

ABSTRACT

A CULTURE OF DISSIDENCE: THE EMERGENCE OF LIBERTY OF THE PRESS IN PRE-REVOLUTIONARY VIRGINIA

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Free press protection in the first state constitutions inspired the similar clause in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. The first free press clause was in Virginia. When independence from Britain was declared, a Declaration of Rights including an article ensuring press freedom prefaced the new state constitution. While most legal and historical works have viewed British philosophers and legal precedents as the inspirations for this right, this dissertation expands our understanding by discovering other less-elite, more popular sources.

This work explores the evolution of the concept of liberty of the press through the newspapers, almanacs, and other printed material from colonial Virginia and the neighboring colony of Maryland. As power struggles transpired among the governors, the legislative assemblies, and the voices in print, a local understanding of the value of civic

discourse developed. A radical Whig distrust of corrupt government combined with concurrent English prosecution of political dissidence presented a stark example in the colonial newspapers of the importance of press freedom. Primary source documents, including colonial newspapers, almanacs, pamphlets, letters, and legal tracts, reveal a popular demand for freedom from both prior governmental restraint and prosecution for seditious libel. The findings of this research contrast starkly with the prevalent legal-historical view.

An interdisciplinary view incorporating mass communication theory helps us to understand a cultural shift partly responsible for this new awareness of the importance of civic discourse in the press. Media ecologists recognize that a new dominant medium—in this case, as printing spread from the colonial elites to the middling sorts—has widespread influence on social institutions and cultural consciousness. A medium such as print does not have independent agency, but is rather one of many influences, helping to erode Virginia's strong traditional deferential culture. From this transformation emerged a new "culture of dissidence," in which political discourse and even disagreement was valued. A free press was recognized as an important driver of public opinion, and a potential balance to a powerful—and potentially corrupt—government.