Puzzles of the Past: The Life of Josiah Parker (1751-1810) and the Revolutionary Generation

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PUZZLES OF THE PAST
The Life of Josiah Parker (1751-1810) and the Revolutionary Generation

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
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Master of Arts

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Approved by the Committee, December 2007

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Josiah Parker (1751-1810) was involved in several key events in the American Revolution and early Republic: he fought at the battle of Trenton, led the militia against Cornwallis in Virginia, and served in the U.S. House of Representatives. Parker made no conscious effort to preserve a record of his life, yet he survives in the margins of the records left behind by the central figures and institutions of his day. These records can be used to create a biography of Josiah Parker, unlocking his inner life and revealing a merchant-planter who was motivated by an ethic of honor in his familial, martial, and political affairs. While Parker was not a central figure of this era, his proximity to the dramatic events of this age offers a slightly different perspective on a familiar story. Furthermore, Parker’s life illustrates the role of the marginal figure in a historical narrative: to frame the larger scene, providing the context through which to view the central figures.
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To Chrisy
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I am particularly indebted to the faculty at the College of William & Mary. Julie Richter provided me with her transcriptions of Isle of Wight County tax records and also offered helpful advice on an early version of this thesis. My advisor, James Axtell, offered critical support and read several drafts with his usual keen eye. The insightful questions and direction provided by my other committee members, Karin Wulf and Gail Bossenga, have made this thesis a stronger product.

I am most grateful to my wife, Chrisy, who has read more drafts, listened to more explanations, and provided more suggestions than anyone should have to, often helping me to realize what I was trying to say when I wasn’t sure. Her faith, not to mention her monetary support, was essential in completing this thesis.
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PUZZLES OF THE PAST
INTRODUCTION

John Trumbull placed both the figure and the character of George Washington at the center of his painting, “The Capture of the Hessians at Trenton.” Seated on his horse, Washington orders his officers to care for the Hessian commander, Col. Johann Gottlieb Rall, who had been mortally wounded in the forty-five minute battle on the morning of December 26, 1776. Surrounding Washington and Rall are other revolutionary heroes who had fought at Trenton, such as James Monroe, Nathaniel Greene, and Henry Knox.¹ On the far-left edge of the painting stands one noble-looking figure dressed in white – Josiah Parker, lieutenant colonel of the 5th Virginia Regiment, Continental Line (See Figure 1). Trumbull likely painted Parker from a portrait he had done around 1791, when Parker was serving as a Congressman in the new U.S. House of Representatives.² But at the battle of Trenton, Parker was a youthful field officer of twenty-five. He had come of age in an age of Revolution. While he was not a central figure in that age, his life followed a common revolutionary trajectory: from resistance to British colonial policy, to armed rebellion, to service in a new national government.

Recreating the life of Josiah Parker poses several challenges. He did not live in what biographer Leon Edel terms “the age of the archive,” an age marked by a deluge of

² Theodore Sizer, The Works of Colonel John Trumbull, Artist of the American Revolution (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 57, Figure 165; Cooper, John Trumbull, 74.
FIGURE 1

"THE CAPTURE OF THE HESSIANS AT TRENTON"

Parker is standing on the far left, wearing an off-white jacket, holding a sword by his side.

Painting by John Trumbull.3

accumulated personal materials. But, Edel reminds us, this is not necessarily a disadvantage, for the age of the archive is also marked by a certain self-awareness in the creation and preservation of personal materials. In such an age the records of the past become not simply history but self-conscious history.4 It does not appear that Parker

3 Cooper, John Trumbull, 74.
4 Leon Edel, “The Age of the Archive,” Monday Evening Papers, no 7., Center for Advanced Studies,
made any self-conscious effort to preserve a record of his life. Yet we see the beginning of the age of the archive in the efforts of Parker’s associates, men such as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and James Madison, to preserve their records.

The record of Josiah Parker exists mainly in official documents and the papers left behind by his associates. Is it possible in such a case to know anything of Parker’s inner life? Literary critic Malcolm Bowie jests that “a dearth of data can offer a real advantage. [The biographer] can become a novelist, an inventor of characters rather than a simple reporter of those that already exist.” When faced with a short supply of primary sources on an individual like Josiah Parker, one alternative to pure imagination is to “locate the individual by reconstructing the circumscribing historical and cultural context within which he lived.” Biography’s focus on the inner life has led historians to discount biography’s use as a method of historical analysis. Some claim that the inner life is the province of fiction and, therefore, biography as a literary form is “as close to the novel as it is to history.” Yet using context to help unlock the inner life can prevent the excessive focus on the inner life for which biography is often criticized. Indeed, the relevance of biography is found in the intertwining of the inner life and the outer world.

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The challenges of unlocking the recesses of the inner life are compounded by time. What we know about “great men” of the past is often tangled in myth, legend, and even simple inaccuracy. Strangely, this is also true of a less famous figure like Parker. There are a number of claims in biographical synopses about Parker’s life that are untrue, unlikely, or at least contradicted by most of the evidence. For example, Parker supposedly appears behind Washington in Emanuel Leutze’s painting, “Washington Crossing the Delaware”; he fought at the battle of Yorktown, commanding part of the militia; after the war he was going to sail to France, but his brother, Nathaniel, went in his stead and was lost at sea; in 1777 Parker took a furlough from the army as it went into winter camp at Valley Forge because his wife had died giving birth. In truth, James Madison stands behind Washington in Leutze's painting; Parker resigned weeks before Yorktown; he had only one brother, named Copeland, who outlived him; and his wife lived until 1802.10

Perhaps such myths reflect the appeal of the dramatic. Parker can as easily fulfill that role as any other figure from his era. Much of it likely comes from the difficulty of verifying historical events over two centuries old. This is true in the case of prominent figures who left a significant record of their lives, but the problem is compounded with Parker. Such documentary discrepancies and dramatic indulgences come in large part from the nature of the historical record. Most surviving documents were created for commercial, political, and logistical reasons: to account for shipments sent, payments

received, crops planted, laws passed, militia mustered, troops supplied, and so on. Much can be teased out of these records to determine the nature of both day-to-day life and more significant events. John Lewis Gaddis refers to the historical record as a structure of past events similar to dinosaur bones which, once reconstructed, must still be fleshed out to create an accurate representation of what once was. But aside from the occasional diary or revealing letter, the impetus behind the events of the past, the motives and character of those involved, and the drama that results is often revealed only in private conversations, off-hand remarks in the company of friends, back-room political compromises, and conversations at the dinner table. The historical record can hint at these gaps, but filling them is a problem that afflicts a biographer of even the best documented life.¹¹

Edel declares that biographies should be about “extraordinary” lives.¹² But what role does the marginal life play in a historical narrative? Extraordinary was a tall order to fill during the American Revolution and the early days of the Republic. Parker was no Jefferson in his articulation of the cause of independence; he was no Washington in his command on the battlefield; he was no Madison in his political maneuverings. Yet the great paradox of the “great men” of this era is that they simultaneously overshadow and illuminate. Washington dominates Trumbull’s painting as he does our historical memory of the event. But just as Trumbull draws our eyes to Washington, he gives form to some of the other men who were at the battle of Trenton. Likewise, Parker survives in the

margins of the records left by Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and a host of others. Yet his life offers something more than the usual challenges and rewards of discovering a subject's inner life. Parker's proximity to the central figures of his day provides an opportunity to view those figures from a different perspective. Parker's point of view may be just as biased as that of the central figures of his age, but it provides a counterpoint to the self-conscious history left behind by such figures. Moreover, his life provides an opportunity to examine the relationship between central and marginal figures and the role each plays in our construction of historical knowledge.
Josiah Parker was born May 11, 1751, near Smithfield, Isle of Wight County, Virginia, to sixth-generation Virginians. There are no records that would give insight into his childhood or the home life of his parents. We can assume from Parker's repeated election to public offices later in life that he had received a typical education for a gentry son. It does not appear that he attended the nearby College of William and Mary, so he would likely have been tutored at home.\(^\text{13}\) The earliest record of Parker's life is a notice in the *Virginia Gazette* announcing his marriage on May 6, 1773, to Mary Pierce Bridger, a wealthy young widow who had been married to one of Isle of Wight's most prominent individuals, Col. Joseph Bridger. Mary had two daughters from her previous marriage, Judith and Catherine, and Josiah and Mary would later have one child – a daughter they named Ann Pierce.\(^\text{14}\) We know nothing of Parker's early home life or of his relationship with his wife; if he wrote to and received letters from his wife and daughter, we do not have them. Institutional records left behind by families – births, marriages, deaths – are


often less revealing than the institutional records of businesses, wars and governments. We must turn, then, to Parker's place in society.

Parker's social rank before his marriage to Mary Bridger is unclear. Social status is inherently difficult to pin down, often resisting the neat three-tiered order that contemporaries and historians try to place on society. Status was determined by society's assessment of one's family, wealth, and demeanor. It is unclear whether Parker would have been considered "well born." His third great-grandfather came to the colony in the mid-seventeenth century with headrights to over 700 acres of land. A cursory comparison of the inventory from Parker's grandfather's estate with other inventories from Isle of Wight suggests that he was of the upper-middling sort. Parker's father, Nicholas, lived until 1789, yet there is no will or inventory for his estate to establish his financial status. He did, however, serve as a vestryman in his local parish and as a justice of the peace. He owned at least a 500-acre plantation on the James River, named Macclesfield.

Whatever the financial status of the Parker family, Josiah Parker established himself by his marriage to Mary Bridger. From her first marriage, Bridger had acquired a nearby plantation, also along the James, named White Marsh. Upon remarriage, the

16 Crocker, "The Parkers of Macclesfield," 420. Land grants show Thomas Parker coming to Virginia with over 700 acres of land; settlers were granted "headrights" to 50 acres for each dependent, whether family or servant, that they transported to Virginia.
17 11 December 1730, Will Book, Isle of Wight County, Book No. 3 1726-1733, 243-44. With a value of £61 sterling, Nathaniel Parker's estate ranks in the top 32 percent of all inventories from 1726-1730. The inclusion of silverware, books, and two wigs also suggests a respectable status (Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 72-74).
plantation and any other real property Bridger had acquired from her late husband legally became Parker's. The marriage notice in the *Virginia Gazette* listed Parker's occupation as merchant, and with his marriage to Mary, Parker became one of Isle of Wight's most prominent merchant-planters. It was common for planters living along the lower James River, where the soil was poor, to engage in trade to supplement their income and reduce transportation costs for their crops. According to historian Rhys Isaac, merchants could earn respect as gentlemen in their own right, but "social values in Virginia usually ensured that wealthy persons in trade would acquire both land and slaves."\(^{19}\) It appears that Parker did just that. The sources on Parker's career as a merchant-planter aren't much better than those of his childhood or home life. He left no account books from his plantation or shipping concern. Letters of marque from the Revolution, granting authority for merchant ships to capture enemy vessels, show Parker was part-owner of at least four vessels.\(^ {20}\) But tax records show Parker steadily acquiring land and slaves. With 31 slaves and 3,600 acres in Isle of Wight County alone during the height of his career, Parker's wealth placed him in the top one percent of all property holders in the county.\(^ {21}\)

How Parker viewed his career as a merchant-planter can also be seen in his will. In a study of advertisements of plantations for sale in the *Virginia Gazette*, Camille Wells

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\(^{21}\) 1783, 1795, 1800, and 1810, Land and Personal Property Tax Records, Isle of Wight County, Virginia, Library of Virginia, Richmond. With 2,482 acres in 1783, Parker was already in the top half percent of landholders in the county, yet he only owned 12 slaves, seven of whom were under the age of 16. This placed him in the top quarter of slaveholders. I am indebted to Julie Richter for providing me her transcriptions of these records.
suggests that the way a planter described his plantation could “represent the stance and priorities of Virginia’s landowning planters – their specific points of view.” Parker’s will resembles in some respects a pattern Wells finds in advertisements, where a planter, envisioning himself “positioned at the center of a constellation,” describes his possessions in hierarchical fashion, starting with his dwellings and moving to outbuildings, gardens, and fields.22 Parker begins his will by listing his bequests to his married daughter, Ann Cowper: six slaves, mirrors, kitchenware, pictures and frames; he then interrupts to mention livestock before returning to household items; beds and bedsteads, fine china, and finally his harp and pianoforte. He states that his daughter will be allowed – until her son and Parker’s ultimate heir comes of age – to use “my dwelling, house, garden, yard, new stable, another stable…. I also allow her the use of fire wood, fencing, [illegible], railing, pastorage for her stock and such fruit as she may choose.”

