

MIDNIGHT ROBBERY: *Philadelphia, Bermuda, and a Sinister Plot*

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For nearly a century, a handful of historians have examined Bermuda’s role in the American Revolution. A natural harbor and haven for merchant shipping, the small British colony was well established as a center of the Atlantic maritime economy by the time King George III lost his thirteen North American provinces. Bermudian merchants and financiers had enjoyed the island’s proximity to both the American mainland and the West Indies, often running salt from Turks and Caicos to the North American provinces, collecting bills of exchange and North American goods before returning either to the sugar islands or cashing in at home within the safety of Bermuda. It was a maritime sanctuary of sorts, defying royal authority for over a century until the momentous American Revolution. The purpose of this article is to examine the diplomacy between Bermudians and Americans in serving mutual interests during a tumultuous period of world history. Moreover, it will analyze the consequences of the Gunpowder Plot of 1775 in regard to both Pennsylvania and Bermuda.

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Historiography

In 1936, Wilfred Brenton Kerr published his classic work *Bermuda and the American Revolution*, a fixture within the field of Atlantic history. Previously, Bermuda had received hardly any attention from professional scholars, especially when compared to the numerous discourses on British North America. Kerr focused on the economic motivation and desperation of leaders in Bermuda. The Bermudians, Kerr argued, had long traded with the North American colonies as cogs within the British Empire’s mercantile system; the onset of the American Revolutionary War and threat of embargo from the American provinces, however, forced political leaders in Bermuda to strike a deal with the Continental

Congress that would allow Bermuda to remain neutral within the global conflict and continue its trade with the revolting American provinces. In like manner, Henry Wilkisson insisted that the Bermudians understood the island’s importance to the nascent United States. As argued in H. E. Sadler’s *Turks Islands Landfall*, Americans relied on Bermudians to deliver Turks Islands’ salt, which the Continental Army needed to cure its meat rations. The famously swift

Bermudian sloops, used by American privateers, were more than capable of performing this task. In this sense, Bermuda’s delegates to Philadelphia, in an act of “self-preservation,” also stressed to the Continental Congress the importance of maintaining an economic relationship with the small colony.^[1]

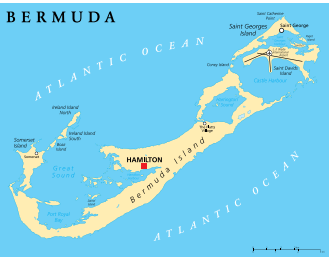
More recent historiography focuses on the Tuckers, an elite southern family with footholds in both Virginia and Bermuda. Phillip Hamilton’s *The Making and Unmaking of a Revolutionary Family* remains the authoritative study on the Tuckers, examining how they adapted to the social and economic upheaval that came with the American Revolution. “Like all conflicts,” Hamilton wrote, “America’s approaching war against the mother country presented both perils and opportunities. As always, the Tucker’s primary concern centered on the family’s collective interests and well-being.”^[2] Indeed, the fear of economic downturn from Congress’ embargo of British goods, as well as the starvation of Bermudians, compelled family patriarch Colonel Henry Tucker to travel to Philadelphia in July 1775 in order to negotiate an exemption for Bermuda, which would allow the Tuckers and other Bermudian merchants to continue trading with the thirteen colonies. These merchants, Alexandra Mairs argues in “The Economics of Treason,” determined the role of Bermuda in an Atlantic conflict. Acting in the “pursuit of profit and self-preservation,” Bermudians circumvented royal authority to establish an independent Atlantic trade network with the Americans, Dutch, and French. As Michael Jarvis noted in his seminal work *In the Eye of All Trade*, Bermudians understood the delicate situation of

staying neutral as tensions escalated between Great Britain and her North American provinces, secretly preparing for the war by increasing shipbuilding between 1774 and 1775. Merchants understood an upcoming war, while dangerous to the economy as whole, would create a higher American demand for Turks Islands’ salt. Furthermore, the Gunpowder Plot of 1775 would fundamentally change the lives of smugglers and pro-American Bermudians at the West End of the island. Until that point, “because royal governors and Crown officers seldom ventured out of St. George’s [at the East End],” Jarvis insisted, “their authority over residents on the main island and at the West End was negligible.”^[3]

