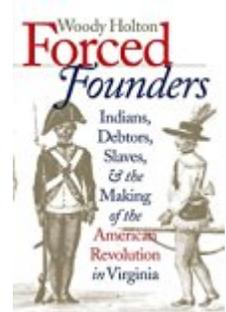


Woody Holton. *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, & the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. xxi + 231 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2501-3.



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These are trying times for the FFV's (Founding Fathers from Virginia). During the 1960s Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, and Jack P. Greene pointed out that, far from composed, confident constitutionalists calmly orchestrating a reasoned rebellion against British tyranny, Virginia leaders were an anxious, uncertain, tentative lot. In the 1980s Rhys Isaac found these same Virginians besieged by an evangelical counterculture, while T. H. Breen pointed out that George Washington and his friends were failed tobacco planters deeply, even desperately, in debt to British merchants. Thus well before DNA testing linked Thomas Jefferson to his slave, Sally Hemings, it looked like Jefferson and his fellow Virginia leaders, far from men fit for marble monuments, in fact had feet of clay.

Woody Holton joins this revisionist chorus in his fine new book, *Forced Founders*. Like his predecessors, Holton portrays Virginia's leaders as desperate men who became convinced that they had to do a desperate deed: declare independence. Where Holton moves beyond his predecessors is the large and colorful cast of characters he

includes in this story. Jefferson and Washington are indeed here, as are Isaac's evangelicals and Breen's British merchants, but so, too, are Shawnees and Privy Councilors, Cherokees and common folk, slaves and colonial governors. All of them, in one way or another, played a crucial role in pushing Virginia down the road to 1776.

The structure of Holton's deeply-researched work is both topical and chronological. An opening section, "Grievances, 1763-1774," traces how natives resisting colonial expansion combined with British officials bent on avoiding another expensive Indian war to frustrate Virginia's many land speculators while those same Virginians, as tobacco planters and slaveowners, were also deeply upset by imperial trade policy. A second part looks closely at the colony's trade boycotts of 1769 and 1774. Next Holton chronicles how slaves and common farmers, in different ways, so frightened the Virginia gentry in the mid-1770s that they had, it seemed, no choice but to declare independence in hopes of regaining control of the situation. A final section considers the fractious "Spirit of the People" in 1776 and ponders the conse-

quences Virginia's independence had for all of the peoples involved. If the topical arrangement is sometimes repetitious, it nonetheless serves to connect this gloriously motley crew to the book's central argument.

Holton is refreshingly, even disarmingly, modest in his claims for that argument. He does not insist that Virginia's story can be applied to other colonies (though he occasionally suggests parallels). He does not assert that Indians, or small farmers, or slaves, or any one group caused the Revolution; rather, a "web of influence" "indirectly," often "inadvertently," "helped" or "powerfully influenced" the course of events (pp. xvii, xviii, 205, 206). Nor can he claim complete originality in his treatment of Indians or slaves. Readers of Colin Calloway, Gregory Evans Dowd, Richard White, and others will find some that is familiar here, as will those acquainted with work on slave resistance by Ira Berlin, Sylvia Frey, Philip Morgan, and Peter Wood.

What Holton does accomplish, however, is to weave these various strands into a single interpretative fabric of considerable persuasive power. Who would have thought to link the Virginia assembly's 1769 petition to British authorities for a land grant in Kentucky with that same body's 1772 petition for an end to the slave trade? Yet Holton shows how both initiatives aimed at "more control over a group of nonwhite Americans, . . . sought to change government policies that had harmed free Virginians economically . . . [and] tried to prevent smallholders from obtaining crucial elements in tobacco production -- Indian land and African slaves --without paying a member of the gentry for them." Finally, "[i]n both cases, the British government sided with the gentry's opponents" (pp. 72-73).

Time and again, Holton's sharp eye for such unlikely connections brings startling scenes to light. Consider the moment in the spring of 1775 when John Murray (Lord Dunmore), Virginia's last royal governor, felt so besieged by rebels that he

armed some slaves and Shawnees to guard the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg. Or think of Dunmore's plan later that year to entice African Americans away from their masters while dispatching an emissary west to recruit Indians, warriors who would then join forces with the former slaves and "march forth to conquer the Virginia patriots" (p. 162). If the chance of such alliances enduring was remote -- those Shawnees were, after all, hostages of a war Dunmore had just waged against natives, while Dunmore's Indian agent was captured and his plans discovered -- they serve as signposts beckoning us to ponder paths not taken.

Taking stock of such clashing, contending groups, *Forced Founders* makes another signal contribution by suggesting how, despite their obvious differences, common principles and common strategies animated these peoples. All pursued a "dream of freedom, and" all believed "that they stood a better chance of achieving their goals if they banded together with others of like mind" (p. 212). Indians arguing for intertribal unity based on a common color and African Americans pressing for slave resistance based on a common plight, Virginia leaders bent on enforcing boycotts and common folk seeking a greater say in public affairs--"Activists of all stripes," Holton argues, "found that an effective strategy for building political unity was to urge their followers to embrace broader identities" (p. 213).

Readers of H-AMINDIAN can be particularly grateful to Holton for giving Indians a lead role in the Revolutionary drama. For years, students of Indian history (myself included) have been calling for better integration of natives in the larger story of America's past. So far that call has not been answered; the best we have come up with is a sort of parallel narrative track, an "Indians' New World," an "Indians' Great Awakening," an "Indians' Declaration of Independence." Holton, on the other hand, connects natives to events beyond Indian country, showing how Shawnees and Cherokees

exchanging friendly wampum belts in some native village had a direct, profound effect on the thoughts and actions of very different men, very far away.

Ironically, Holton's work ends up, in some strange sense, redeeming the FFV's. For one thing, he humanizes them: far from Weemsian demi-gods in firm command, they were as confused, divided, and frightened as the rest of us. For another, by tracing just how many challenges these men faced--from slaves and common folk in their midst to Indians and British officials beyond Virginia's borders --Holton makes their successful independence movement all the more remarkable.

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