Next, Parker orders his lands in Ohio, Kentucky, western Virginia – lands awarded for his service in the Revolution – and his lot in the town of Washington, D.C., to be sold for the improvement of his Isle of Wight estates. His lots in the towns of Norfolk, Portsmouth, and Gosport were to be sold at the discretion of his daughter and his late wife’s brother, the proceeds going to the improvement of his Isle of Wight estates or for further investments, whichever “may be most for the benefit of my aforementioned grandson Josiah Cowper.”23

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23 8 March 1810, Isle of Wight County Will Book No. 13, 1809-1815, 90.
As with the *Virginia Gazette* advertisements, Parker’s emphasis on the dwellings and the objects contained therein suggests a desire for order and control. “Ensconced,” Wells continues, “in houses that they perceived to be at the very top or center of their fixed and orderly rural landscape, planters thought of themselves as unquestionably in control.”

Beginning his bequests with his slaves suggests not only control but also Parker's recognition of the critical role of slaves to his economic and social status, especially in the lower Southside region – the area south of the James River and near the Chesapeake Bay – where the land was less productive and less a symbol of social status than slaves. But Parker's will is more striking for what it doesn't mention. The first document we have of Parker's life – his marriage notice – presents him only as a merchant; the final document Parker left behind says nothing of his career as a merchant. Parker clearly saw himself not as a merchant but as a gentleman planter.

Parker’s repeated election to various public offices throughout his life suggests that the freeholders of Isle of Wight County viewed him with the respect and deference owed to a gentleman planter, whatever his status before his marriage. Elections were not marked by campaigns in the modern sense. Candidates would have been chosen on the basis of familial and personal reputation. Elections took place in the yard of the county courthouse, where the candidates would treat the freeholders to alcohol and food. The name of each freeholder would be called by the county clerk, and they would declare their candidate, whereupon the candidate would thank them for their vote. The process

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thus acted as a ratification of the social position of both the candidate and the
freeholder.27

The unfolding conflict between Great Britain and the American colonies opened
several opportunities for military and public service, and Parker’s entrance into public
office came in 1775. The Continental Congress had called upon the colonies to boycott
British goods in an attempt to force Parliament to repeal its taxes and to soften its stance
towards a rebellious Boston. In response to this call, the counties of Virginia established
committees of safety to monitor commercial conduct and to enforce compliance with the
resolutions of Congress. On January 5, 1775, at the age of twenty-three, Parker was
elected to Isle of Wight’s committee of safety.28

In the early months of its operation, the Isle of Wight committee was used as a
vehicle for enforcing the non-importation agreement, known as the Continental
Association. The Continental Congress had resolved to halt the importation of British
goods beginning on December 1, 1774, and planned to phase in the enforcement of non-
consumption of British goods (March 1, 1775) and non-exportation to British ports
(September 10, 1775).29 The committees of safety would investigate complaints that
merchants had violated the Association. Often the offending parties would explain the
situation and declare their desire to comply with the Association while asking that
exceptions be made in their particular circumstance. Such was the case of John Sym, a

27 Isaac, Transformation of Virginia, 110-14; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior
in the Old South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 184-85.
28 Robert L. Scribner, Brent Tartar, and William J. Van Schreven, eds., Revolutionary Virginia: The Road
to Independence: A Documentary Record, 5 vols. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975-
1979), 2:221.
29 Hast, Loyalism, 18-19; David Ammerman, In the Common Cause: American Response to the Coercive
merchant in Smithfield who had received a shipment of Irish linen soon after non-importation had gone into effect. The Continental Congress had allowed for such contingencies, and the county committee appointed Parker and three others to sell Sym's goods in a public auction. The auction acted as a mechanism to fine the offending merchant, for Sym would likely have been the only bidder. The money Parker raised would have been sent to aid Bostonians who had been blockaded by the British.  

Serving on the committee of safety would propel Parker to higher office. Virginia's royal governor, Lord Dunmore, had dissolved the House of Burgesses, Virginia's colonial legislature, when it had called for a day of "Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer" in support of Boston. Yet the Burgesses continued to meet as a political convention. On March 11, 1775, Parker was elected as a delegate to the second Virginia Convention, and he would be reelected to the third and fourth. Parker also continued to serve on the committee of safety, which had begun to take a more active role of opposition to British policy. When the second Virginia Convention closed the county courts, the committees of safety began to act as the de facto county governments. As the threat of armed conflict with Britain grew, the committees began preparing for the defense of the colony by raising and supplying local militia. Parker and other committee members were sent on assignments to obtain gunpowder. The committee paid for the gunpowder unless an individual refused to part with it, in which case the committee

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30 Scribner et al., Revolutionary Virginia, 2:286-87; Hast, Loyalism, 21.
31 Isaac, Transformation of Virginia, 243-45.
32 Scribner et al., Revolutionary Virginia, 2:304, 3:47n.
33 The convention closed the county courts on March 25, 1775. Scribner et al., Revolutionary Virginia, 2:373.
member was “directed to dispossess them of it by the most eligible means in their power.”

Institutions such as the Virginia Convention play a critical role in preserving records of the past. Our knowledge of Parker would be even more limited had he not been connected to institutions that kept a detailed account of their activities. Yet an institution can preserve detailed records while obscuring the individuals associated with it. Minutes from the committee of safety merely tell when Parker was in attendance and what his assignments were. We face a similar problem in the record of the Virginia Conventions. There were no recorded votes, and debates are boiled down in the official minutes to a list of topics of discussion. In some cases, we simply know that Parker was present. As he was entrusted with more committee assignments, his involvement and positions become more evident. Yet even in these instances, the nature of politics and committee work is such that his motivations, beliefs, and assumptions remain hidden.

The second Virginia Convention was brief. It met for seven days at the end of March 1775. Parker likely played no role in the proceedings, for he was a political novice. The average age of the 120 delegates was about forty. Twenty-three-year-old Parker was one of only fifteen delegates who had not served in the House of Burgesses before Dunmore had dissolved the assembly. The colony’s militia law had lapsed since the official assembly had last met, so the convention’s main goal was to establish provisions for the raising, arming, and training of a militia and to place the colony in a general “posture of Defence.” Yet the convention delegates still hoped for reconciliation.

34 Ibid., 3:134; Ammerman, Common Cause, 103-24.
with Britain. While they encouraged the local production of commodities as a means of protest against British commercial policy, they also declared their loyalty to King George III.  

The political climate changed quickly. By the time the third Virginia Convention met on July 17, 1775, armed conflict had broken out in Massachusetts. In Virginia, Lord Dunmore had seized the gunpowder at the armory in Williamsburg, citing fears of insurrection as his justification. He later fled the capital and established his headquarters on a ship near Norfolk. Over the next month the delegates continued to meet the challenges of raising, supplying, and governing a militia as well as organizing regular troops for the defense of the colony. But the convention was not yet in an attitude of complete rebellion. On August 10, 1775, Charles Duncan complained to the convention that he and a group of others had been forced to join their county militia “under pain of incurring the Displeasure of the said Company and of being treated as Enemies to the Country.” Duncan had complied with the Continental Association and supported the authority of the Virginia Convention; he simply did not want to take up arms in the cause. The delegates agreed that his position was reasonable and ordered the county militia officer to proceed with more leniency.

The issue of neutrality and allegiance would have been on Parker’s mind. The lower Southside region of Virginia was sharply divided between British sympathizers and “rebels.” As a native of the Southside, Parker would have seen these divisions develop.

37 Scribner et al., *Revolutionary Virginia*, 3:413.
firsthand as the conflict progressed. Lord Dunmore’s presence in Norfolk after fleeing Williamsburg further divided the region. On August 16, 1775, Parker was appointed with George Mason to draft an ordinance to establish an oath of allegiance for the colony. Mason had been an enthusiastic supporter of the idea of a test oath, and it appears that Parker may have had little, if any, role in the actual writing of the ordinance. Test oaths were similar in aim and execution to the enforcement mechanisms of the Continental Association, which Parker had supported. Colonists were pressured to publicly sign the Association and those who refused or broke the agreement were publicly shamed, sometimes with their names printed in the newspaper, sometimes harassed and even tarred and feathered. Historian Rhys Isaac suggests that the Association acted as a “boundary-making ceremony.” The same can be said of test oaths. As dissenters were cut off from the community, consensus and unanimity in the face of danger could be restored. “Rituals of detestation were of great importance in defining the danger and amplifying the community’s alarm to it.” These ceremonies could also be used to coerce or cajole the lukewarm into supporting the cause of independence.

For the time being the convention did not adopt such coercive measures. Indeed, upon receiving a petition from several British-born Virginia merchants who supported the American cause but did not wish to take up arms against the country of their birth, the convention encouraged the county committees to treat all such individuals with “lenity

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38 Hast, Loyalism, 19-45.
39 Scribner et al., Revolutionary Virginia, 3:468n, 490-91.
41 Isaac, Transformation of Virginia, 248-51.
and friendship.” Mason's ordinance was laid aside, and it was not until the conflict had escalated that Virginia adopted an oath of allegiance, first only for suspected loyalists in May 1776, but by May 1777 for all white males over sixteen years of age.

By late 1775, fighting had broken out in Virginia between British forces under Lord Dunmore and the regular troops that had been raised by the third convention. On November 7, 1775, Dunmore issued a proclamation declaring martial law and calling all able-bodied men to join his forces. He required the inhabitants of Norfolk to take an oath of allegiance to King George III and to wear a red band on their arm signifying that they had taken the oath. Furthermore, he offered freedom to any slaves who would fight with him.

The fourth Virginia Convention was called to address these developments. In this convention, which met from December 1, 1775, through January 20, 1776, Parker began to play a more visible role as his seniority and experience earned him more committee assignments. He was appointed to the committee that prepared the official reply to Dunmore. The colonists had found in Lord Dunmore the embodiment of the present conflict. Dunmore had “become the rigid executioner” of “that system of tyranny adopted by the ministry and parliament of Great Britain.” In declaring martial law, Dunmore was “assuming powers which the King himself cannot exercise.” The delegates had taken umbrage when Dunmore called them rebels. As the delegates saw it, they had continually held out the hope of reconciliation with Great Britain while Dunmore had sought the

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42 Scribner et al., Revolutionary Virginia, 3:468n, 490-91.
43 Hast, Loyalism, 93, 145. Those who refused could be jailed, forced to leave the colony or move to the backcountry, or barred from buying property, holding office, serving on a jury, and voting.
44 Ibid., 52-54.
subjugation of the colony at every turn. He tried to destroy their liberty and property by raiding their plantations and freeing their slaves. The delegates pardoned all those who had been forced to take an oath of allegiance to the crown, so long as they had not taken up arms or actively assisted “our enemies.” In sum, the delegates argued that the colony had been “compelled, by a disagreeable, but absolute necessity, of repelling force by force, to maintain our just rights and privileges.”

