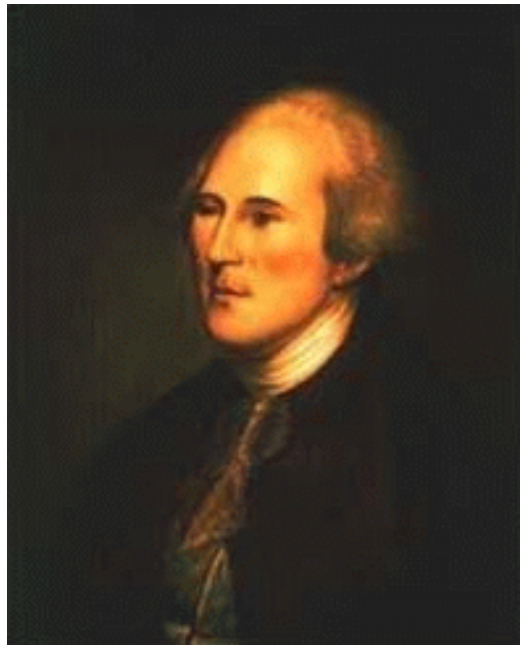




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Arthur Lee of Virginia
*Was He a Paranoid Political Infighter or
An Unheralded Press Agent for the American Revolution?*

By William F. Rhatican



Arthur Lee

Arthur Lee was one of eight children born to Thomas Lee, the builder of Stratford Hall. Most of his adult life was spent in London and Paris while working to secure European support during the Revolution. He was a diplomat, a secret agent for the Continental Congress, and a Commissioner (along with Benjamin Franklin and Silas Deane) to the Court of Versailles.

Arthur used the written word to spread his ideas. His pamphlets were distributed throughout Europe and America and served to rally sympathizers in support of the American cause. A 1775 editorial in the Virginia Gazette praised “the amiable Dr. Lee, admired by all for his literary abilities and excellent pieces in Vindication of the colonies, shines conspic-

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uously as one of the first patriots of his age.” Historian, Alvin Riggs, calls Arthur Lee “probably the most influential publicist anywhere for the cause of the colonies.”¹ Burton Hendrick, acknowledges Lee's contribution to the pre-Revolutionary fervor of the colonies when he writes, “Arthur's greatest service to the cause... (was) his correspondence, for the six years preceding hostilities, with many of the leaders in America.”² Despite his influence at the time, other historians dismissed him as a “neurotic... always a centre (sic) of... disturbance.”³ Thus, they often overlook his writings, focusing more on his personality than on the principles of his writings and the intellectual capacity he brought to the colonists' side of the debate with the mother country.

The writings of Lee show he was an early and powerful exponent of colonial independence from the British Parliament but not necessarily independence from the British monarch. His writings, under numerous pseudonyms, were so powerful that they pushed the debate on the political spectrum so far toward confrontation with Great Britain that he moved the fulcrum of the debate away from conciliation and inexorably toward a break.

The Formative Years

Arthur Lee was born in 1740, the sixth son of Thomas Lee and his wife, Hannah Ludwell. At the age of eleven, he was sent to Scotland to be educated. After receiving a medical degree from Edinburgh University, he returned to Williamsburg to practice medicine only to discover that medicine interested him little. He went to London to study law, but soon knew he craved the attention and verbal combat of politics and “public service.”⁴ During his formative years, both in Virginia and later, in Scotland and England, Arthur demonstrated a restlessness and confusion of sentiments. Unmarried throughout his life, Arthur confessed to his brother Frank in 1769, “I am now the

only unhappy or single person of the family, nor have I any prospect of being otherwise... I often feel so homesick that I cannot bear the thought of living forever from you.”⁵ While some historians credit (or blame) Arthur's childhood experiences for his later “paranoia” or “neuroticism,” Arthur did manage to find and make friends on both sides of the Atlantic. He apparently fascinated the Londoners as a “colonial” who claimed that Americans had the same rights and liberties as Englishmen and desired to awaken Great Britain to the injustice heaped upon Englishmen who lived in the colonies rather than the mother country. On the American side of the Atlantic, he was equally persuasive, having traveled extensively throughout the colonies, making a favorable impression on Samuel Adams and other early leaders of the colonial resistance.⁶

His early, classical education and his extensive readings of Greek and Roman literature apparently prepared him well for his self-appointed role as “press agent” for the colonials.

Using a Pseudonym

Arthur Lee honed his ability to write political tracts while in England as a correspondent with “influential colonial leaders.”⁷ In 1768, he wrote a series of pieces known as the Monitor letters, which called on the colonials to demand a Bill of Rights similar to the freedoms the British had achieved for themselves. When he later retraced his steps and returned to London in 1768, he eagerly began a series of essays under the pseudonym, “Junius Americanus.” Although written in London, they were meant to be read in both Great Britain and in the colonies and were intended to inflame passions and provide direction for the colonists and their supporters on both sides of the Atlantic.