While historians have examined the Bermudian conspiracy with the Americans, more can be said regarding how it coincided with the Americans’ desperate need for gunpowder, which, along with Turks Islands’ salt, became invaluable to the war effort. It is no secret that the Americans required a heavy supply of foreign aid in their quest for independence; for example, John Franklin Jameson’s classic article “St. Eustatius in the American Revolution” emphasized that the tiny Dutch colony’s supplies helped sustain the American cause.^[4] To temper their need for West Indian gunpowder, some of the rebelling provinces took the initiative to produce gunpowder and ammunition at home while simultaneously hiring private vessels to secretly procure powder. For instance, Virginia provided advertisements to local citizens on how to make gunpowder in exchange for money. Because gunpowder required raw materials, including sulfur and saltpeter, neither of which were abundant, manufacturing was slow, with one mill only producing as much as fifty pounds of powder per day. As a result, the Virginia Committee of Safety hired merchant and plantation owner John Goodrich and his sons to travel to Antigua and St. Eustatius to buy gunpowder from merchants on those islands, a mission that ultimately failed.^[5] Still, plans for acquiring gunpowder continued, including the plot to bring St. George’s cache from Bermuda to Philadelphia.

Zealous Friends to the Cause of America

In the earliest phase of the American Revolutionary War, the Continental Congress placed an embargo on British goods, a resolution that would deprive Bermuda, one of the American provinces’ closest partners in trade, of much-needed American corn and rice. Writing to his son in Virginia, Colonel Henry Tucker said that St. George



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starvation: “I need not tell the distress we shall soon be in if we are not permitted to have provisions from America as it is impossible for us to subsist without their Assistance.”^[6] Determined to work with the Americans, while also keeping Bermuda in an official state of neutrality, St. George wrote to a young Thomas Jefferson:

The Island of Bermuda, by it’s detached Situation, by the Number of it’s Inhabitants, by its inconsiderable produce, and by the small progress made there in Manufactures, must be reduced to the most dreadful Calamities by the present Contest between great Britain and the Colonies, should both parties demand a Compliance with their

respective Measures. Utterly destitute of the Means of obtaining Provisions for their Support, except from the Continent; and altogether unable to procure Cloathing from any other Source than Great Britain, since the Island affords neither Materials, nor Manufacturers, it is altogether impossible for them to exist without the Assistance of both . . . [The Bermudians] consider the Americans as Brethren, and their Souls are animated with the same generous Ardor for Liberty that prevails on the Continent; they are most Zealous Friends to the Cause of America.^[7]

Tucker and his family were desperate to come to a sort of resolution with the Americans. Similarly, George Bascome, another prominent Bermudian figure, stressed to New York Governor George Clinton that “Famine stares [Bermuda] in the Face; and [Bermuda’s] Condition must be truly miserable if the Ports on the Continent are shut.”^[8] Clearly, the Americans had strong leverage.

Tucker led a Bermudian delegation to Philadelphia in July 1775. After hearing Tucker’s pleas for an exemption from the embargo, Congress considered that exceptions could be made in the case of imported arms or gunpowder. Having learned from St. George Tucker of a gunpowder magazine in St. George’s, Bermuda, and later confirmed by a Bermudian named Benjamin Harris

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to George Washington, Congress turned over the issue to the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety, headed by Robert Morris and Benjamin Franklin. Franklin, who would become internationally famous for his shrewd diplomacy, realizing Bermuda’s desperation and its peoples’ ability to

deliver much-needed salt, suggested the Bermudians hand over the gunpowder at St. George’s in exchange for a possible exemption from the American trade embargo.^[9]

Unfortunately for the Bermudians, the British Parliament passed the American Prohibitory Act, banning all British trade to the colonies and instituting a blockade, thus formalizing the war.