The committee presented a separate declaration in answer to Dunmore’s offer of freedom to the slaves. Dunmore had long threatened to turn slaves against their “rebel” masters. Ever since Dunmore fled Williamsburg, slaves had been running to Dunmore for refuge. Convinced of their usefulness in the present struggle, Dunmore officially offered the slaves freedom in his November 7 proclamation. In response, Parker’s committee presented an “offer of mercy to those unfortunate people” who had been “seduced, by his lordship’s proclamation, or other arts, to desert their masters’ service, and take up arms.” The convention agreed to pardon the freed slaves who would return “to their duty.” However, those slaves who were found “conspiring to rebel or make insurrection” would be put to death. Understandably, the former slaves found Dunmore’s offer of freedom more attractive.

The fourth Virginia Convention had been dominated by military affairs and inundated by petitions from individuals seeking leniency or pardon. Parker was thus assigned to several investigative committees, sometimes as chairman. At issue in these

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45 Scribner et al., Revolutionary Virginia, 5:125-26 (italics in original).
investigations was an individual’s commitment to the American cause and his or her compliance with the resolutions of the Continental Congress and the Virginia Convention. In one such case, Richard Hopper had planned to ship a cargo of naval stores before September 10, 1775, when the non-exportation association took effect. The ship lay in harbor September 2, when a hurricane ran the ship aground. Unable to meet the deadline, Hopper appealed to the convention for permission to ship his goods. Parker and his committee determined that the ship could sail with ballast and passengers, but not the naval stores. Since the goods were perishable, Hopper asked the convention to buy them for use by the colony. Parker presented the committee’s decision the next day, declaring that the request was “unreasonable and ought to be rejected.”

As in Trumbull’s painting, the records of the Virginia Convention show Parker in the margins, framing a larger story of resistance and rebellion against Britain. Yet Parker’s role in the conventions, even as a committee chairman, gives us little insight into his positions. As with most committee work, only the final decision was reported; lost are the arguments and compromises made. Nor can we gauge Parker’s degree of support for the final decision. Parker likely would have taken an increasingly visible role in the next convention, but he was appointed major of a new regiment of regular troops created by the fourth Virginia Convention. While Parker’s involvement in the conventions does little to illuminate his inner life, his military career is more enlightening. The Revolutionary military left behind several institutional records which, similar to the conventions, give little insight into the individuals associated with the military: commissions, orders, letters

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of marquee, receipts, reports on troop size and movements. Yet the very uncertainty of war and the nascent form of the Revolutionary military ensured that business could not be conducted in a routine, institutionalized manner. Official documents were often supplemented by letters seeking to direct and explain, justify and complain. While the value of letters is limited by the self-consciousness with which the authors portrayed themselves, they potentially offer a more intimate view of the individual, allowing us to begin to see not only where but who Parker was.

Parker became ineligible to serve as a convention delegate when he received his military commission on February 13, 1776. Little is known of Parker’s early military career in Virginia. Lord Dunmore was still in the Norfolk area, and the new Virginia regiments were sent to protect the inhabitants of southern Virginia and halt the foraging raids of the British troops. With his access to supplies cut off, Dunmore fled up the Chesapeake Bay in May 1776 and, by August, had left the area altogether. The main threat to Virginia was now gone. On September 3, 1776, Parker’s regiment was transferred to the northern command of General Washington.

While in the Main Army, Parker would serve in the battles of Trenton, Princeton, Brandywine, and Germantown. He crossed the icy Delaware with Washington’s troops on Christmas evening, 1776, and marched the nine miles or so to Trenton. Since he served in General Nathaniel Greene’s division, we can assume that Parker engaged the

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48 Editorial notes in Revolutionary Virginia mention Parker’s commission date as March 21, while Virginia Military Records index lists it as February 13. Scribner et al., Revolutionary Virginia, 5:392, 433n; Judith McGhan, Virginia Military Records from the Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, the William and Mary College Quarterly, and Tyler’s Quarterly (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1982), 828.
main body of Hessian troops near an apple orchard outside Trenton – the site of Col. Rall’s surrender.\textsuperscript{50} "I have always understood," his daughter wrote years later, that "he received the sword of the expiring British Commander, Col. [Rall]."\textsuperscript{51} We can reconstruct the actions and movements of the divisions in which Parker served in the other engagements. Yet we know nothing more of his experiences in these battles. Greene would later write Parker a letter of recommendation, declaring that he had been "a brave good officer" when he served under Greene in 1776 and 1777. He had been "exact and regular" in discipline and had "signaled himself in a way highly honorable to himself and beneficial to the service."\textsuperscript{52}

Parker won Washington’s admiration on at least one occasion. A party of 400 men had been moving supplies from Brunswick to Perth Amboy, New Jersey. Parker, now a lieutenant colonel, was leading the advance when they came upon two regiments of British soldiers. Parker and his men engaged the enemy for about twenty minutes before forcing them to flee. While the enemy had suffered heavy casualties, only two of Parker’s men were captured and none was killed. Meanwhile, Col. Mordecai Buckner had failed to bring the main party of men to Parker’s aid and the enemy was able to escape. Washington later wrote to John Hancock, contrasting the "great Bravery" of Col. Parker and his men with the “extraordinary” conduct of Col. Buckner.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{51} Petition of Ann P. Cowper, 1816, Legislative Petition Records Group 78, Library of Virginia, Richmond.
\textsuperscript{53} Chase et al., \textit{Washington Papers}, 8:161-63.
Parker would not winter with the Main Army at Valley Forge in 1777 and 1778. Sometime in November or December, Parker left on furlough to attend to personal business matters. On May 28, 1778, Parker was appointed as a member of a court of inquiry to investigate Lt. Col. Park, who was absent without leave. The assignment was common enough, except that Parker himself was not in camp either. For whatever reason, Parker had not returned from his furlough. While he had obtained permission for his leave of absence, Parker was apparently pushing his limits. The next day Washington had his aide-de-camp, Alexander Hamilton, draft a letter to Parker: "I cannot forbear expressing my astonishment, that you should have so far exceeded the time, limited for your return." The place of a field officer was with his regiment, and Washington ordered Parker back to camp immediately. Parker returned to camp, but he would not stay long. On July 12, 1778, Parker resigned his commission in the Continental Army.\(^{54}\)

Parker’s respite would last but two years. In October 1780, British general Alexander Leslie invaded Virginia, settling in the town of Portsmouth, near Norfolk. Taken by surprise, Governor Thomas Jefferson called out the state militia. On October 26, 1780, Jefferson asked Parker to return to military service as a colonel in the militia, that they might “substitute in place of the militia officers, others who to equal zeal join experience in military duties.”\(^{55}\) Parker answered the call.

Although General Leslie abandoned Portsmouth by mid-November, Benedict Arnold, now a British general, came in his wake and began to harass the inhabitants of

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 12:249, 15:242, 262.
southern Virginia with his troops. Parker had been wary about raising and commanding the militia without official military orders, but on January 13, 1781, the orders arrived. Baron von Steuben authorized Parker to raise militia in the counties south of the James River. He was placed in command of the militia in the region and was ordered to begin gathering intelligence and securing supplies.\textsuperscript{56} The British reestablished posts at Portsmouth and farther up the James River at Petersburg, raiding along the shores and engaging American troops. By May, Lord Cornwallis had moved up from South Carolina to join Arnold in Virginia.\textsuperscript{57}

Washington had sent the Marquis de Lafayette south to command the Continental troops as the British forces gathered in Virginia. In July 1781, Lafayette attacked Cornwallis near Jamestown and forced him across the James River to the Southside. Lafayette wrote to Parker, instructing him to “throw every possible obstruction in the route of his Lordship.” Parker was to “harass his rear – but you will not commit yourself.” Every effort was to be made to deny provisions and easy passage to the British: “Break down the bridges, obstruct the fording places, and destroy or remove the boats beyond his reach.”\textsuperscript{58} Lafayette realized the value of an experienced officer with intimate knowledge of the terrain: “Your perfect knowledge of the ground, and every avenue leading to the enemy, must be very favorable for surprise.”\textsuperscript{59} Parker also played a critical role gathering intelligence on the enemy’s forces and movements leading up to

\textsuperscript{56} Steuben to Parker, 13 January 1781, Josiah Parker Papers, P2266a:3-5, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA (hereafter cited as Parker MSS).
\textsuperscript{57} Hast, Loyalism, 106-11; Wright, Continental Army, 167-68.
\textsuperscript{58} Lafayette to Parker, 10 July 1781, Parker MSS, P2266a:14.
\textsuperscript{59} Lafayette to Parker, 22 June 1781, Parker MSS, P2266a:13.
Yorktown. Weeks before the battle of Yorktown, however, Parker resigned his commission and left the field.\textsuperscript{60}

While fragmentary, the record of Parker's involvement in the campaign of 1781 is more complete than that of his Continental service or his service in the Virginia Conventions. Taken together, however, these accounts offer a glimpse into who Parker was. The events of 1781 shed more light on his attitude toward loyalty and allegiance. Lafayette had praised Parker's "zeal in the service of [his] country,"\textsuperscript{61} but Parker could sometimes be impetuous. While serving in the Continental Army, Parker had ordered a man to be whipped for not doing his duty. A court of inquiry determined that Parker had illegally carried out a "private punishment," and they declared the action "reprehensible" and "by no means warranted."\textsuperscript{62} Several years later, in a letter to Virginia governor Benjamin Harrison, Parker admitted that the critical situation in Virginia in 1781 had required him to be more severe in the discipline of the militia than he had been in the Continental Army.

Parker also mentioned to Harrison that he believed that the British loyalists who lived in the lower Southside region were "much more dangerous than the public Enemy," and they posed a threat until "tarring & feathering drive them off" or they were removed "over the mountains."\textsuperscript{63} Parker was particularly incensed at the case of Dempsey Butler.

\textsuperscript{61} Lafayette to Parker, 18 July 1781, Parker MSS, P2266a:15. Reprinted in Parker, Virginia Magazine of History and Biography 22, no.3 (July 1914): 262-63.
\textsuperscript{62} Chase et al., Washington Papers, 11:249.
\textsuperscript{63} Palmer, Virginia State Papers, 2:189; Parker to Harrison, 9 March 1782, Photostat, accession 21746, Personal Papers Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA.
Formerly a member of Parker’s militia, Butler had deserted and fled to the British. Another one of Parker’s men had been on a scouting and raiding mission, “doing the Enemy little injuries,” when Butler and four other loyalists ambushed and killed him. Butler was eventually caught, and Parker sent him to Williamsburg to be tried, where “he will doubtless meet his deserts.” Parker considered Butler “one of the most vile rascals in this part of the County,” and he was beside himself when the British wrote asking that Butler be treated as a prisoner of war and returned to them. Parker flatly refused. “Rascals & Villains of every sort, will never meet with any protection or lenity from me.” In 1782, the General Court convicted Butler of treason and sentenced him to death. The legislature, however, exonerated Butler “in consequence of a promise of pardon granted him by colonel Josiah Parker.”