According to Riggs, Lee used numerous pseudonyms to author more than 170 political essays, which appeared in 36 English and American newspapers and periodicals. Riggs identifies three of the pseudonyms Lee used as "Monitor," "Junius Americanus," and "Raleigh" but hints at the use of many others. It is possible to explore the possibility that at least one of them was "The British American," a name that appears prominently in the *Virginia Gazette* in 1774 and makes arguments strikingly like those Lee made while using other pen names. The use of a pseudonym did not necessarily mean an author wished to maintain his anonymity, however. A literary device often used in both Britain and the colonies at the time, it provided the author with the flexibility to acknowledge or disavow certain published works as the occasion arose. For Lee's part, he did not seem to mind; to the contrary, he appeared to relish the attention his political agitation created.

Defending Franklin

By all accounts a superbly educated and crusading patriot, Arthur Lee honed his columnist's skills by attacking his political enemies in print, defending his friends and sources and, when the occasion arose, assuming the reasonable tact of a diplomatic businessman. His attacks in print on the British governors of Massachusetts Bay and Virginia, for example, might make the likes of Walter Winchell blanch while his defense of his political foe Ben Franklin when he was attacked by the greater enemy, Britain, is still cited today as "eloquent." In January 1774, for example, the British Privy Council was investigating the matter of certain letters from Massachusetts Royal Governor, Thomas Hutchinson, written between 1768 and 1769 before he became governor of the Commonwealth. In those letters, Hutchinson and Andrew Oliver, who would become Lieutenant Governor, opined on the value of

"abridgment of what are called British rights" for the colonists and on the importance of a stern hand, including British troops, in dealing with the Boston colonials. Ben Franklin, as agent in London for the Massachusetts Bay Colony, received the letters under suspicious circumstances and, considering the letters as "public property" written by public officials, sent them to Boston to be distributed discretely. When they were made public, however, Franklin was brought before the Privy Council, which had before it the General Court's demand that Hutchinson and Andrew Oliver be removed from office. Franklin, at the venerable age of sixty eight, appeared before the Council on January 29, 1774, where he was attacked "acrimoniously"⁸ by the Solicitor General, Alexander Wedderburne, as the personification of the people of Boston, who were, "...not only the worst Subjects, but the most immoral Men of any he has had to deal with...(as bad as) Sodom itself was for a Vice which ought not to be named."⁹ Writing later about the mood in London at the time, Franklin characterized the "clamour...is high and general."¹⁰ Lee leapt to Franklin's defense, even though they had been - and would continue to be - ideological, political and personal foes. Lee wrote, in London, "Is it the act of a coward to insult an old man? Is it the act of a villain to accuse falsely, and stab the character of an innocent man? Mr. Wedderburne is the man who insults age. Mr. Wedderburne is the man who stabs innocence."¹¹

As adept as any of his colleagues at personal attack and insult, Lee could shift his rhetoric to satisfy his audience. If he were defending a fellow-colonist such as Franklin, he could viciously launch *ad hominum* attacks on Franklin's detractors. On the other hand, he was equally capable of writing a reasonable appeal for restraint on the part of the British with their American colonies and of the great deeds the two had already accomplished as

precursors for what lie ahead. In his *Appeal to the Justice and Interests of the People of Great Britain*, he eloquently intertwined the earlier fortunes of the two countries and predicted glorious accomplishments for both if they remained united and resolved their differences amicably.¹²

Solving the Problems Between Britain and the Colonials

Directing his message to British merchants and others trading with, or related to, the colonists, Lee understated the problems between the two countries, describing them as solvable. Using the pseudonym "An Old Member of Parliament" he wrote, "A state of contention between Great Britain and America is not only disagreeable but dangerous. We have every influence of interest and affection to attach us to each other, and make us wish to preserve the union indissoluble."¹³ He went on to caution the British that it was in their own best interest to work closely with the colonists in a mutually respectful manner to achieve what he suggested were common goals. He also held out, though in the gentlest terms at first, the prospect of a forceful separation of the two, a hint of what might come if the British people allowed their Parliament to impose itself upon the colonies. Thus, Lee could write in both a volatile and visceral manner or calmly and rationally depending on his audience. Further, Lee calls on the reader of each essay to take some action or to perform some deed as the result of having read the essay in the first place.

