



Virginia C.A.R. Patriots of the Round Table ***William “Billy” Flora***

Free Black Patriot – Hero of the Battle of Great Bridge

Virginians were ready and able to support the Continental Army and French forces at Yorktown in 1781 in part because, until 1780, most of the war took place elsewhere in the former colonies. But, at first, it seemed as though the British might keep control of its oldest colony. Following the Battle of Lexington and Concord (April 1775), loyalist and patriot forces in Virginia engaged in a series of minor skirmishes to gain control of military supplies in the colony. After one such incident in October 1775 in which British sailors were killed, the Royal Governor, Lord Dunmore, declared martial law and offered to emancipate enslaved Virginians willing to serve in the British Army. He was confident of success, writing in November that he would be able to “...to reduce this colony to a proper sense of their duty... to His Majesty’s crown and dignity....”

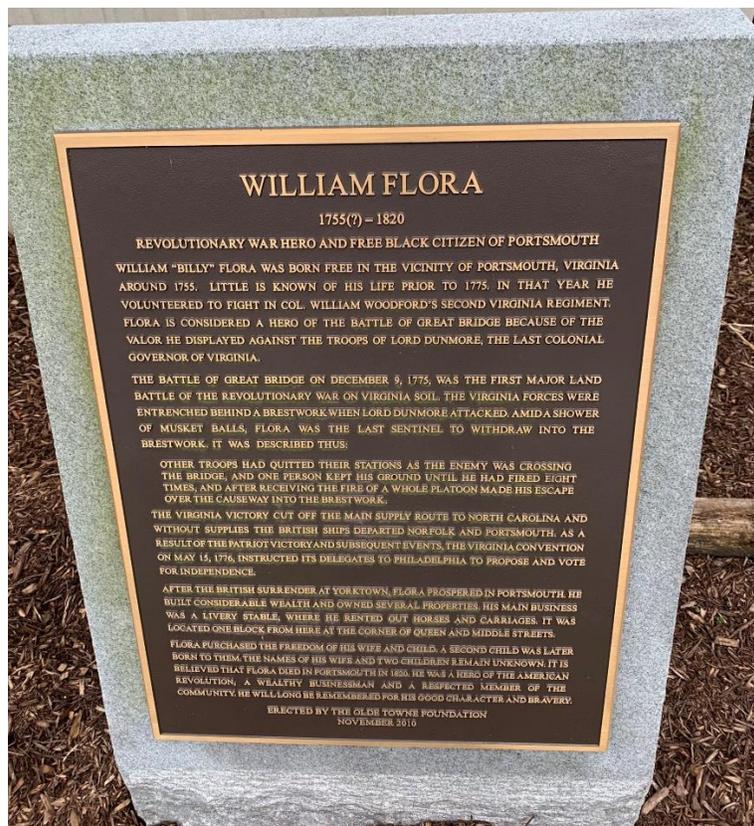
But, of course, that did not happen, and William “Billy” Flora, a free black man born in Portsmouth, Virginia, would play a significant role in turning Lord Dunmore into a Royal Governor without a royal colony to govern.

Flora was born in 1755 in Portsmouth, Virginia. His parents were free African Americans who owned a livery stable in Portsmouth. Flora was drawn to the American cause in 1775 and joined a militia unit. As Lord Dunmore continued to try to secure his colony. He fortified the Norfolk and of “the Great Bridge,” over which the only road to North Carolina passed.



In response, the Virginia General Assembly ordered its troops to march on Norfolk. Col. William Woodford, commander of the 2nd Virginia Regiment, was in overall command, and Flora's militia unit joined Col. Woodford's troops at the south end of the Great Bridge in early December 1775. Concerned for the safety of Norfolk, Lord Dunmore ordered an attack on the patriot position on December 9, 1775.

Flora stood as one of several sentries on the narrow "Great Bridge" that divided the British and patriot positions. As the British advanced toward the patriots, Flora fired eight times on the enemy. He was the last sentry to leave the bridge. According to one account, Flora even removed the last board of the bridge, preventing the British from attacking the retreating patriots. Flora is credited by historians with slowing the British advance and allowing patriot forces more time to prepare for battle. His valiant actions were lauded by his comrades and even by a newspaper of the time.



In the days following the battle, with the road to Norfolk open to the ever-growing patriot forces, Lord Dunmore took refuge aboard ships of the Royal Navy anchored off of Norfolk. On January 1, 1776, Dunmore ordered the bombardment of Norfolk in an attempt to deprive patriot forces of the provisions in the town. Dunmore briefly occupied Portsmouth in January and February but was once again forced offshore by patriot forces. In August 1776, Dunmore and his dwindling adherents were evacuated by the Royal Navy to New York, and he would never return to Virginia.

In November 1776, Flora enlisted as a private in Capt. William Grimes' 15th Virginia Continental Regiment. That regiment participated in the 1777 Battles of Brandywine and Germantown and the 1778 Battle of Monmouth. Flora also fought in the Battle of Yorktown in 1781. Flora's former commanding officer once said of the dutiful private that he "was held in high esteem as a soldier."

Flora spent the remainder of his life in Norfolk County, Virginia. He briefly returned to duty in his 50s when the Norfolk militia was called up following the attack on the USS Chesapeake by the HMS Leopard off the Virginia Capes. He died in 1820. On Great Bridge's preserved battleground, there is a historical marker detailing his actions at that important battle. Flora, a free black American, was the hero of the battle that effectively ended over 150 years of royal government in Virginia.

Discussion Questions for Local Societies

I thought the Declaration of Independence was signed in July 1776. Why was there a battle in Virginia in December 1775?

What was the significance of the Battle of Great Bridge?

<https://jyfmuseums.org/learn/learning-center/what-was-the-battle-of-great-bridge/>

Was Billy Flora the only African American to fight for the Patriot cause at Great Bridge?

<https://allthingsliberty.com/2021/12/virginian-ned-streater-african-american-minute-man/>

Is it possible that a Native American also fought for the Patriot cause at Great Bridge? You might find out at this year's commemoration of the battle in Chesapeake on December 3!

Resources

[Billy Flora at the Battle of Great Bridge - Journal of the American Revolution \(allthingsliberty.com\)](https://allthingsliberty.com/2021/12/virginian-ned-streater-african-american-minute-man/)

[William Flora | American Battlefield Trust \(battlefields.org\)](https://battlefields.org/)

Carey, Charles W., Jr. "Flora, William," American National Biography Online, American Council of Learned Societies. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc. (2000).

Davis, Burke, Black Heroes of the American Revolution (1976).