

Slaty Run Church & The Chesapeake-Leopard Affair

On June 18, 1807, the U.S.S. Chesapeake sailed 10-12 miles off the coast of Norfolk, Virginia, with its decks full of cargo. She was overtaken by the British Warship H.M. S. Leopard that demanded to board and search for British Navy deserters. That day, the United States Navy drew a line in the sand and said no foreign governments would force their way onto our ships without a fight. However, on this refusal of the Chesapeake, the Leopard opened fire at point blank range, killing four seamen and injuring 18 others. The British then proceeded to board the Chesapeake and carry-off four seamen, including one British citizen and three others, a white man and two people of color. This was by no means an isolated incident, as the British for years had stopped American merchant ships on the seas with the ruse of searching for deserters. Impressments of American seaman into the British Navy were estimated to be in the thousands.

The outrage over this incident known as the Chesapeake-Leopard Affair was swift and immediate, but nowhere greater than in Virginia. In the courthouses, taverns, and streets, the cry for war was overwhelming. A few Virginia counties, including Prince William, decided to hold public meetings for everyone to be heard and, ultimately, to send demands of action to President Jefferson. The place selected was Slaty Run Church, centrally located about a mile south of the present Town of Brentsville. Public notice went out to the citizens that the meeting would take place on August 8.

At the meeting, Richard Brent was selected the chairman, and James Kemper was appointed secretary. A committee to prepare resolutions was then made up of the following nominations: Richard Brent, James Kemper, Dr. Fitzhugh, Richard Foote, Philip Alexander, Stephen French, Walter Lindsay, Gerard Alexander Jun., Thomas Harrison, Jr., Bernard Hooe, Jr., Dr. George Graham and William Grant.

The following was posted at the court house in Dumfries and copies sent to Governor Cabell and President Thomas Jefferson: "We the citizens of Prince William have with sentiments of indignation and horror, received information of the late flagrant outrage committed by the British Ship of War Leopard on the frigate Chesapeake belonging to the United States; and at the moment when these sensations are strongly excited in our bosoms, we feel with poignant sensibility for the fate of our fellow citizens who were the unfortunate and immediate victims of this atrocious act. Yet amid the conflict of emotions which we experience in the highest degree amid the mingled emotions of horror, indignation, resentment and sympathy, we cannot but regret from motive of intered as also from more amiable considerations of humanity that the madness, ambition, perfidy, jealousy, rapacity, or sanguinary policy of foreign nations, should force us to encounter the miseries, massacres, and devastations of war. We more especially regret that outrages of this nature should have been offered to us by a nation whose prosperity, as well as our own, we are satisfied is best promoted by peace and friendly interchange of hind offices; but we cannot restrain the expression of our opinion that from some unfortunate infatuation, or dishonorable prejudice the rulers of Britain have for a series of years, manifested a disposition in every instance inimical to this country. At length an outrage has been committed of a nature so flagrant and insulting that every patriotic feeling that can actuate the human bosom impels us to demand the most perfect reparation or to encounter WAR with all its consequent calamities – While therefore we deprecate its evils we consider them less calamitous than national degradation.

Resolved, therefore, That the course which our government hath uniformly pursued, with respect to the belligerent powers of Europe, has been marked by the strictest neutrality, and by a dignified forbearance which commands our warmest approbation, and secures our most perfect confidence.

Resolved, That although dearly appreciating the enjoyments and the arts of PEACE, and ever desirous of extending the olive branch to all who deserve it. Yet when once aroused by injuries aggravated by insults we will hurl the arrows and the thunder of WAR on an insidious foe & teach them to dread the indignation of a people who are powerful because they are free.

Resolved, That the inhabitants of Norfolk, Portsmouth and their vicinities by their ever memorable alacrity in excluding the aggressors from their shores, and energetic fortitude in graving the threats of a petty tyrant, are entitled to the warmest thanks of a grateful nation.

Resolved, That the executive of the United states by the promptitude and firmness displayed in the measures already adopted has given the surest pledge that nothing in his power will be wanting to procure us that ample atonement for the past, and that complete security for the future which can only appease the feelings of a people justly enraged.

Resolved, That in the conduct of our state executive, we recognize representatives who are highly worthy the elevated stations in which they are placed: -

And That, for our parts, however we may have differed on domestic and speculative question of policy, whenever our country is threatened, either by foreign insolence, or internal treason, we will be found an UNITED

PEOPLE, and we most solemnly pledge ourselves to rally around the standard of our government, contributing our exertions either to avenge injuries, repel aggressions, or to punish traitors.

Resolved, That it be earnestly recommended to our fellow citizens at large to cherish and improve their domestic manufactures to ply the loom and the wheel with active diligence, and thus by preparing against a war which the wantonness of British power appears determined to wage upon us we at once secure our own comfort and independence, and deprive our enemies of the vast resources derived from our custom.

Resolved, That a copy of these proceedings shall be transmitted by the chairman of this meeting to the President of the United States, to the Executive of this State, to the Mayor of the Borough of Norfolk, to our representative in congress, and that they be published in the National Intelligencer and Richmond Enquire.

On motion, Resolved, That the thanks of this meeting be returned the chairman, for his able and faithful discharge of the duties of the chair.”

Richard Brent, Chairman

James Kempe, Secretary

The action at Slaty Run Church, as well as demands from other counties, led President Jefferson to state, “Never since the Battle of Lexington have I seen this Country in such a state of exasperation.” The total inability of the country to protect itself on the seas would lead to demands for a creditable Navy. This and other events would leave smoldering feelings in this country until war was declared in 1812.

Ron Turner