Lee's Views on Slavery

What Hendrick fails to recognize, however, is the brilliance with which Lee made that correspondence and his other writings available to the newspapers in both London and America to bolster the cause of freedom in the colonies and to embarrass the royal administration and its supporters on both sides of the Atlantic. Writing in the *Virginia Gazette* as early as May

31, 1770, Lee struck a nerve with colonists apparently becoming increasingly troubled with the issue of economic slavery when he coupled that issue with the question of independence from London. Making the point that democracy and slavery cannot live side by side, Lee wrote that recent British actions against the colonies would certainly lead to slavery for the colonists themselves since the diminishment of liberty through the application of such economic restraints would surely lead to slavery.¹⁴ It is likely Lee was referring to the Townshend Acts, a series of indirect duties on imports of lead, glass, paper and paint from Great Britain. In the same article, Lee foresaw the possibility of economic conflict among the colonies based on individual colonial economic interests, which he thought might preclude unity against what he considered the greater enemy - Great Britain. Thus, Lee made the prescient point that the colonies must be united in their opposition to the parliament as each colony was attacked or they would surely be isolated one from the other until all thirteen had capitulated.

"It was hoped," Lee wrote in Monitor I, "that the rest of the colonies would not interest themselves in the fate of one; but look with silence and unconcern on this violation of American freedom, in the British Parliament's disposing of the property of the people of New York, and suspending their government. Thus were we to be divided, and our liberties seized upon by such degrees, as should not alarm us into opposition, till it was too late..."¹⁵

Lee often returned to what appears to be his favorite subject, that of the erosion of freedoms into the abysmal pit of slavery with Monitor VI. In that essay, Lee asks himself a rhetorical question and answers it eloquently. "Why do you employ your time in writing on Liberty, which may possibly bring you into some difficulties or danger; when you might use it so

much more to your own emolument?"¹⁶ His answer: "Liberty is the very idol of my soul, the parent of virtue, the nurse of heroes, the dispenser of general happiness; because slavery is the monstrous mother of every abominable vice and every atrocious ill because the liberties of my country are invaded, and in danger of entire destruction, by the late acts of the British Parliament."¹⁷

Conspiracy Theory

Apparently an avowed "conspiracy theorist," Lee believed, and wrote on May 31, 1770, that the direction of British policy since 1764 seemed to "evidence a settled plan, a conspiracy among ministers designed to corrupt the colonies and to establish arbitrary power."¹⁸ This "conspiracy theory" of Lee's, that the entire British hierarchy was conspiring against the colonies, appears regularly throughout his writings and may have been one cause for his diminishment in the eyes of other pre-Revolutionary writers. For example, in Monitor II, which appeared in the *Virginia Gazette* on March 3, 1768, he wrote, "They [the colonists loyal to England] depend on their tyrants [the British Parliament] for what they are pleased to grant them, property, or life, or honours (sic), to which they aspire not by virtue, but by cunning, servility, and wickedness, from whence they soon become habitually vicious, weak and miserable."¹⁹ He was apparently trying to tie the plight of the American colonists under British rule with that of the British subjects in England who had already won some degree of freedom through the Magna Carta. His argument to the British was that their own personal and political freedoms were intertwined with those of the colonists. If the British stood by and allowed the American colonists, whose assemblies had also been authorized by the ruling monarch, to come under the control of the British Parliament, where they had no representation, it would not be long before the House of Commons in

Britain would become subservient to the non-elected House of Lords, thus subjecting the British to the same unelected rulers the Americans were fighting.

Only two weeks later, on March 17, 1768, he wrote in the *Virginia Gazette* that constituents had a right to direct their representatives in the legislature and that the British Parliament had "lately denied this right."²⁰ Only when the constituents' representatives had developed what he called a "Bill of Rights" would there be an American freedom.²¹

Lee's View on British Troops in America

One of Lee's primary targets early in his writings was the billeting of British troops on American soil. No longer were they necessary for the conduct of the French and Indian War, he argued, nor as escort for settlers into the frontier. Now, he contended, they were billeted in the colonies "...to enforce upon ourselves any oppressive measures..."²²

In Monitor I, Lee spelled out his basic concerns about the British control of the American colonies; he wrote:

When the Stamp Act had raised so universal an opposition both in *America* and *Great Britain*, that their execution of it was impracticable, it was repealed; and however joyous that event might be, yet in its effects it may be fatal. It is but too evident that the enemies to our liberties have drawn from it this dangerous lesson, to change the mode of that act, not the measures which dictated it; that is, to sap ...not to storm our freedom. To accomplish this, two things were necessary; to divide us among ourselves, and to divide us from those who declared themselves our friends in Great Britain.²³

Thus, he was, early in the debate, arguing that the British Parliament had developed a comprehensive and focused strategy of "picking off" the colonies for individual treatment, relying on the belief that the colonies would not band together against what they considered the greater evil - that of the mother land.

