

THE FAIRFAX MILITIA DURING THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR PERIOD

By

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The Virginia County Militia, 1775-1783

When the Assembly of Virginia met in July 1775, after being disbanded in 1774 by Lord Dunmore, the first law passed was "An Ordinance for Raising and Embodying a Sufficient Force for the Defense and Protection of the Colony." It dealt with forming Continental regiments, minute battalions, and the county militia.

This law made liable for militia duty all free male persons, hired servants and apprentices between the ages of 16 and 50. In each county the Committee of Safety was to commission a County Lieutenant, Colonel, Lieutenant Colonel and Major. The county militia was to be formed into companies of from 32 to 68, rank and file to be commanded by a Captain, one Lieutenant and one Ensign. Government officials, clergymen and professors were exempt from militia duty.

The militiaman was given six months in which to supply himself with a good rifle or musket, a tomahawk, bayonet, pouch or cartridge box, three charges of powder and ball. He was also required to have one pound of powder and four pounds of musket balls at his home. But, as was common during the Revolutionary War, what the law stated and what was the actual case were sometimes totally different. In his journal, Nicholas Creswell of Alexandria stated: "Friday, March 22th, 1776 . . . went to see the general muster of the militia in town, about 700 men but few arms . . ." And again, "Monday, October 28th, 1776, general muster of the county militia in town, about 600 men appeared underarmed, with tobacco sticks in general. Much rioting and confusion."

The militiaman had no uniform. He wore his civilian clothing at musters and when called out for actual service. In a "Report of Committee to Prepare a Plan for a Militia," dated March 25, 1775, it was recommended that the militiamen "be clothed in a hunting shirt by way of a uniform," but this provision was not contained in the final law.

Each company was to have one fifer and drummer, halberds for sergeants and colors (flags). The colors were described in a 1775 issue of the *Virginia Gazette* as having "Virginia for Constitutional Liberty" on one side and the county name on the other. Unfortunately as with most descriptions of Revolutionary War flags, the color of the flag was not recorded.

Each militia company was required to muster every two weeks except in

* Presented before the Arlington Historical Society, May 14, 1971.

December, January, and February. The entire county regiment was to muster in April and October of each year. The state was divided into 16 districts of which Prince William, Fairfax, and Loudoun comprised one. Generally the militias of these counties were called out together.

These militia regulations were in effect with only minor changes throughout the war.

Fairfax County Militia, 1775-1781

Fairfax County had appointed as its County Lieutenant, Peter Wagener; Colonel, William Rumney; and Major, George Gilpin.

The Fairfax Militia was called out several times during the war to guard Alexandria, Mount Vernon, and Colchester, and to erect fortifications in Alexandria.

On August 25, 1777, British General Howe landed his troops at Head of Elk, Maryland, and marched towards Philadelphia. Three days prior to that, on the 22nd of August, the Continental Congress anticipating his move, requested Virginia draw out a third of the militia of several counties including Prince William, Fairfax, and Loudoun. The militia was ordered to march to Frederick, Maryland, and await word from General Washington.

Washington, in a letter to Colonel William Rumney, dated September 14, 1777, stated: "I have been favored with your letter of the 10th and am happy to find the militia of Fairfax County have turned out with such readiness at this interesting period. Their conduct is truly laudable and has a claim to my thanks . . ." Washington ordered Rumney to take the militia to Lancaster, Pa., where their aid could be more easily had.

In a statement made to the U. S. Government for a pension after the war, a James Taylor stated that he was in Capt. Moody's company of the Fairfax Militia and served three months in Pennsylvania under General Charles Scott of Virginia who commanded a part of Gen. Nathaniel Greene's column at the Battle of Germantown on October 4, 1777. Also mentioned as a company commander during this period was Thomas Pollard.

No further mention is made of the service of the Fairfax Militia until February 17, 1781, when the Council of the State called out the militia stating: "Baron Steuben having requested that an additional force of militia be immediately called into service, the Governor is advised to order a fourth of the militia from the countries of Loudoun, Fairfax, Prince William and Fauquier to march without delay to Williamsburg under proper field officers, captains and subalterns and with their arms." It was during this period that John Piper of the Virginia State Line was assigned as adjutant of the First Regiment of Prince William and Fairfax militia. His orderly book gives a very detailed look at the everyday life of the Fairfax militiaman during active service. Copies of it are in the Fairfax and Prince William County Public Libraries.

On July 14, 1781, the Council again stated: "The Board also desires the Commissioner of the War Office to direct the County Lieutenant of . . . Loudoun . . . Fairfax and Prince William to keep one fourth part of their militia in the field under the command of the Marquis Fayette, taking care to relieve them once in two months . . ."

The Fairfax Independent Company, 1774-1775

The blue and buff uniform that Washington is always pictured in, that was worn by him to the Second Continental Congress in May 1775 and throughout the Revolution and was adopted as the uniform for general officers in the Continental Army, was the uniform of the Fairfax County Independent Company.

The Company was formed on September 21, 1774, by the Gentlemen and Freeholders of Fairfax County. They chose as their dress ". . . a regular uniform of blue, turned up with buff, with plain yellow metal buttons, buff waist coat and breeches and white stockings and furnished with a good flintlock and bayonet sling, cartridge box and tomahawk." Nicholas Cresswell in his Journal mentions that there was also a mechanics company dressed in blue faced red.

Washington accepted command of the Company and mentions in his diary that he reviewed the company in Alexandria January 16 and 17, February 18, April 15 and 26 and May 1, 1775.

Nicholas Cresswell also wrote: "Thursday, November 3rd, 1774. Saw the Independent-Company exercise. The Effigy of Lord Nash was shot at, then carried in great parade into town and burnt." He mentions the strength of the Company at about 150.

While in Philadelphia for the First Continental Congress, in October 1774, Washington purchased for the Fairfax Independent Company a pair of colors, two drums, two fifes and two halberds for the Sergeants.

In his papers, James Madison makes mention of the fact that ". . . One fleeson, an upholster, has made two colors for the Fairfax Company; the mottos' "Pro Aris et Focis" (For our Altars and Firesides) and "Aut Liber Aut Nullus" (Either Freedom or Nothing). He has orders also to procure a number of drums and 200 muskets as speedily as possible."

In January 1775, Washington ordered from Philadelphia, eight shoulder knots for the Sergeants and Corporals of the Company. They were sent to Washington in March, 1775.

In June 1775, Washington assumed command of the Continental Army in Massachusetts and the Fairfax Independent Company wrote to him stating that it was ready to march to Boston or elsewhere should he so direct.

In a letter written by George Mason in 1778, it is stated that the Fairfax Independent Company was the first Independent Company founded in

Virginia and indeed on the Continent. It was commanded by the present General Washington, as Captain, and consisted entirely of gentlemen.”

“An Ordinance for the Raising and Embodying a Sufficient Force for the Defense and Protection of the Colony”, dated July 17, 1775, contained a provision that: “And be it further ordained, the several volunteers companies, raised in pursuance of the resolution of a former convention shall be disbanded, as soon as the battalion in the several districts where the said volunteer companies respectively reside are fully and completely embodied.”

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