There is no record of why Parker offered Butler a pardon. Perhaps he recognized that he had been rash. He did not despise every British sympathizer. Rev. William Andrews had gone to the British camp when they invaded in 1781. While he did not wish to fight against the Americans, he ministered to the British troops. When Andrews was caught by the Americans, Parker petitioned to have him freed and allowed to return to the British. Andrews’ wife favored the American cause, and Parker was convinced that his “attention & services to our unfortunate prisoners, would excel any services he could render the Enemy.” Parker did not soften his stance just because Andrews was a man of God. He had known Andrews for some time, and Andrews was by no means a threat to

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the cause of independence. Parker looked less favorably upon two new Methodist ministers who had been “preaching the doctrine of passive obedience, and point out the horrors of war in so alarming a manner, that it has caused many to declare they wou’d suffer death rather than kill even an enemy.” Parker, like others at the time, believed that the ministers were agents of the British government and he wrote to the speaker of the House of Delegates, Virginia’s new legislative assembly, urging that this threat “must be discountenanced,” lest it prove the ruin of the American cause. Ultimately, the determining factor in Parker’s judgment of a loyalist, neutral, or patriot seemed to be Parker’s familiarity with the person’s disposition and his judgment of what would further the cause of independence, though the case of Dempsey Butler remains a mystery.

George Washington’s great act of mercy at the battle of Trenton may or may not have had an effect on Parker, but Parker had likely learned other lessons from the general. In April 1777, Washington reprimanded the commanders of several Virginia regiments, including Parker. The troops were so poorly provisioned that their health was at risk and they were “absolutely unfit to take the field.” It was not that provisions were hard to come by at this time; the commissary was stocked and more could be ordered. “Inattention to the Wants of Soldiers marks the bad officer – it does more, it reasonably removes that Confidence on which the officer’s Honour & Reputation must depend.”

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67 With the adoption of a state constitution in 1776, the Virginia Convention was replaced by the bicameral Virginia Assembly, composed of the House of Delegates and the Senate.
68 Palmer, *Virginia State Papers*, 2:150-52. The fear that pacifist Methodist ministers were part of an effort by the British government to undermine the revolution was based on the fact that, until 1784, Methodism was still part of the Church of England and its founder, John Wesley, had publicly urged the colonists to submit to British rule (Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 260-61).
rebuke from Washington was not easily forgotten. As a commander of the militia in Virginia, Parker would tirelessly work to supply his troops, even out of his own pocket. Commanding a militia so close to home could be difficult. Soldiers – even officers – were “frequently stragling out of Camp.” To boost morale, Parker would do what he had seen Washington do: he gave speeches about victories in other theaters while encouraging the troops to do their part in the great cause. Parker even boasted to his troops that if they would follow his orders, they would capture General Arnold, bring an end to the war, and “gain Laurels, without which we must inevitably be disgraced.”

Ultimately, what mattered to Parker in his military career was honor. Historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown has shown that Southern society was governed by an ethical code of honor that dictated acceptable attitudes and actions for the individual and the community. “It established signposts of appropriate conduct...[that] gave meaning to lives.” Wyatt-Brown identifies two main types of honor: primal honor and gentility, the former influenced by ancient Indo-European customs, the latter by Christianity. Primal honor incorporated military valor, familial loyalty, and personal reputation. Gentility emphasized learning, piety, and sociability. Due in part to the advance of evangelicals in the South in the late eighteenth century and a republican ideology that emphasized learning and virtue, gentility was growing as the more dominant form of honor. While the two forms of honor are intertwined and not mutually exclusive, Parker's life most clearly illustrates the more traditional form of honor.

70 Parker, Order Book, 8 and 18 March 1781, Parker MSS, P2266a:9.
71 Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, 114.
72 Ibid., 26-116.
Primal honor could encourage service to one's country. But, Wyatt-Brown argues, honor was first and foremost reputation: "Honor resides in the individual as his understanding of who he is and where he belongs in the ordered ranks of society." Occasionally this led to an incompatibility between personal honor and civil or military service. When Jefferson first called Parker back into military service after Leslie's invasion in 1780, he warned Parker that "difficulties about relative rank between the gentlemen who have resigned, and those who have continued in the service may arise; The removal of these is beyond the reach of our powers; and I shall think it unfortunate indeed, if your country should for that cause lose the service of gentlemen in a crisis where they are so vitally important." Perhaps Jefferson knew of some preexisting rivalry. He would certainly have been aware that a gentleman's sense of honor could lead to potential problems. In any case, within a month just such a dispute erupted. On November 9, 1780, Gen. J.P.G. Muhlenberg ordered Colonels Parker and Gibson to attack the British outposts between Suffolk and Portsmouth, striking at either the main body or any outlying pickets. They had twice as many men as the British, and Parker was "perfectly acquainted with the ground and the Enemies Position." But the attack never happened. Joseph Jones, a member of the House of Delegates, wrote to James Madison that the plans had been "miscarried by the disagreement between Colonels Gibson and Parker about Rank." While both men had achieved the rank of colonel, Gibson had

73 Ibid., 114.
74 Boyd et al., Jefferson Papers, 4:71-72.
76 Muhlenberg to Parker and Gibson, 9 November 1780, Photostat, Josiah Parker Letters, 1780-1800, accession 21745, Personal Papers Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond (hereafter cited as Parker Letters).
remained in the Continental Army and felt that he held seniority over Parker. However the dispute unfolded, the two men did not resolve it in time to act. Jones feared that “a fair and perhaps the only opportunity our people will have of striking the Enemy to advantage...has been lost.” Within days, General Leslie left the state with the British troops.

Wyatt-Brown suggests that honor has three components: “Honor is first the inner conviction of self-worth.... The second aspect of honor is the claim of that self-assessment before the public.... The third element is the assessment of the claim by the public, a judgment based upon the behavior of the claimant.” We can see this interplay in Parker’s repeated threats to resign his military command. On April 1, 1781, Baron von Steuben wrote to Parker that he had heard that Parker intended to retire from his command. This was, Steuben assured him, “an indulgence I cannot refuse being confirmed from the Zeal you have already shown that when your Country requests it you will not withhold your services.” In July, Parker again stated his intention to retire. This time Lafayette “warmly and affectionately” requested that he “remain with the command until the enemy’s intentions are better understood.”

Parker claimed that he needed to retire because of material hardship. As a merchant-planter, he may indeed have lost slaves or had his plantation pillaged. At least

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78 Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 114.
79 Steuben to Parker, 1 April 1781, Parker MSS, P2266a:10.
one of his ships that had been commissioned as a privateer to attack British shipping had
been captured. But two letters to a close friend reveal a motive for retiring that was
deeper than just economic adversity. On August 3, 1781, Parker wrote to Col. William
Davies, “my old Mess-Mate,” about his “unhappy” situation. He had answered the call to
serve and begun to raise the militia. While several counties were negligent in their
response to the call to service, the militia of Parker’s native Isle of Wight had faithfully
responded, “turning out to a man required.” The militia had “nobly braved every
difficulty in remaining with me.” They had not been paid since Parker had taken
command nearly one year ago. He had done everything in his power to supply and
prepare them. He had hired blacksmiths and mechanics to make swords and bayonets. He
had purchased ammunition, even contributing his own money and supplies. What he
could not buy, he took “by force of arms.” He had done his duty; his losses had been
“considerable.” But what devastated him was that he had not received the respect he felt
he deserved. “Being out of the military line,” he was “only thought of in times of
extremity.”

Parker felt insulted by the rejections he had received when he asked for
reinforcements and supplies. As an officer and a gentleman, he was practically required
to take offense. He had written Governor Jefferson just before the governor left office,
outlining many of the same complaints he had written Davies about. He received no

83 Ibid., 2:287-88.
84 Royster, *Revolutionary People at War*, 88-93, 207-09.
reply.  

"I fear," Parker wrote to the speaker of the House of Delegates in June 1781, that "the root of our Springs of Government is rotten, and I dread the consequence... I am foolishly fond of my Country, and cannot bear to see her neglected." He informed the speaker of his exertions and requested more troops and money to cover the debts incurred. If this was not done, he threatened to "quit the field." Yet in the same letter Parker proclaimed that he would happily continue to suffer in the cause if he were convinced that his efforts would be "serviceable." Lafayette had reassured him that "whatever can be done for your support will be undertaken. But you know our force, you know the force also we are opposed to; and the many calls which distress us on every side. You must rely upon Governor Nelson and your own exertions, principally, neither of which I am persuaded will fail." But Nelson offered no help:

The late very critical Season of the Year has prevented the Marquis reinforcing you as could have been wished. I felt much for you & the County under your immediate Command, but Circumstances rendered support impracticable. Were the Means of defending the Country equal to my Inclination to protect it, not a Spot should be subject to British Depredations; but we must make use of the abilities we have, & lament that they are not more adequate to the Purpose.

On August 25, 1781, Parker wrote Davies a confidential letter. He had finally retired, "and never do intend to take up the same profession in this Country, having done her ample justice – I may now vaunt, because I never expect or will accept of anything from a Country which I have found ungratefull." He was preparing to leave Virginia for

85 Parker's letter to Jefferson has not been found, and it is possible that Jefferson never received it. See editor's note in Boyd et al., Jefferson Papers, 6:83-84.
87 Lafayette to Parker, 5 July 1781, Photostat, Parker Letters.
88 Nelson to Parker, 27 July 1781, Parker MSS, P2266a:17.
Europe, a trip he had been considering for some time. In France he would be able to live comfortably and forget his recent troubles in his native country. There were “few who have done more to serve her, and none who could have been better rewarded for turning traitor.” Not that he would actually do so, for having fought in the same theater as Benedict Arnold, Parker was well aware not only of the reward for turning traitor, but also of the dishonor. To Parker, a traitor was “a character I conceive of monstrous shape, and horrid Idea – Such as will never lay hold on me.” He then cautioned Davies to keep this lament to himself.⁸⁹

According to historian Rhys Isaac, “traditional society expected a man to 'resent' insult and showed approval if he did.”⁹⁰ As long as Parker was assured that his services were indispensable, he could remain in the field. But when his claims to honor were rebuffed, either by words or actions, he could only maintain his honor by following through with his threat. After retiring from the military, it appears that Parker did not go to France. Instead, he returned to public office, serving in the House of Delegates until he was appointed a naval officer at the port of Norfolk on December 20, 1783.⁹¹

The position of naval officer was essentially that of a customs official. Under the Articles of Confederation, responsibility for the regulation of trade and collection of duties essentially fell to each state.⁹² The Virginia Assembly divided the major rivers and ports of the Chesapeake Bay into several naval districts. A naval officer was appointed to

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each district, with searchers appointed to patrol the waters and assist the officer and his clerks in collecting revenue and recording imports and exports. The naval officer was also assisted by at least one deputy officer, a position to which Parker appointed his brother, Copeland. The position of naval officer does not appear to have been a lucrative position. When one officer was questioned about his ability to act simultaneously as deputy county clerk and naval officer for the Accomack district, he replied that he would readily give up the “trifling emoluments of the naval office,” but that he could not afford to give up the deputy clerkship. While the pay was not substantial, the position at the Norfolk district may have carried added prestige as one of Virginia’s largest ports.