Thus were we to be divided, and our liberties seized upon by such degrees, as should not alarm us into opposition, till it was too late; and as they well knew, that the majority of those who opposed the *Stamp Act* in *Great Britain*, did it not from any friendship to our liberties and rights...but from a persuasion that it would operate injuriously to their own interests; these were to be drawn off by the never failing cord of self-interest; for which purpose a duty was laid on those *British* manufactures, which we were supposed to be under a necessity of using, for the purposes of a revenue; that is, to save the money of the people of Great Britain, who must otherwise be taxed to furnish this revenue (emphasis added).²⁴

In other words, Lee brilliantly articulated the position that the British establishment, rather than directly attacking all of the colonies and their supporters in Great Britain - and especially the merchants who desperately wanted to continue trading with the colonies - chose, instead, to "nibble away" at the colonies, "picking off" individual colonies or sectors of the colonial economy slowly and gradually until there was no opposition left, either in the colonies or in the homeland.

In his call to action in that first Monitor piece, Lee ended with a resounding call to all the colonies to band together:

Let every colony contend which shall stand foremost in petitioning our most gracious Sovereign against the billeting act, and the suspension of the legislature of *New York*, showing that we consider these as wounds to *American* liberties, though that of one colony. Let us petition against the giving away our money by the *British* Parliament...let us, in the meantime, by our frugality and industry in manufacturing for ourselves convince our adversaries of their mistake in one grand point, that we are under a necessity of using the manufactures of *Britain*. To accomplish these noble and necessary purposes, let *the people of every county instruct their members (represent-atives) to petition, and let associations be formed to promote manufactures*; that we make manifest to all the world, how unanimously we are determined, both with hand and heart, to maintain our freedom and frustrate the designs of those, who, by *dividing, would enslave us*.²⁵

Returning to London in 1768, Lee continued his writings on behalf of the colonies and in opposition to the arbitrary British rule in America. From London, Lee wrote two pieces that appeared in William Rind's *Virginia Gazette* and, according to Alvin Riggs, in at least ten other colonial newspapers of the day. In those pieces, Lee reminded his readers of his intention to "lay before you the intentions of those who would by fraud or force annihilate our free constitution."²⁶

In that first piece, he quotes a "ministerial man" in London as admitting that the decision to bring the British troops from the frontier back into the colonies had been made shortly after the Townshend Acts had been passed two years earlier "...to enforce its success."²⁷ Quoting

Lord North, Chancellor of the Exchequer, he wrote that the British troops "ought to have America prostrate at their feet, before they even deigned to listen to her complaints."²⁸

Two weeks later, in a Monitor article appearing in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Lee wrote, "Never was a plan of despotism more absolute, and in itself complete, never were chains better forged...What remains to make our slavery complete? Nothing but our acquiescence (sic) and submission."²⁹

Lee's choice as an outlet in London was the *Gazetteer*, a publication with a somewhat larger and more populist readership than the establishment's *Public Advertiser*. Writing under the pseudonym "Junius Americanus," Lee produced more than fifty essays from January 1769 through January 1772.³⁰ In his first piece for the *Gazetteer*, on July 18, 1769, Lee called for the resignation of Lord Hillsborough, the American Secretary (British colonial minister), "as the contriver of the entire scheme to oppress Americans."³¹ According to Lee, writing as "Junius Americanus," Lord Hillsborough had ordered American governors to dissolve assemblies and had conspired with individual governors such as Francis Bernard of Massachusetts to order the British "soldiers (to) carry the law on the points of their swords."³² Only one month later, Lee wrote, again as "Junius Americanus," that Bernard, the Royal Governor of Massachusetts, had conspired with Lord Hillsborough to cause civil unrest in Boston as a ruse for British coercion of the population and that Bernard had ordered the movement of British troops inside Boston's city limits in violation of the American Mutiny Act.³³

Again, trying to connect the American colonists' plight with that of the British people, Lee wrote that, "America, viewed in its true light, is a nursery of British liberty."³⁴

"Representation and taxation are constitutionally inseparable," Lee wrote in 1771, appealing again to the British people's sense of fairness based on their own historical struggle for representation.

