conservative document, proving the congress's contention almost a year before that it had "no love of innovation." Although it adopted the more generous representation of the Provincial Congress over the very restricted and disproportionate distribution of seats in the colonial assembly, the new constitution preserved most other colonial offices unchanged. Only their new titles reflected the appropriate republican demeanor.63

Still reluctant to commit themselves to irrevocable measures, the lowcountry leaders did not regard independence as final. When the

61 Moultrie, Memoirs, I, 115–16 (first quotation on p. 115); Henry Laurens to Stephen Bull, January 20, 1776, "Journal of the Council of Safety," 202 (second quotation); it is impossible to know how many slaves escaped with Governor Campbell or what became of them. When the Scorpion left Charleston in mid-December, Henry Laurens estimated "30 or 40" slaves were on board; Henry Laurens to James Laurens, January 6, 1776, in Papers of Henry Laurens, XI, 7. When it left the colony in January, Governor Campbell's fleet consisted of six ships: "The Tamar sloop, Cherokee armed ship and an armed scooner as a tender together with the Sandwich packet, a brigantine prize, and a Georgia pilot-boat," which together might conceivably have contained as many as two hundred additional slaves; Henry Laurens to Archibald Bulloch, January 6, 1776, "Journals of the Council of Safety," 153–54. Of one of the escapees, at least, more is known. In November 1783, when a census was taken of the three thousand ex-slaves to be evacuated with the British army from New York to Nova Scotia, included in the register was "Saml. Drayton [age] 40, stout fellow . . . formerly slave to Geo. Ancrum [in] Charles Town left him with Lord Wm. Campbell in 1775," in British Headquarters Papers (Carleton Papers), British Public Record Office, 301/55/100/10427, (microfilm), SCDAH.

62 McCrady, History of South Carolina, III, 109–10 (first and second quotations on p. 109, third quotation on p. 110); Drayton, Memoirs, II, 171 (fourth quotation).

63 McCrady, History of South Carolina, III, 110–11; this description of the South Carolina
first president of South Carolina, John Rutledge, addressed the first General Assembly, as the Provincial Congress had restyled itself after the old colonial legislature, he reminded the members "that this Constitution is but temporary, till an accommodation of the unhappy differences between Great Britain and America can be obtained; and that such an event is still desired by men who yet remember former friendships and intimate connections, though for defending their persons and properties they are stigmatized and treated as rebels."64

The slaveholding gentry of South Carolina had been fundamentally satisfied with the old colonial system. Under its auspices they had prospered economically. With its support and protection they had dominated their colony politically. They were indeed unlikely rebels, for they did not desire any changes in the status quo. In resisting British encroachments upon their "rights" through the decade after 1765, they sought to protect their accustomed "Reasonable Liberty" within the empire and not to gain independence outside of it. The outbreak of war and the ensuing slave scare in the spring and early summer of 1775 caught the lowcountry leaders unprepared. In these circumstances and given their fear of a British-slave conspiracy, it is difficult to perceive how they could have done otherwise than to assume the reins of power and displace lawful (but now suspect) authority. Uncomfortable with the "revolutionary" implications of their actions, South Carolina patriots attempted to avoid an open break with the royal government and its representative, Governor C'mbbell. When, despite their wishes, this break came and the governor moved into the harbor, his continued claims to authority, with no legitimate outlet, became a source of instability.

In this atmosphere of threatened disorder, the slaveholders' fears of insurrection came to the fore. As evidence mounted that the continued British presence in the colony was disruptive and dangerous and that numbers of their slaves were accepting the "offers" put forward by the governor, white South Carolinians' respect for the British regime eroded. Finally, in order to restore order to the lowcountry and to prevent the confusion of the preceding months from recurring, South Carolina's leaders sought a separation from Britain that would leave no doubt as to where rightful authority lay. South Carolinians continued to hope that an accommodation with the royal government was possible, in which case South Carolina would willingly have

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64 McCrady, History of South Carolina, III, 116. Even the oath of office for officials of the
rescinded its assertion of political independence. Until then South Carolina's slaveholders could treat Britain only as a threat to their domestic peace and tranquillity.65

Carolina whites were well aware that the eyes of their slaves were upon them and believed that their continued security depended on how well they seemed able to maintain order and to make good their threats of terrible retribution for those slaves who rebelled. Believing themselves vulnerable, the slaveholders of the lowcountry could not afford a prolonged challenge to their authority. Two weeks after independence, a general of the Continental Army was informed of the necessity to defend Charleston against enemy attack. "In Slave Counties," the general was told, "so much depends on opinion, and the opinion which the slave will entertain of our superiority or inferiority will naturally keep pace with our maintaining or giving ground."66

According to the new constitution, the actions of the royal government threatened to "loosen the bands of government, and create anarchy and confusion in the Colonies." In declaring independence the Provincial Congress claimed that it acted to reestablish "good order." Therefore, upon close examination, the paradox of slaveholder revolutionaries is no paradox at all. The choice that the British had left South Carolina, William Henry Drayton claimed, was "Slavery or Independence," but this drastically misstated the case; by their actions the lowcountry planters had preserved both. If they had undertaken an external revolution, it was only to escape the calamity of one at home.67

new government released them from their pledge to defend the constitution of South Carolina when "an accommodation . . . shall take place" between the colony and Britain, in Drayton, Memoirs, II, 197.

65 In a letter dated March 30 Henry Laurens wrote, "AFTER long suffering and Forebearance the People of this country, seeing the noble Lord who had been sent to be their Governor, although he had abandoned his Post, still continuing in this and, the next neighbouring Colony, exercising and encouraging every hostile and injurious Act against them, judged it indispensably Necessary to resolve upon the present Form, as a temporary Expedient for Government until an Accommodation of our Disputes with Great Britain, and a Redress of Grievances can be obtained." Henry Laurens to Oliver Hart and Elhanan Winchester, March 30, 1776, in Papers of Henry Laurens, XI, 199–200.


67 The first two quotations are taken from the text of the constitution reproduced in Drayton, Memoirs, II, 186–97; William-Henry Drayton, A Charge, on the Rise of the American Empire (Charleston, 1776), 8.