While acting as a naval officer, Parker continued to manage his shipping concern, sending his ships to the West Indies and Europe. Most of the few surviving documents of Parker’s career as a merchant are from this period, consisting of letters to and from prominent individuals. Several leading Virginians appealed to Parker for favors in his capacity as a merchant and customs official. Parker offered James Monroe passage to France on one of his ships, and when Monroe returned, Parker was entrusted with the care of his furniture, which had been shipped separately. George Washington also turned to Parker for help. After the war, Washington had taken to using his social circles to expand the floral and faunal diversity of his plantation, asking former aides and

longtime friends to send him plants from their locales. From Parker he received wild
honeysuckle, grape vines, live oak from Georgia, and gold fish from abroad.95

Parker's day-to-day role as a naval officer is uncertain. As a gentleman, he likely
would have taken a managerial role rather than actually recording the value of ships'
cargoes. A state inspector named Bolling Stark was assigned to ensure that customs
officials were complying with the legislature's directives. Stark's observations give some
hint into Parker's management of the port of Norfolk. Stark found that Parker's records
were largely in order, save for a few minor irregularities. Parker had even provided an
enclosed bookcase in which to secure the records, whereas other naval officers that Stark
had visited felt they were not paid enough to comply with this expensive requirement.
Parker's clerks, however, had not been opening the customs office as early as Stark
believed they should. Stark approached Parker about the issue and Parker promised "a
more punctual observance," but, Stark wrote, "having understood that he seldom came to
the office himself at a very early hour, it is to be feared there will be no great amendment
in this particular." Stark also found that Parker, confident in his understanding of the
legislature's directives, had clashed with naval officers in other districts over protocol for
ships unloading at two ports. Stark confided in his journal that he believed Parker was in
the wrong, but he only suggested to Parker that he seek the state attorney general's
opinion on the matter, thereby avoiding any possible accusation against Parker's honor.96

Parker freely expressed his frustrations in fulfilling his duties to the governor and lieutenant governor. Smuggling was a problem, though Parker believed it was not rampant. Parker requested more men and ships to handle the workload. Given one ship for each river, Parker wrote to Gov. Patrick Henry in 1786, he could “check any smuggling that may be generally attempted.” Parker was also frustrated with vessels from Maryland bypassing Norfolk and selling their goods without paying Virginia taxes. “If they are allowed to run the Goods in here without paying the duties,” Parker wrote to Henry, “a continuation of the imposition will tend to the annihilation of the Trade of this Town.” Parker suggested that the problem could not be solved without Maryland's aid.

Virginia had begun to bring its commercial laws into closer conformity with Maryland the previous year and made further progress in 1786. Far from suffering as Parker feared, Norfolk's trade began to expand as a result. In 1787 Parker complained to Lt. Gov. Beverly Randolph that the port had become so busy that his clerks “scarcely have time to take their meals.” Things were so hectic that his clerks were “frequently visited with insult by those demanding entries and clearances of their vessels or cargoes.” The stress led two of his “best Officers” to resign. The searcher at Norfolk, William Graves, complained of even worse treatment. Graves tried to get the mayor and alderman to go with him to investigate a ship from Jamaica that had supposedly made a false entry when it first came into Norfolk. The city officials refused to assist. When Graves went to

97 Ibid., 4:91-93.
98 Ibid., 4:102, 448-49.
fulfill his duty, the merchants had all gathered at the dock to harass him, "making Remarks and condemning me for my good wishes for my Country."\textsuperscript{101}

With his clerks and searchers pushed to their limits, Parker informed Randolph that he had determined to resign. But, he hastily added, he would decline "for the present" to tender his resignation, certain that the next legislature would afford him some aid. Besides, he had "an unfortunate friend" who was in need of a job, and Parker apparently intended to hire him as a clerk.\textsuperscript{102}

The port entry books and handful of letters covering this period of Parker's career provide an even more skeletal sketch than Parker's military record. Other records that might tell us more about Parker's nearly six-year career as a naval officer have not been preserved as well as tax records and the official correspondence of sitting governors. Yet even this paltry record shows Parker acting in a similar manner as when he was serving as a militia commander. In \textit{The Landscape of History}, John Lewis Gaddis defines character as the "elements of personality that remain constant" throughout life, a pattern of behavior that "causes a person to deal with dissimilar circumstances in similar ways."\textsuperscript{103} Parker responded to an unresponsive government just as he had done in the military, exhibiting the same concern for his personal honor. As a leader of men, Parker responded to the affliction of his clerks and searchers just as he had done with his militiamen, placing his personal honor on the line in their behalf.

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 4:112.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 4:298.
\textsuperscript{103} Gaddis, \textit{Landscape of History}, 116-17.
This, then, is the key to unlocking the life of an individual who left behind such a fragmentary record of his life. This is how we can be certain that in the skeletal records of Parker's life we have located his character. Borrowing a principle from the physical sciences, Gaddis described this approach to biography as a search for "self-similarity across scale," a set of patterns that persist when looking at both "the widening and then narrowing sphere of a person's life."¹⁰⁴ We must look for such similarities across the scale of Parker's life, whether in a familial and local setting, a statewide setting, or on a national scale. We have come to see Parker as a man motivated by honor in his military career and in public office. We now must turn to his entrance onto the national political scene.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 116-21.
CHAPTER II

CONGRESSIONAL CAREER

The debates surrounding the ratification of the Federal Constitution portrayed the new document in such momentous light that a gentleman who professed to be concerned with the public good, as Parker did, could not help but join the fray. Virginia was deeply divided between Anti-Federalists and Federalists, with Anti-Federalists typically supporting a more localist form of government as opposed to the centralizing tendencies of the new Constitution.\textsuperscript{105} Parker declared himself Anti-Federalist and stood for election to represent the Borough of Norfolk in the state ratification convention. On March 24, 1788, Parker was defeated by the Federalist candidate, Col. Thomas Mathews, a member of the Virginia Assembly. The convention ratified the Constitution 89-79 on June 25, 1788. When the inhabitants of Norfolk received word of the ratification two days later, a salute of cannons was fired, fireworks were lit, and a hot air balloon was launched "amidst the acclamation of a numerous groupe of spectators."\textsuperscript{106}

While we don't know Parker's immediate response to the ratification of the Constitution, the \textit{Norfolk and Portsmouth Journal} suggests that he took part, perhaps reluctantly, in the celebrations. The town had decided to turn the upcoming Fourth of July

\textsuperscript{105} Saul Cornell, \textit{The Other Founders: Anti-Federalism and the Dissenting Tradition in America, 1788-1828} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1999), 51-80.

celebration into a ratification celebration. The day began with a salute of ten cannons, representing the ten states that had ratified. Then, at “about ten o’clock, the different ranks of citizens began to assemble on the Federal Commons, and at eleven the procession commenced.” Sailors and soap boilers, lawyers and politicians were all part of the parade – even “Naval-Officers, searchers and clerks.” While it is possible Parker could have sent his brother, Copeland, in his stead, skipping the Fourth of July celebration would have been difficult for an avowed patriot. After the parade, Parker would have had to sit through a Federalist oration, followed by a dinner, toasts to the Constitution, and a play. The orator, at least, was gracious toward the Anti-Federalists: “Even the opposers of this Code, among whom were many great and good men distinguished for learning and integrity, will rejoice in the appearance of harmony and order. They wanted amendments to the system, and no doubt they will be constitutionally indulged.”

Once the Constitution was ratified with the promise of amendments, several Anti-Federalists in Virginia declared their support for the new government. They did not want to see the government fail, and they also realized that inside involvement of the Anti-Federalists was necessary to ensure that the Constitution would be amended. This appears to have been the position Parker took. On February 2, 1789, he was elected one of Virginia’s ten representatives to the first Federal Congress of the United States. The victory, moreover, came against Parker’s previous foe, Col. Mathews, who was then

107 Ibid., 10:1732-40.
serving as speaker of Virginia's House of Delegates. Writing to inform Gov. Beverly Randolph that he would no longer be able to serve as a naval officer, Parker mentioned that his election had been "unsolicited," before adding that "it is very probable I may accept of the honour conferred on me."¹⁰⁹ Parker may have solicited the office in private, allowing other prominent gentry to undertake public soliciting and treating on his behalf, as was common at the time. He may even have refrained from soliciting the office in private, yet support from and promotion by prominent individuals in the community would have been necessary to defeat Mathews.¹¹⁰

An anonymous letter was published, perhaps by one such supporter, in the *Norfolk and Portsmouth Journal* on February 18, 1789. Signed by *A Federal*, the author wrote, in effect, to thank Federalists for supporting a former Anti-Federalist candidate. "Permit me to congratulate the Public, and you [Federalists] in particular, upon the happy event of the late election in your choice of a Representative for Congress." After criticizing the Anti-Federalist position as well-intentioned but ultimately misguided, *A Federal* continued, "These are the principles upon which Colonel Parker first declared himself *Anti*---Ushering forth to assist in preserving the rights and privileges of a free and independent people, in support of which is well known he had in the course of the late war boldly risqued his life and fortune; but now that the Federal Government is ratified by a great majority, it was his prudence and good sense alone that directed him to avow

himself a steady and faithful friend to the Constitution (as Federal), that he may still have it in his power to be of more material service to his country.\footnote{Jensen et al., \textit{First Federal Elections}, 2:358.}

\textit{A Federal} may have felt that it was necessary to clarify Parker's position. As people began to talk about the results of the elections across the state, different reports arose as to the number of Federalists elected; some said seven, and some, counting Parker, said eight.\footnote{Ibid., 2:254, 358, 406-08.} It is possible that \textit{A Federal} had no connection to Parker and simply chose to see in Parker whatever he wished. Another anonymous essayist, an Anti-Federalist named \textit{Sidney}, congratulated the people for rising “above the narrow prejudices of party spirit” in their selection of Parker, “who (to say no more) is in every respect equal to his competitors.”\footnote{\textit{Sidney} had been engaged in a paper war with the Federalist author \textit{Candidus} in the \textit{Norfolk and Portsmouth Journal}. Ibid., 2:397.} James Duncanson had high hopes for Parker and the other Anti-Federalists who had been elected. These Anti-Federalists, he wrote to a friend, “will be very good federalists when they get to N: York, as they will certainly find themselves in the Minority, \& for their own Interest will join the strongest party.”\footnote{Ibid., 2:405.} Perhaps the most trustworthy assessment of Parker's position – since he left no statement himself – is James Madison's remark in a letter to Jefferson. The Federalist Madison, also elected as a representative, had a vested interest in assessing the politics of his future colleagues. He counted Parker as an Anti-Federalist, yet he added that he “appears to be very temperate.”\footnote{Ibid., 2:408.}
Parker may have deliberately created the ambiguity surrounding his political position to win the support of Federalists in Norfolk while maintaining the support of Anti-Federalists in the rural counties of his district. The company Parker kept seems to suggest that he felt comfortable with the Anti-Federalist persuasion. Parker traveled to New York, the temporary seat of the new government, with Anti-Federalist representative Isaac Coles, arriving on March 24, 1789. Parker took up residence with Coles and Virginia's other Anti-Federalists, Theodrick Bland and Senator William Grayson, in a boarding house on Maiden Street, four blocks north of Federal Hall on Wall Street.116

Whatever its source, the uncertainty surrounding Parker's politics may have been symptomatic of the larger uncertainty surrounding the new government itself. An awareness that the experiment had to work was coupled with an awareness that it might not. There was a pervasive feeling that all eyes, both national and international, were on the new government. As the representatives and senators traveled to New York in February and March 1789, they were filled not only with uncertainty as to the government's prospects and one another's politics, but with an awareness of the priority of their position. Their reputations were tied to the reputation of the government. It was imperative in this uncertain setting that the new congressmen know whom they could trust. The labels of Anti-Federalist and Federalist could not be used like modern political parties to predict a person's positions and actions. Historian Joanne Freeman suggests that

politicians handled this uncertainty by falling back on a familiar and shared code of honor. “In an age before institutionalized parties, reputation was the currency of national politics, a personalized banner of character and standing that won or lost political contests.”\footnote{Political parties had not begun to form until late 1792 and 1793. Anti-Federalism, more an opposition force than a political party, dissolved and was replaced by the Republican party (though the two were not synonymous). Joanne B. Freeman, \textit{Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), xiii-10, 59; Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick, \textit{The Age of Federalism} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 26-27.}

While politicians were busy assessing the reputations of others, they were also concerned with establishing their own reputations. Freeman suggests that congressmen “viewed the congressional record as a chronicle of reputation, often the only evidence of [one's] greatest victories or defeats.”\footnote{Freeman, \textit{Affairs of Honor}, 27.} This concern, coupled with an awareness that precedents were being forged, resulted in an extensive record of the new government. Votes were recorded and committee assignments tracked. The Senate debated behind closed doors, but the House opened its gallery to the public and the press. Reporters captured the debates in shorthand and their reports have since been collected in the \textit{Annals of Congress}. While Parker was not a constant fixture on the floor of the House, the record of his congressional career affords insight into his politics and personality. Yet having access to his speeches still poses important questions: Do they accurately portray his inner life? Can they be used to determine the importance Parker placed on his reputation and how he sought to reestablish that reputation on a national stage?