Sovereignty for the Colonies as "Non-Issue"

He even raised the question of sovereignty for the colonies as a "non-issue." In Monitor V, Lee calls on the colonists to bypass the British Parliament and address their grievances directly to the King. He opens the essay, "...I earnestly recommend to my countrymen in America, the instructing of their *real representatives* (sic) to petition to our most Gracious Sovereign against those late acts of the British Parliament, which infringe our liberties..."³⁵ Later in the same piece, he suggests a "*Magna Charta Americana*, a confirmation of those rights, which we have hitherto uninterruptedly possessed...would establish them on a sure and solid foundation..."³⁶

Later, in 1773, and quoting from private letters stolen from the then-current Governor Hutchinson of Massachusetts, Lee wrote:

The seal of secrecy and confidence, which these men fixed upon their letters, was adopted by that wise and worthy Minister the Earl of Hillsborough. He assumed it, because he knew the orders contained in his letters were illegal; they used it, because they were equally conscious that the intelligence conveyed in theirs was wickedly false. The principle of their letters is that whoever they thus secretly accuse shall be doomed to punishment without knowing his accusers or his crime. What an excellent dispensation of justice is here laid down.³⁷

In his *Appeal to the Justice and Interests of the People of Great Britain*," Lee attempted to touch a sense of fair play in the British people on the side of the colonists in their struggle with the British Parliament. This pamphlet, serialized in the *Virginia Gazette* in the spring of 1775, began with an appeal to the sense of unity the British and American people once felt for one another. He wrote:

Is it not strange, is it not deplorable that we should differ? We saw how valuable the colonies were during the last war. The next war will convince us of the feebleness which flows from their (colonists) disaffection (with the mother country). The war found us united. It was conducted gloriously upon the strength of that union; and left us in perfect harmony; unhappy were the councils which disturbed that harmony, unhappy was the idea of taxation...from the aera (sic) of this innovation (taxation) we are to date the disturbances which have shaken the entire empire.³⁸

The pamphlet must have struck a responsive cord, at least on the English side of the Atlantic, for Alvin Riggs writes in "The Nine Lives of Arthur Lee" that it sold out four editions in London while only one in New York. In addition, according to Riggs, the town of Newcastle in England published one edition and the merchants of London another.³⁹

Throughout the "Appeal," Lee calls on the British people to recall their own "historic struggle" for individual freedoms including the right to private property as they attempt to understand the pleas of the colonists. Referring often to the earlier British struggles for individual rights in numerous writings to the British people, including Monitor I, he suggests a return to the strategies of the "revolution-

aries" of an earlier time. "For to speak in the words of the great Sir Thomas Wentworth, on a similar occasion, in the time of Charles the First, 'They have taken from us, what? What shall I say? Indeed what have they left us? They have ravished from us all means of supplying the King, and ingratiating ourselves with him, taking up the root of all property.' If the Parliament of Great Britain, over which we have no earthly restriction, may give and grant our property for the purpose of a revenue, in whatever manner it be affected, the root of all our property is effectually taken up, and we at best are but tenants at will."⁴⁰

Reflecting the tenets, beliefs, and writings of the philosophies that the end of government is the good of the majority, Lee wrote that if that be the case, then when "it is diverted to the emolument of one or a few, it becomes bad, it then becomes, detested by the name, it then becomes a tyranny. When this is vested in one, as in an unlimited monarchy, it is bad, but much more is it to be dreaded when in the hands of many."⁴¹

Calling the House of Commons in England "the most tremendous tyranny that ever existed...if it were independent of the people; that is, if the seats were for life, filled up when vacant by the members themselves, and they not affected by the laws they made. If they made a law to take away the property of the people, their own would be untouched; if to endanger the lives of the people, they themselves would not feel its severity."⁴²

Again appealing to the British people, and calling attention to their own form of Parliamentary government, Lee asks, in Monitor III, what the British people would do if the House of Commons were no longer elected by the people or, more to the point of the colonists, what would occur in England if the "House of Lords would say to the people of

England, we are your virtual representatives, and therefore have a right to tax you; suppose they were, upon this declaration, to tax them accordingly; what would the people say? They would tell their Lordships that they possessed, and, have ever (emphasis added) possessed, a right by the constitution an unalienable right to shuse (sic) representatives, who are their trustees, and are bound in duty and interest to preserve their liberty and property...should the Lords persist, the people would without doubt make their last appeal to Heaven."⁴³ Lee further wrote on the role of representatives, "To shut up from the people, who have an essential & unalienable right to enquire into the conduct of their Representatives, all knowledge of their Proceedings; is against reason, a flagrant violation of right, & stamps an alarming suspicion on those whose actions are thus carefully cover'd (sic) with darkness...The People...acknowledge no absolute power over them but the Law; & to that their Representatives are equally subject."⁴⁴