Since only a few small powder mills dotted the area surrounding Philadelphia, Franklin and his cohort welcomed any means for getting extra powder to Philadelphia. Prior to 1775, the lone significant powder mill, belonging to Oswald Eve, was located on Frankford Creek, only seven miles from Independence Hall. Because of the difficulty in securing potassium nitrate (a saltpeter), sulfur, and charcoal, Eve was only able to produce around 250 pounds of gunpowder per month. Other mills in the area were not as productive but provided Congress with whatever powder they could make. In August, just before the raid on the powder magazine in St. George’s, the Committee of Safety approved another major powder mill, owned by George Lush, in Norriton.^[10] Realizing the importance of these mills, by November, Congress ordered saltpeter and sulfur found in other colonies to be consolidated in Philadelphia, as Eve and Lush, in addition to other small mill owners, could make the best use of the raw materials.^[11] Domestic powder was certainly welcome, if only scarce in comparison to powder acquired from foreign sources.

As the night of the Bermuda powder raid approached, Colonel Henry Tucker wrote to his son St. George that Congress was still concerned that Bermuda could sell American provisions to the West Indies; in this case, Bermudian merchants could serve British interests while feigning American friendship.^[12] In an attempt to alleviate these fears, St. George wrote to Thomas Jefferson that a committee of inspection could be appointed in Bermuda that would, at least in principle, attempt to stop the re-exportation of American goods to the West Indies.^[13]

The Gunpowder Plot

In any event, the Americans proceeded with their plan. On the night of August 14, a posse of Americans and Bermudians broke into the powder magazine, located about 200 yards from the home of royalist Governor George James Bruere. The crew opened the top of the magazine, and lowered a man down to bring up each barrel, eventually amounting to over 100 barrels stolen. The robbers rolled the barrels, carrying over a ton of gunpowder, down the nearby hill to Tobacco Bay. They

then loaded the barrels onto dinghies, provided by Henry Tucker of Somerset, cousin of the colonel, before ferrying them over to American vessels waiting at the West End: the *Lady Catherine*, bound for Philadelphia, and the *Savannah and Charlestown* Packet, bound for Charleston.^[14]

The following morning, Bruere sent customs house boats after the American vessels, but to no avail. Determined to find the conspirators, Bruere convened with the House of Assembly, agreeing to offer “100 pounds sterling Reward to any Person or Persons, that shall make any discovery, and legally convict any of the perpetrators of this Audacious piece of Villainy.”^[15] For Bruere, the sad irony was that, with Colonel Henry Tucker, George Bascome, and Henry Tucker of Somerset all members of the assembly, the conspirators were standing right in front of him. Writing to the Earl of Dartmouth, Bruere complained that the Bermudians “frequently pursue a Schandalous and villainous Enterprise, by going to the [Caicos] in Search of [Wrecked] Goods, a disgrace to the English flag, to be made a Trade or practice of, And should be altogether forbid or discountenanced by a small Sloop of War, going there and ordering them to desist and return home.”^[16] Moreover, Bruere requested garrisons of troops for the West End, hoping to stop the smuggling or any further attempts by Americans to raid Bermuda for provisions.