Biographer William St. Clair reminds us that the sources on an individual are “likely to be an unrepresentative record of the patterns of the lived life.” St. Clair
compares archives to archaeological sites. Certain material survives by human choice, by nature of the material, by nature of the individual or event about which it is written, or by chance. Regardless of why it survives, the majority of information is lost. No matter how extensive the records on an individual's life are, “some of the most important events, or circumscribing limitations...were so universal or so ubiquitous as to be taken for granted.”

Yet the feelings of uncertainty, unfamiliarity, and priority surrounding the new government led some of Parker's contemporaries to record some of the patterns of life that usually remain concealed from the written record. In Affairs of Honor, Freeman examines some of these patterns that reveal underlying assumptions about politics in the early Republic. Given negative attitudes toward bargaining and back-room-deals, most political business took place in the social realm. “[Since] private negotiations were out of bounds,...social events filled the gap. Dinner parties and receptions were ideal political stages, private enough for quiet asides yet public enough to avoid seeming secretive.” Entertaining and politicking went hand in hand, and “there was no shortage of social events to adapt to this purpose. In fact, there was a dinner, reception, theater performance, or levee almost every night of the week.” In such an atmosphere, even something as simple as a social call held symbolic weight.

A few accounts show that Parker took easily to this style of politics. Senator William Maclay of Pennsylvania noted in his diary that while he was out for a walk one Saturday morning in the spring of 1790, he ran into Parker and John Walker of Virginia.

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120 Freeman, Affairs of Honor, 52-54.
He “fell in” with the two and found that “they were coming to visit our house. They pressed us so hard for dinner that we consented.” At the end of his entry for the day, Maclay wrote that “we could not resist the pressing invitation of Parker and some Virginians to dine with them on turtle.” Maclay may not have bothered recording the routine event — “all this is not worth a note,” he said — had it not been for some interesting “anecdotes of General Washington” shared during dinner. “No Virginian can talk on any subject, but the perfection of General Washington interweaves itself into every conversation.” Walker had visited Washington's plantation on a recent visit to Virginia, and as Maclay recorded his description, he lampooned Washington's management of the plantation as if it was an army, with everyone and everything right down to the hogs named, recorded, and placed in formation. “Thus the etiquette and arrangement of all [the] army are preserved on his farm.... When once the human mind is penetrated by any system, no matter what, it can never disengage itself.”

Whether the author of the lampoon was Maclay or one of the Virginians is unclear, but Parker was willing to criticize his former commander. Every Tuesday afternoon, Washington held a formal levee that nearly every congressman and a host of others attended. Guests formed a circle and the president greeted each one. A few were invited to dine with him on Thursday in a more intimate setting. Parker and others thought the levees were suspiciously similar to royal affairs. When Parker returned to

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Virginia in July 1789, he expressed his disgust with the pompous display to Gov. Randolph and several others. Randolph reported Parker's visit to Madison:

The tincture, with which [Parker] has coloured some subjects, has nauseated some of the best federalists here. And the form of the levee, with the [president's] total alienation (in point of dinners,) from the representatives, has awakened a degree of jealousy. In short [Parker] represents every thing, as marching with furious rapidity, towards monarchy; as far as manners can work such an effect.123

Parker's disaffection with the president may have been more a factor of not having been invited to the dinners rather than adherence to notions of republican virtue, for he accepted two invitations to dine with the president several months later.124

Whether in dinners, visits, or other social events, a person's affability was seen as a sign of his trustworthiness. Sociability, therefore, was tied to reputation. Senator Maclay's guarded, suspicious personality led many of his colleagues to distrust him.125 Parker may have been at the other extreme. Fellow Virginia representative, Federalist John Page, wrote to a friend that "Parker...is by no means to be relied on – he to his Reproach will say anything that will raise a laugh, or bring down Characters to his own Levil."126

Though Parker may not have mastered the more refined form of gentility, he had other tools with which to establish his reputation. At the local and state level, family status had played a major role in establishing honor. Yet family connections held little sway with a stranger who lived several states away. Without recourse to family status,

123 DePauw et al., First Federal Congress, 16:1113-14.
124 Twohig et al., Washington Diaries, 6:30, 57.
125 Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, 89-90; Freeman, Affairs of Honor, 11-61.
126 DePauw et al., First Federal Congress, 16:1110.
personal appearance and presentation took on added importance as an “outward sign of inner merit.”\textsuperscript{127} Freeman argues that “self-presentation was fundamental, for one's outward appearance affected one's reputation in the public eye and potentially broadcast one's politics as well. The political elite thought carefully about their clothing, manners, and lifestyles, costuming and conducting themselves to earn the right sort of reputation.”\textsuperscript{128}

Parker was aware of the importance of self-presentation. He had used it to establish his reputation in Virginia and he would do the same on the national stage.\textsuperscript{129} Wearing his military uniform, Parker sat for a portrait by John Ramage soon after arriving in New York. Parker's military uniform served as a reminder of his martial valor and defense of liberty to those who knew of his military career, and as an announcement to those who did not. (See Figure 2). To Parker, honorable military service was practically a prerequisite for service in the new government. In recommending to President Washington a successor as naval officer at Norfolk, Parker passed over his brother, Copeland, “as he is a young man & never had the honor to serve his Country,” in favor of two men who had served in the Revolution. Instead, he recommended Copeland for the lesser post of surveyor.\textsuperscript{130}

\textsuperscript{127} Wyatt-Brown, \textit{Southern Honor}, 48.

\textsuperscript{128} Freeman, \textit{Affairs of Honor}, xx.

\textsuperscript{129} See, for example, a bill that shows Parker ordering a post-chaise, or four-wheeled covered carriage, from a British merchant in 1784. The bill describes a “handsome” carriage worth £88, but Parker added nearly £20 worth of “extras” to ensure an elegant look. “Historical Notes and Queries,” \textit{The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography} 8, no 3 (January 1901): 332-34.

\textsuperscript{130} DePauw et al., \textit{First Federal Congress}, 16:908.
Sociability and self-presentation established a reputation, but language was the most useful tool in defining, challenging, and defending a reputation. Parker was effective in linking his reputation to his military career. Yet others could challenge the meaning of such self-presentation. In December 1792, at the beginning of the second

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Congress, Parker arose to speak in favor of reducing the size of the regular army, which had been increased earlier that year to engage in Indian wars on the frontiers of the United States. Parker declared that he had "always abhorred the idea of keeping up Standing Armies in this country." A congressman from Connecticut, Jeremiah Wadsworth, challenged Parker's position. After referring to Parker's experience as a militia commander, Wadsworth asked "whether it was not absolutely impossible either to bring militia under proper discipline, or prevent their enormous waste?" He then suggested that Parker was "imprudently" trying to change the plan of the commander-in-chief.

Parker could not let lie a challenge that struck at the core of the reputation he had sought to establish. "I am sorry to hear gentlemen," Parker replied, "when they have no other resource of argument left, so often resorting to the name of the President, to carry their measures." He did not think the president's sentiments were congruent with Wadsworth's. But even if they were, "this is not a sufficient reason to silence me, or to prevent me from delivering my own sentiments, and those of my constituents who sent me here to do so." Parker sought to vindicate the militia (and himself as a militia commander) by insisting that they "were always more spirited soldiery, and fitter for fighting the Indians than the regulars, although they did not always move at the sound of a trumpet or beat of a drum, which were necessary to rouse the attention of heart-broken, mercenary troops, who seldom act but from force, or fear of the whipping-post." Of his

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132 Congresses are numbered consecutively, each lasting two years with two sessions in each Congress (unless a special session is called). Parker served twelve years in Congress, from the first through the sixth Congress.

own experience as a commander, Parker said he “remembered having been called away from the regular army in the North to take the command of some militia in Virginia, who supported themselves for twelve months without either pay or provisions from the United States; and yet they were never once defeated or disgraced, neither did they leave the country unprotected and exposed.” Parker's recollection of being “called away from the regular army” is inaccurate and revealing. He had resigned his commission in 1778, and though we do not know why, his reconstruction of the event suggests that it may have been an impulsive action that he regretted. But Parker continued his defense of the militia unflagged. He believed them to be “the best security of a country,” governed by “the spirit or principles of the honest yeomanry, who composed the militia during former wars, when every man turned out impressed with a good cause.”

Such exchanges typified affairs of honor in the new Congress. While a challenge to one's honor, taken to the extreme, could end violently, most questions of honor were settled with words on the floor of Congress. The potential of a duel, recently introduced to America by French officers during the War for Independence, served to temper the speech of congressmen. As a result, challenges and insults were often veiled in civility and flattery. The operating procedure of Congress was thus based on a subtle code of honor, which has persisted in that institution to this day.

Much of congressional debate must be viewed in these terms. The first Congress had only been in session six weeks when on May 13, 1789, in the course of debating an

impost bill, Parker introduced an amendment to impose a duty on the importation of slaves. He said he was “sorry that the constitution prevented Congress from prohibiting the importation altogether; he thought it a defect in that instrument that it allowed of such a practice.” It was “irrational and inhuman,” and he declared that “it was contrary to the Revolution principles, and ought not to be permitted.” The Constitution had prevented Congress from stopping the importation until 1808, but it allowed for a duty of up to ten dollars per person, which Parker proposed to enact.136

Parker had taken the House by surprise. Many viewed the Constitutional clause as a moratorium on debate over slavery, despite its provision for a tax.137 William Smith from South Carolina immediately protested that it was too late in the debate on imposts to introduce a new item. Smith “hoped that such an important and serious proposition as this would not be hastily adopted.” He asked that it be set aside for a few days, since he was “not prepared to enter into any argument.” Some arose to declare their support for the principle, but suggested that taxing slaves would in essence condone the trade, or that including human beings in an impost bill would give the appearance of justifying their treatment as “goods, wares, and merchandise.” James Jackson of Georgia offered the most intense opposition. He said that the motion “did not surprise him” as it had others. He suggested that “Virginia was an old settled State, and had her complement of slaves; so she was careless of recruiting her numbers by this means; the natural increase of her imported blacks was sufficient for their purpose; but he thought gentlemen ought to let

their neighbors get supplied, before they imposed such a burthen upon the importation.” He then asked for more time to consider the motion, hoping that “the candor of the gentleman would induce him to withdraw it for the present.”¹³⁸

Jackson's assessment was accurate. There was no financial risk to Parker in opposing the importation of slaves, and may have even been to Virginia's financial benefit to do so. Supporting the end of the slave trade was not the same as supporting the end of slavery. At the beginning of the Revolution, Parker and the Virginia Convention did not counter Lord Dunmore's proclamation by freeing their slaves; they only offered to pardon those who returned to do their “duty.” Although Parker mentioned in the course of the congressional debate that he wished to set his slaves free, he did not do so in his lifetime or through his will. Yet this did not mean his sentiments were insincere. Many Virginians had begun to recognize the inconsistency of the revolutionary principles they espoused and the system of unfree labor that supported their lifestyles. Furthermore, Virginians valued independence, and they had grown uncomfortable with the realization that they were dependent upon their slaves.¹³⁹ With their social, cultural, and economic lives enmeshed in a system of slavery, some, like Parker, were glad for a less complicated opportunity to speak and act against slavery. Parker answered his critics. He did not wish to withdraw his motion. He acknowledged those who did not want to associate slaves with merchandise:

He knew it was degrading the human species to annex that character to them; but he would rather do this than continue the actual evil of

importing slaves a moment longer. He hoped Congress would do all that lay in their power to restore to human nature its inherent privileges, and, if possible, wipe off the stigma under which America labored. The inconsistency in our principles, with which we are justly charged, should be done away, that we may show, by our actions, the pure beneficence of the doctrine we hold out to the world in our Declaration of Independence.140

The debate continued the rest of the day. Madison offered a strong defense of the motion, but recognizing its poor prospects and, more critically, that it would delay his impost bill, he recommended to Parker that “it would be best to make this the subject of a distinct bill” and asked him to withdraw it. Parker did so, “under a conviction that the House was fully satisfied of its propriety.”141 The distinction made in the debate between principle and procedure had allowed Parker to maintain his honor in spite of backing down. Indeed, his honor and reputation may even have grown. A newspaper in Rhode Island praised Parker as “the first gentleman who, to his immortal honor, introduced a motion in Congress to discourage the 'disgraceful slave trade.'”142 When Congress took up the issue again upon receiving petitions from the Religious Society of Friends in 1790 and 1797, Parker could remind his colleagues that he had been first to decry the slave trade on the floor of Congress.143

Parker guarded not only his own honor but that of Congress as well, for the one reflected the other. On the morning of February 15, 1798, before the House was called to order for the day, a fight broke out between two representatives, Republican Matthew

141 Ibid., 1:351-56.
143 Annals of Congress, 1:1226, 7:664. The 1790 petition was signed by Benjamin Franklin, thus ensuring it would not be ignored despite the opposition Parker's amendment had faced less than a year previous.
Lyon and Federalist Roger Griswold. The two had confronted each other just outside the House where Griswold insulted Lyon's bravery and ridiculed his military career. Lyon spat in Griswold's face, and the latter stormed away. He returned later to the floor of the House with a hickory cane and began beating Lyon. Lyon barely had time to get up from his seat before meeting Griswold's wrath. While suffering blows from Griswold, Lyon made his way to the fireplace where he grabbed the tongs and made a few attempts of his own. The two were finally separated, but when they left the floor, Lyon started to attack Griswold and the two had to be separated again. Though the speaker of the House called the session to order, he was soon forced to adjourn for the day as no one was paying attention to legislative business.144

The next day the House began debating a motion to expel Griswold and Lyon from Congress. Most Republicans adamantly opposed including Lyon in the motion; they believed he was innocent in the affair. Parker disagreed. "The attack of yesterday," he said, "would fix an indelible stain upon [the House].... Such a transaction would certainly lower that House in the estimation of their constituents." In fact, as Parker came to the House that morning, someone in the streets called out: "There is nothing to do in Congress to-day – there's no fighting going on!" Parker pleaded to his colleagues to put aside partisanship and "unite in expelling these members." And once they had been expelled, Parker wanted to expunge the House Journals of any reference to the affair. The vote failed, with only two other Republicans joining Parker to expel a fellow Republican.

144 Ibid., 7:1034; Elkins and McKitrick, Age of Federalism, 706-11.
To Parker, personal honor was paramount. He was not willing to see his reputation sullied with the House.145

Of all the challenges to someone's honor, a charge of inconsistency was one of the most serious. It struck at the very core of a man's reputation: his trustworthiness. Such a charge had to be leveled with the utmost care. Parker was aware of the implications of such an accusation when in December 1796 he accused Massachusetts Federalist Fisher Ames of inconsistency. Tension had been mounting between the France Republic and America over the latter's neutrality. Parker accused Ames of inconsistency in adopting a belligerent tone toward France, despite Ames's conciliatory stance toward Britain in a similar situation two years earlier.146 Parker quoted at length from a speech Ames had given in 1795, a speech filled with several “high-toned, alarming metaphors, which,” Parker added, “I am not able to follow him in, as, in point of eloquence, the palm is yielded to him.” After praising Ames’s superior oratory, then came the insult: “but, after this, let me ask for his consistency.” As Ames arose, he said “he believed the House would not be surprised if he took notice of what had been said in allusion to him in the course of the debate – allusions with which he could not be offended, because they were urged with so many expressions of the most flattering civility.” He then went on to defend his position.147

It is interesting that Parker would lay the charge of inconsistency at another's feet, for Parker seems in retrospect as vulnerable to that charge as any man. He began his

146 Elkins and McKitrick, Age of Federalism, 537-39.
147 Annals of Congress, 6:1638-44.
congressional career as an Anti-Federalist, though even that distinction was shrouded in uncertainty. He then became Republican, but by the end of his congressional career, he was elected as a Federalist. Modern scholars who have analyzed party affiliation in the early years of Congress have been baffled by Parker's politics. They dismiss him as impossible to classify, “a maverick, shifting from one party to the other with the flow of public opinion.”

But would Parker's contemporaries have seen him as inconsistent? Perhaps at the beginning of his congressional career. Yet the switch from Anti-Federalist to Republican was typical enough. As the Republican opposition began to emerge in 1792, many former Anti-Federalists made common cause with disaffected Federalists in opposition to Secretary of Treasury Alexander Hamilton's commercial program. Virginians in particular saw Hamilton's program as a threat to local sovereignty and an agrarian way of life. The switch from Republican to Federalist is less typical. Parker began voting with the Federalists in 1796. By April 1798, Jefferson wrote to Madison that “Parker is completely gone over to the war-party.” Jefferson's depiction is not entirely accurate. Even after 1798, Parker voted with the Federalists only half of the time. Parker's contemporaries may more likely have identified him as a “Half-Federalist,” someone elected as a Federalist but who didn't vote consistently with that party. But the documentary record does not seem to suggest the kind of uncertainty about Parker that

149 Cornell, The Other Founders, 147-71.
150 Boyd et al., Jefferson Papers, 30:299, 301n.
151 Dauer, The Adams Federalists, 171; Risjord, Chesapeake Politics, 527.
surrounded his politics when first elected. A closer examination of his voting record suggests a consistency that was likely apparent to Parker's contemporaries.

Every Federalist vote that Parker cast dealt with defense and the protection of American commerce.152 While France and Britain were fighting each other both in Europe and in the West Indies, America had attempted to maintain its neutrality. Desperate for supplies, France began in 1796 to condone privateer attacks on American merchant ships in the West Indies. American commerce made an easy target. America had disbanded its makeshift navy at the end of the Revolution and merchant ships were virtually helpless. By 1797, French privateers were even capturing ships off the coasts of New York and Delaware. As depredations increased, American trade plummeted and insurance rates skyrocketed. The Federalists called for defensive measures to strengthen the ports and rebuild the navy; some went so far as to call for war. The Republicans were reluctant. They still held a deep affinity for their sister Republic of France and an even deeper aversion to anything British. They did not want to take defensive measures that might provoke a war. Furthermore, they were fundamentally opposed to a standing navy, not only because of the power it gave to a potential tyrant, but also because they feared it would make America too much like Britain, which proudly defined itself by its navy.153

Parker shared the Republican affinity for France and aversion to Britain, a feeling that first developed while he served in the Revolution. But Parker was not blinded by these feelings as so many Republicans were. While serving as a naval officer, Parker had shown perspicacity and an awareness of the danger of begin overcome by such feelings.

In 1795, the French consul in Virginia had asked Parker for a list of the vessels passing through Norfolk the previous year, along with information on their destinations, cargoes, and owners. Parker reported the request to Gov. Patrick Henry:

I have given him a vague answer, my reason for which was I conceived it a matter of much consequence, and which I deemed ought not to be divulged without the approbation of the Executive, as although I consider the French nation as our protectors from Tyranny, and the great means of our emancipation, yet I know they are politick, and perhaps may make use of these means to counteract our Commercial plans at some future day, when we may not be on as happy terms, as we are at present.154

Even as the French crisis arose in 1796, Parker was loathe to go to war:

Were I to have a choice, I would prefer a close connexion with France rather than Britain. Our Governments are more alike; we alike have fought for freedom; we have, in some measure, loosened the chains which ignorance and superstition had made, and which were supported by kingscraft and priest-craft. I wish to see Republican liberty spread itself over the world; this is among the reasons why I should deprecate a war with France. Hence I hope that every measure will be used consistent with the honor of our country, to cement closely the bands of union between the United States and the French Republic.155

But Parker’s martial valor would not let him stand by and see his country preyed upon by another’s privateers. “If we must go to war with France, and we are invaded by her, I must and will fight for my country.”156

It is understandable that Parker would break with the Republicans over this issue. Not only had his military service powerfully influenced him, but so had his career as a merchant. Historian T. H. Breen has argued that Virginia planters typically viewed

156 Ibid.
commerce in predominantly personal terms, as a way to strengthen social networks. As a result, planters exhibited a naïveté in their understanding of the workings of international commerce. They also formed a suspicion of merchants and impersonal forms of commerce. As a merchant-planter, Parker shared the planter mentality that viewed commerce in highly personal terms, but he would have had a more favorable view toward merchants and international commerce. From his own career as a merchant and from his tenure as a naval officer at Norfolk, he may have gained a more sophisticated understanding of markets and international trade. The primary purpose of a navy was not defense against invasion, but protection of commerce. If Parker still owned a shipping concern, he would have been well aware of the need for a navy to protect his vessels. Regardless, he was aware of the toll the privateers were taking on his constituents in Norfolk and American commerce in general. Despite Parker's view of himself primarily as a planter, his reaction to the French crisis suggests that he was more heavily influenced, if only subconsciously, by his career as a merchant.

Parker demonstrated independence in his break with Republicans over the French crisis, independence from the planter mentality and from prevailing obsessions over France and Britain. He was not willing to let partisan politics impede the protection of American commerce and sovereignty. In the spring of 1789, Parker had organized a meeting with congressmen from the two parties to encourage the minority party to vote with the Federalists "in favor of measures of general defence." Such displays of

157 Breen, *Tobacco Culture*, 84-159.
158 See above, for example, Parker's business transactions with Washington and Monroe.
independence could be a double-edged sword. Independence was one of the most prized virtues a gentleman could possess. It was seen as a legitimation of authority and honor. “Independent persons, it was believed, stood above the scramble after power and wealth.” Striving for independence was at the root of early disavowals of political parties. Yet some scholars have argued that politicians like Sen. Maclay and John Adams ruined their political careers by trying to maintain their independence. Their actions were interpreted by others as unpredictable rather than independent, thus damaging their credibility on the national stage. That was not the case with Parker. His independence had a certain consistency to it. Parker voted with Federalists only on defensive measures; he voted with Republicans on all other domestic matters. While Republicans could not have been glad about Parker’s defection, everyone knew how he would vote. In a report to England in February 1799, the British minister to the United States referred to Parker as “a man of some weight” in the House of Representatives. Parker would have carried no weight had he not had a reputation of reliability.