Obviously, Lee believed in "the power of the people" and saw in the great masses an unexploited power base to force the aristocracy to accept an egalitarian society, not only in the colonies but throughout the empire. In 1769, he wrote an essay as "Junius Americanus" that challenged those who might rue the past mistakes but who failed to want to "move on." "Our business is not to enquire (sic) who were the leading men who first corrupted our representatives, which has given birth to every calamity we now feel...Surely it is high time to demand some fresh security, some permanent redress...That the constitution is inflicted with disease and rottenness, reduced and weakened by state leeches and empirics, cannot be denied; but I trust the heart is sound...Seize the opportunity, and fill up every seat in Parliament, which by common occurrences, may fall vacant, with such men as you have just grounds to suppose, firm to the great cause of freedom."⁴⁵

A Petition of Grievances

Exhorting his fellow-Americans to draw up a petition of grievances, Lee writes that they "should instruct their representatives to draw up a petition of rights, and never desist from the solicitation (sic) till it be confirmed in a bill of rights. Then, and then only, will there be truly such a thing as American freedom; then only shall we be safe from those ills which tyranny pours down upon its wretched vassals. From which, may God of his infinite mercy, preserve us."⁴⁶ Not only did Lee encourage his readers to prompt their legislators to petition the King with their grievances, he also gave them some specific instructions. In Monitor IV, he spells out seven steps the legislators should take:

- I. That we the freeholders or electors of the _____ county or _____ borough, are fully sensible, that the privilege, which we have always possessed, of electing our own representatives, to raise taxes, or levy money upon us, as the exigencies of government shall require, and we are able to supply, is essentially necessary to our freedom: So that without this privilege, we must inevitably be slaves.
- II. That we regard every attempt to take this privilege from us, or to injure us for not resigning it, as in the highest manner oppressive and unjust. That we consider such attempts made upon any one colony, equally interesting to every British colony in America. We therefore recommend it to you, in the most earnest manner, by the regard you have for our liberties and rights, with which we have entrusted you, to do your utmost in the next Assembly, toward having petitions drawn up to our most Gracious King against the late acts of the British Parliament, for billeting soldiers in America, for suspending the government of New York, and for

laying certain duties, for the purpose of raising money on glass, paper, paint, etc. imported into America from Great Britain.

- III. We think, and shall always think, that any impositions whatever laid upon us by the British Parliament, which does not and cannot represent us, are absolutely destructive of our liberty.
- IV. We therefore recommend it to you that you endeavour (sic) to have these our sentiments formed into a petition of rights; or in any other manner that shall seem, to your wisdom, most proper to procure their being established into a bill of rights; to the end that we may no more be alarmed with invasions of our liberties, but rest in peace, each man under his own vine, and each man under his own fig-tree.
- V. We again heartily recommend the utmost attention to these our most important concerns; and we promise to support you, in the prosecution of these measures, to the utmost of our abilities.⁴⁷

Clearly, Lee was attempting to appeal to the King for an American Bill of Rights similar to that secured by the English some time earlier and was going "over the head" of the Parliament directly to the monarch to achieve his goal.

Did his arrogance destroy his political career?

One final question about Arthur Lee to be addressed is how did this obvious patriot and prolific writer on behalf of the colonies, lose out to other, more ruminant colonists in the subsequent creation of the new government? In his work on John Adams, James H. Hutson writes that Lee "was a man of passion - his

temper would raise Quarrells in the Elisian Field - and of jealousy."⁴⁸ Hutson goes on to report favorably that Lee's enemies like Silas Deane "believed that his 'head was affected' (and) that his 'jealous disposition' made him the victim of delusions, led him to 'apprehend designs injurious to him' in every one he dealt with."⁴⁹ Burton Hendrick, the definitive authority on the Lees of Virginia, describes Arthur Lee as "elegant" but also one who "not only charmed, he frequently irritated. Rapid in cerebration, lightning-like in retort, not overly tactful, even with elders, mentally and physically restless, probably somewhat neurotic..."⁵⁰

Arthur Lee, outspoken, arrogant, sometimes belligerent in his passion for freedom in the colonies, took on other "heavyweights" on the colonial side of the Atlantic, which may have proven to be, at least in part, his undoing. Hendrick writes of a letter Arthur Lee wrote questioning John Jay as a "suspicious character," that is, Jay's "lukewarmness toward independence."⁵¹ The letter's contents were whispered from delegate to delegate and, according to Hendrick, may have helped cool the relationship between Jay and Arthur's brother, Richard Henry, then a Virginia delegate to the fledgling Congress in its second session, May 1775. Thomas Jefferson took note of the John Jay/Richard Henry Lee acrimony over policy. Jefferson wrote that the two, John Jay and Richard Henry Lee, "...had had some sparring in debate before, and continued ever very hostile to each other."⁵² Apparently, Jefferson already had a low regard for the youngest Lee. "He (Arthur Lee) is courting Miss Sprig," Jefferson wrote to James Madison on February 10, 1784, "a young girl of seventeen and of thirty thousand pounds expectation."⁵³ And Silas Deane, a colleague of Arthur Lee on the commission to France, apparently did not help the Lee reputation much when Deane's friends began to circulate reports that Arthur Lee was betraying allied (American

and French) secrets to the British. Deane himself wrote an "Address to the Free and Virtuous Citizens of America" in 1779 that charged the Lee family with "treason against the United States in both Europe and America."⁵⁴