Consequences

Of the barrels of gunpowder stolen, 1800 pounds of it arrived in Philadelphia by August 26, with the rest going to South Carolina, where it eventually helped the state militia defend against attacks the following spring.^[17] Of the 1800 pounds in Pennsylvania, the Committee of Safety observed that 1000 pounds had been damaged by moisture. Therefore, on October 12, the committee resolved to send the damaged powder to George Lush’s mill for repair; two weeks later, Lush sent half of the powder back, having salvaged 500 pounds worth. While these small Pennsylvania mills could not produce sufficient amounts of gunpowder, they could certainly treat damaged powder, salvaging it for the war effort.^[18] Still, the Americans relied on foreign powder such that historian Orlando Stephenson estimated 90 percent of the powder available during the two years of the war had been imported. With this statistic in mind, combined with the scarcity of powder available from domestic mills and the fear more private mills would not be built in time, the following February the Committee of Safety resolved to build a state-owned gunpowder mill at French Creek which could yield 8000 pounds of gunpowder every week.^[19]

By the end of 1776, Pennsylvania boasted eight private mills in addition to the larger state-run mill, and it seemed that American reliance on foreign gunpowder could at least be tempered. However, on March 10, 1777, two

explosions went off at the French Creek mill, removing its roof. After months of partially rebuilding the mill, the Battle of Brandywine and the subsequent British occupation of Philadelphia in September forced the Americans to abandon French Creek. Other private mills were destroyed or even captured for British use; Oswald Eve’s mill at Frankford Creek began making powder for the British army after its capture, and the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania labeled Eve a traitor to the American cause.^[20] Ironically, constructing mills so conveniently close to Philadelphia factored in their destruction or capture.

For Bermuda, Congress granted the island its exemption from the trade embargo on November 22, and directed several colonies to send peas, beans, pork, and rice to the island so “friendly to the cause of America.”^[21] Unfortunately for the Bermudians, the British Parliament passed the American Prohibitory Act, banning all British trade to the colonies and instituting a blockade, thus formalizing the war. Now, any supplies from the American continent would have to be off the books and under the nose of the Royal Navy. In January 1776, George III had ordered a 20-gun ship to be stationed at Bermuda and another in the Bahamas to curtail smuggling or an invasion of either of those territories. By September, two warships, the HMS *Nautilus and Galatea*, patrolled the island and intercepted dozens of Bermudian vessels carrying much-needed American provisions, causing starvation.^[22]

Moreover, because the Prohibitory Act designated Americans as enemies, British and loyalist privateers could take them as legal prizes, with their cargoes being forfeit. The potentially lucrative business of privateering pulled men from both sides: Americans tried to disrupt British



commerce and trade with Bermuda; pro-British privateers aided in blockading the Chesapeake and capturing American and Bermudian vessels indiscriminately. Understanding their usefulness in stopping smuggling, George Bruere was elated to welcome private vessels. In the winter of 1777-78, Bridger Goodrich, son of the former patriot-turned-loyalist John Goodrich, who had run gunpowder for Virginia, arrived in Bermuda seeking a commission as the island provided a natural base for privateering. Bruere recommended Bridger Goodrich and his brothers for commissions, since he had already captured nine prizes since being enlisted by Lord Dunmore in 1776. After capturing two corn-laden vessels belonging to West End Bermudians, an anti-privateering association led by Henry Tucker of Somerset threatened the Goodriches to leave or face a mob of over 200 associates. The Goodriches briefly fled to New York, but returned soon thereafter, capturing vessels for the remainder of the war to build an immense fortune while also selling Bermudian sloops to other loyalist privateers, adding insult to injury.^[23]

Conclusion

Overall, the Gunpowder Plot of 1775 forged an economic alliance between the rebelling American provinces and the island of Bermuda, despite the latter’s official state of neutrality. The July 1775 meeting in Philadelphia was significant in that it brought together subjects of a non-rebelling British colony with those who risked bloodshed to form the young United States. While the Bermuda gunpowder plot was far from the only source of foreign powder, the robbery, along with American dependency on the West Indies, illustrated both the need to fund private mills in Pennsylvania and other states and the desperation of the Americans in securing a source of salt for their army.^[24] Furthermore, it demonstrated the ambivalence of the Bermudian people, especially the Tucker family, revealing that they would commit blatant treason in order to avoid certain starvation, all under the guise of neutrality. As a result, their long-enjoyed remoteness from British authority evaporated.

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