With the confidence of his colleagues, Parker took the lead in naval affairs as relations deteriorated into what is known as the Quasi-War with France. Local and family historians have christened Parker “The Father of the United States Navy.” This is a title that has been applied to a few individuals, perhaps none more appropriately than

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160 Breen, Tobacco Culture, 89; see also Isaac, Transformation of Virginia, 131-35.  
161 Freeman, Affairs of Honor, 11-61; Elkins and McKitrick, Age of Federalism, 529-79. George Washington is, of course, a notable example of one politician who was able to establish a reputation of independence and credibility.  
162 Parker was absent for the votes on the Alien and Sedition Acts, but he voted with Republicans on all attempts to modify or repeal the acts.  
Benjamin Stoddert, the first Secretary of the Navy Department, whose management and vision turned a navy of one ship into a fleet of fifty-four in less than three years. Working closely with Stoddert, Parker spearheaded the effort in Congress. As the chairman of the Committee on Naval Affairs in the fourth through sixth Congresses, Parker guided Stoddert's plans through the House, securing funding for the completion of the frigates Constitution, Constellation, and United States, authorizing and funding the building of several additional vessels and the purchase of merchant ships to arm and convert into galleys. Every step of the way Parker had to battle Republican opposition, led primarily by Albert Gallatin of Pennsylvania and William Giles of Virginia, as they sought to restrict naval vessels to American waters and to limit the president's authority to use the navy in general. On his trips home, Parker visited the shipyards of Norfolk to monitor shipbuilding progress and, under Stoddert's direction, to help new captains select reliable officers.164

By 1799, the fledgling navy was beginning to have a visible effect on commerce and public morale. Attacks on American ships were down; insurance rates were down; trade was up. Public opinion swelled in support of the navy in February 1799 when the Constellation overtook and captured the fastest ship in the French fleet, l'Insurgente. Republicans were finding it hard to oppose naval armament measures. During a debate on increasing the size of the navy, Gallatin spoke out only against building the largest

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164 Elkins and McKitrick, Age of Federalism, 634-35, 643-62; Dudley W. Knox, ed., Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War between the United States and France, 7 vols. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1938), 1:495, 2:129-34, 323-25, 5:58-61; Annals of Congress, 7:242, 289-90, 359-78, 8:1259, 1463, 2555-56. Naval ships were built in each major port; support of Norfolk's shipbuilding industry may also have been a factor in Parker's support of the navy.
vessels in the bill, twelve seventy-four-gun ships-of-the-line. Parker replied that he was "happy to find, however, that the gentleman from Pennsylvania did not go farther, and oppose the whole force, as he had heretofore always opposed everything like a navy."\textsuperscript{165}

Parker made his longest speeches and dedicated his greatest energies to building up the navy. He had caught Stoddert's vision and made it his own:

France...seems to have seized the truncheon of Mars, and wields it successfully in two quarters of the world, and yet she is not satisfied – and Neptune has yielded his trident to Great Britain; but we may expect, at some future day, when our unfledged Eagle has attained full plumage and vigor, that it will explore its vast aquatic domains, and snatch the trident from the hands of proud Albion [England], and bring it to America. That day may be distant, but the time must come, when the United States will give laws to the world. If so, he hoped we would make them good, and let the family of mankind be happy.\textsuperscript{166}

The Quasi-War with France ended in September 1800, and as the sixth Congress completed its work in late February 1801, Parker "retired from public life to the bosom of his family," his daughter, Ann, would later write, to enjoy "that happiness which arises from the reflection of a life well spent, sweetened by the endearments of my mother, and myself."\textsuperscript{167} It is likely that Parker also looked forward to being on his plantation full time. When Washington had retired for the first time after the Revolution, Parker wrote admiringly, "The mode you have adopted for the remainder of your days are I think the

\textsuperscript{165} Annals of Congress, 8:2832.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 8:2872.
\textsuperscript{167} Petition of Ann P. Cowper, 1816, Legislative Petition Records Group 78, Library of Virginia, Richmond.
most agreeable you could fix on. Nothing could be so delightfull to a great mind as mixing in the most agreable walks of Nature richly cultivated by art.”

Parker's retirement appeared to be enjoyable indeed. In May 1802, Ann was to be married. Yet the marriage proved to be anything but a source of happiness to the family. Ann's husband, William Cowper, was extremely abusive and Ann eventually filed for a divorce. Furthermore, in September 1802, Parker's wife, Mary, passed away. How Parker felt toward his wife, how he treated her, and how he reacted to her death can only be assumed. Mary's life, moreover, is even further obscured from historical view.

Ann's petition for a divorce, besides chronicling her harrowing ordeal, provides some insight into Josiah Parker's family life. Divorces had to be granted by the state legislature, so in an attempt to “excite some sympathy” from the legislators, Ann began her petition with a recitation of her father's distinguished military and political career. She then described him as “a fond and affectionate parent.” Ann wrote that he had been “so dotingly fond [of me] that he spared neither trouble or expense; for my improvement or gratification.” By improvement, Ann may have been referring to her education. In a biographical sketch of the Parker family, James F. Crocker wrote that “Col. Parker had educated his daughter, as if she had been a son, in the languages and in all manly arts.”

Thomas Buckley suggests in his study on divorce in early Virginia that Ann had been trying to play upon the patriarchal sympathies of the male legislators; by praising

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169 May 8, 1802, Sept. 11, 1802, Norfolk Herald, Norfolk, Virginia.
170 Ann P. Cowper, 1816, Legislative Petition.
her father's martial and familial virtues and displaying her dependent state, she hoped to entice the legislators to extend protection by granting her divorce.\textsuperscript{172} This does not mean that the sentiments Ann declared were not real. Ann felt a deep attachment to her father; she named her first son Josiah not after her husband, who was likely away at sea, but after her father. Ann's account of her ordeal suggests that Parker also had a deep love and concern for his daughter.\textsuperscript{173}

Parker had come to know his future son-in-law, William Cowper, as an officer in the navy during the Quasi-War with France. Parker may have even known him before, for he was friends and possibly business partners with William's older brother, John Cowper.\textsuperscript{174} Parker had recommended William as a junior officer to a new captain, though it may have been because of Parker's friendship with John that he did so. It is unlikely, however, that Parker knew William well. When Cowper served on board the \textit{Constellation}, the captain, Thomas Truxton, constantly criticized him for being unable or unwilling to follow orders or do any work at all. Cowper seems to have redeemed himself in Truxton's eyes during the battle with \textit{l'Insurgente} and he ultimately received his own command. Yet as master commandant of the \textit{Baltimore}, several complaints were filed against Cowper, accusing him of cruelty toward his crew and erratic behavior in


\textsuperscript{174} In 1790 Parker had recommended John Cowper for the foreign service as "a young Gentleman of address and abilities and supports a very good Character." Boyd et al., \textit{Jefferson Papers}, 17:326.
general. Apparently unaware of these characteristics, Parker likely would have approved of the marriage, for new in-laws reflected upon the honor of the family, and fathers were “seldom indifferent” in such matters.176

Problems began only a few months after William and Ann were married. William had gone into business with his brother, but the store soon failed and William lost his house. Ann wrote that her husband had become “indolent” and “made no exertions for my support, and I was left destitute.” Parker would not let his daughter suffer while his son-in-law did nothing. William and Ann came to live at Macclesfield, but Parker insisted that Cowper “make some exertions for himself” and Ann. Cowper took to sea, but was “so thoughtless and extravagant” that Ann saw none of his income. Two and a half years later, Cowper returned from a voyage with five thousand dollars worth of goods and set up a retail store. Parker, eager to see his son-in-law able to support Ann, provided Cowper with a store and a house into which he and Ann moved. Once they were out of Macclesfield, however, Cowper became abusive. “His temper shewed itself with all its enormities, he treated...me with the most unfeeling barbarity.” He began to treat Parker with “rudeness” as well, sending him “insulting and threatening letters.” Ann left her husband and returned to her father's house.177

Cowper's business failed again. Having lost everything, he returned to beg forgivingness of Josiah and Ann. While Ann thought Cowper had learned his lesson,

176 Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 206-08.
177 Ann P. Cowper, 1816, Legislative Petition.
Parker would not forgive him. Instead, he offered to use his political clout to help Ann obtain a legislative divorce. Ann refused, but she remained at Macclesfield.

In March 1810, Parker, now 59, began to grow ill. Aware that the end could be near, he gathered witnesses and wrote his will. His daughter's situation weighed heavily on his mind. Cowper was at sea at the time, but Parker knew he would be back. He wanted to protect Ann and ensure that she would not have to rely upon Cowper for support. Parker thus left Ann a considerable amount of property and control over the estate until her son, Josiah, came of age.

Concern over family reputation, paramount in an ethic of primal honor, may have guided Parker's reaction to Cowper. But love of his daughter was most likely the impetus behind his actions. The two motivations are not necessarily exclusive; indeed; familial love was reinforced by familial pride. One stipulation in Parker's will suggests that the ethic of honor was deeply ingrained in Parker's consciousness. Parker's ultimate heir, his grandson Josiah Cowper, would only inherit the estate "on the express condition of his taking the surname Parker." Just as Parker had tried to expunge from the House Journal an episode that dishonored that institution and its members, so Parker tried to expunge from his family the disgrace of the name Cowper, first by legislative divorce, then by controlling the legacy of the Parker name.

Josiah Parker died on March 11, 1810. His efforts to protect his daughter ultimately did not prevail. Cowper moved himself into Macclesfield, but as his violence grew in intensity and frequency, Ann finally abandoned her property, fearing for her and

178 8 March 1810, Isle of Wight County Will Book No. 13, 1809-1815, 90.
her children's lives. In 1816, she petitioned the Virginia Assembly for a legislative divorce. The legislature granted the divorce in January 1817, but Ann was continually in court trying to protect herself, her children, and their assets from her ex-husband until he died in 1819.180

180 Ann P. Cowper, 1816, Legislative Petition.
CONCLUSION

Records about Parker have been preserved because of the significance of the events and people with which he was involved. They give form to Parker just as John Trumbull did in "The Capture of the Hessians at Trenton." Yet sometimes in our historical memory, marginal figures like Parker are overshadowed by the central figures of this era. Trumbull’s painting appears on the cover of David McCullough's recent 1776, but Parker is cut out of the scene altogether. Trumbull, however, recognized the power of the margins in framing a dramatic scene. As he prepared sketches for his painting over ten years after the battle, Trumbull originally placed Washington on one side of the painting and the wounded Col. Rall on the other. But as Trumbull sought to emphasize Washington’s mercy in sparing Rall, as “a lesson to all living and future soldiers,” he moved Washington, Rall, and the act of mercy to the center. He then filled the painting with others who had fought at Trenton.\(^\text{181}\)

Similarly, Parker’s life frames the more dramatic stories of Washington and Jefferson, illuminating the political culture of the era and providing context for the actions of these central figures. We see in Parker’s life the supporting role that so many people played on the crowded stage of the Revolution and early Republic. As a military officer he mustered the militia, gathered supplies, and collected crucial intelligence; as a

public official Parker sought to protect American commerce by implementing Stoddert's naval plans. While Parker often worked to carry out the vision of these "great men," he unabashedly challenged them when he felt that personal and national honor was at stake. Parker would have acknowledged the superior abilities and wealth of some of those central figures, like Washington, but he would have seen himself as no less honorable. He experienced the same frustrations and challenges of the "great men" as he tried to convince an apathetic militia to continue fighting amidst a hotbed of loyalism. He devoted himself to the principles and prosperity of the new government as he sought to eliminate the slave trade and establish a navy.

After the Revolution had ended in 1783, Parker realized that he had a valuable asset: he had served under Gen. Washington and had even won the general's praise for his military service. Parker recognized the potential asset of his association with an international hero. He presented himself to the freeholders of his county almost as an intermediary between them and Washington. "Everybody here expresses there great desire to see you at this place," he wrote to Washington in February 1785. "I flatter them it is probable you will feel an inclination in the Spring to visit this part of the State."

Had Parker seen Trumbull's painting, produced in his day, he would not have seen himself on the margin; rather, he would have viewed the painting as evidence of his proximity to Washington and his centrality to the dramatic events of the late eighteenth century.

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