James Perkins, author of "France in the American Revolution," goes even further. He writes, "Lee did most to involve his associates in constant trouble. He came over to Paris filled with a sense of his own importance, and ready to regard his fellows with jealousy and ill-will. He soon decided that Deane was surely dishonest, Franklin was perhaps dishonest and surely incompetent. Lee...believed that no one else possessed (honesty)."⁵⁵

Paul C. Nagel, in his *The Lees of Virginia*, reports that Arthur Lee reneged on a promise to sit quietly on the sidelines, devoting himself to preparing a history of the Revolution. Lee actually stopped work on that project in 1781 because he felt he was not receiving the documents he needed from the principals involved. Using his family connections, he was selected for the Virginia House of Delegates and, one year later, he became a delegate to the Congress. There, according to Nagel, he "vexed his colleagues, particularly Thomas Jefferson and James Madison (who) suspected, for good reason, that Arthur confused the public interest with avenging himself upon Benjamin Franklin, Robert Morris, and their associates."⁵⁶

Nagel describes Arthur as a "pathetic figure" in the Congress, "perpetually indignant, paranoid, self-centered, and often confused."⁵⁷ Sent into western Pennsylvania to negotiate with the Iroquois Indians in 1784 as a means of getting him out of Congress, Arthur fell ill in Pittsburgh and spent his time in melancholy meditation. Subsequently spurned by Jefferson and Washington in the new government and defeated in a bid for a seat in the House of Representatives, Arthur retired to a 500-acre

estate in Middlesex County, Virginia, where he died on December 12, 1792.

Reviewing the works of Arthur Lee, one gradually but inescapably comes to the conclusion that his writings, under however many pseudonyms, "framed the debate" by articulating the colonists' most radical positions in such a way that they substantially moved the "center" toward the position of the colonists. What Arthur Lee also accomplished, however, was a demonstration that the inability to compromise and adjust to the changing political winds in the colonies could be considered a fatal flaw by his colleagues. That is certainly the sense one gets from historian Louis W. Potts. In describing the three Commissioners who assembled in Paris in 1776, Potts called Arthur Lee a "fanatic" and described the selection of Lee, Franklin and Deane, of Connecticut, as the result of a welter of cultural, ideological and political factors, affecting the American frame of reference in the development of foreign policy and the conduct of diplomacy.⁵⁸

Potts goes so far as to indict the "individuality" of Arthur Lee while in Europe and America as a costly detriment to both his brother Richard Henry and himself. "In the later years of the war", he writes, the Lees were at the periphery rather than the center of power in America."⁵⁹ Arthur Lee, Potts argues, was not a first choice for the Commission, anyway. The original nominee was Thomas Jefferson who, according to Potts, wanted to remain in Virginia during this politically important time. Lee apparently coveted a conspicuous role in the diplomacy on behalf of the American Revolution. Potts argued, however, that Lee, although he should have felt elated at the American victory, "found himself feeling that his side has miscarried"⁶⁰ because his equally victorious colleagues had turned their back on him and his contributions at the colonists' moment of triumph. Potts, perhaps more than most other historians, paints

Arthur Lee as a sympathetic figure, a man who dedicated his life, both at home and in abroad, and his honor to his mission – helping the birth of his nation – only to be rejected by that country upon its birth.

Potts points out, for example, that Arthur's personality was dictated by his personal sense of independence and his distrust of his fellow-man. Quoting John Adams about Arthur and his older brother Richard Henry, Potts writes, "that band of brothers intrepid and unchangeable, who like the Greeks at Thermopylae, stood in the gap, in defense of their country from the first glimmering of the revolution in the horizon through all its rising light, to its perfect day."⁶¹

Again quoting Adams, Potts says Lee had been "a man too early in the service of his country to avoid making a multiplicity of enemies; too honest, upright, faithful and intrepid to be popular; too often obliged by his principles and feelings to oppose Machiavellian intrigues, to avoid the destiny he suffered. This man never had justice done him by his country in his lifetime, and I fear he never will by posterity."

Current day historians should give Arthur Lee his rightful place in the history of the birth of our country.

This article was adapted from a paper written for a class at George Mason University in May 2001. Mr. Rhatican lives in Fairfax County where he teaches Social Studies at West Potomac High School.



Notes:

¹ Alvin Richard Riggs, *Arthur Lee and the Radical Whigs, 1768-1776*, Yale University, 1967.

² Hendrick, *The Lees of Virginia*, p. 170.

³ Burton J. Hendrick, *The Lees of Virginia*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1935, p. 146.

⁴ Paul C. Nagel, *The Lees of Virginia*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1990, p. 92.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Burton J. Hendrick, *The Lees of Virginia*, Boston, Little, Brown, and Company, 1935, p. 138.

⁸ Benjamin Woods Larabee, *The Boston Tea Party*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 177.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *London Evening Post*, February 3, 1774; *Public Advertiser*, February 5, 1774.

¹² Arthur Lee, *An Appeal to the Justice and Interests of the People of Great Britain*, London, 1774.

¹³ Arthur Lee, "An Appeal To the Justice and Interests of the People of Great Britain," London, 1775.

¹⁴ "Monitor I," *Virginia Gazette*, (Rind), May 31, 1770.

¹⁵ "Monitor I," *The Farmer's and Monitor's Letters to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies*, William Rind, Williamsburg, 1769, reprint, Virginia Independence Bicentennial Edition, 1969, p. 62.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Alvin R. Riggs, p. 7.

¹⁹ "Monitor 11," *Virginia Gazette*, (Rind), March 3, 1768.

²⁰ "Monitor IV," *Virginia Gazette*, (Rind), March 17, 1768.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² "Monitor I," *The American Gazette*, London, 1769, p. 189.

²³ "Monitor I," *The Farmer's and Monitor's Letters to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies*, William Rind, Williamsburg, 1769, reprint Virginia Independence Bicentennial Edition, 1969, p. 61.

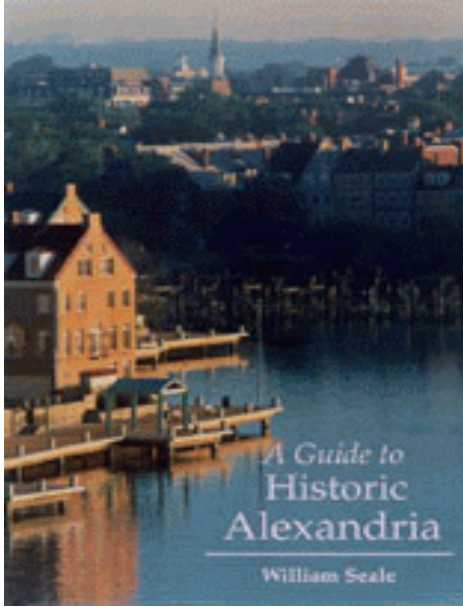
²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

²⁶ "Monitor XI," *Virginia Gazette* (Rind), June 1, 1769.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ "Monitor XII," *Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 29, 1769.
- ³⁰ Alvin R. Riggs, p. 27.
- ³¹ "Junius Americanus," *Gazetteer*, London, October 12, 1769.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ "Junius Americanus," *Gazetteer*, London, November 3, 1769.
- ³⁴ "Junius Americanus," *Gazetteer*, London, January 25, 1770.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Monitor V," *The Farmer's and Monitor's Letters to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies*, William Rind, Williamsburg, 1769, reprint, Virginia Independence Bicentennial Edition, 1969, p.76.
- ³⁷ Alvin R. Riggs, p. 127.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Alvin R. Riggs., p. 132.
- ⁴⁰ "Monitor I," *The Farmer's and Monitor's Letters*, p. 62.
- ⁴¹ "Monitor III," *The Farmer's and Monitor's Letters*, p.68.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Ibid. p. 69.
- ⁴⁴ Arthur Lee letter, Lee Papers, VIII, 216, Houghton Library.
- ⁴⁵ *Gazetteer*, London, November, 15, 1769.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid.
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- ⁴⁹ Ibid., p 39.
- ⁵⁰ Burton J. Hendrick, p. 146.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., p. 203.
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ Ibid., p. 368.
- ⁵⁴ James H. Hutson, p. 42.
- ⁵⁵ James Breck Perkins, *France in the American Revolution*, Corner House Publishers, Williamstown, Mass., 1970, p. 222.
- ⁵⁶ Paul C. Nagel, p.133
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ⁵⁸ Louis W. Potts, "Arthur Lee, Autonomy and Diplomacy in the American Revolution," *The Revolutionary War in the South: Power, Conflict, and Leadership*, ed. W. Robert Higgins, Duke University Press, 1979, p. 160.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 161.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 162.
- ⁶¹ Ibid.



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