



# NEWSLETTER

BRUNSWICK COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
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## BRUNSWICK: "THE RICE EMPIRE"

As early as 1521 Spanish explorers investigated the Cape Fear Area; and as years passed, others came to the vicinity. A group of Indian traders with livestock came to the area about 1660, but soon returned to their home in Massachusetts, abandoning their livestock. In 1664 Sir John Yeamans, as governor with colonists from Barbadoes, attempted a settlement. This too soon failed and the group of 800 moved to present Charleston, South Carolina. These failures caused the Proprietors to close the area, then called Clarendon County, to settlement for about fifty years.

The area was reopened after Roger and Maurice Moore passed through on their way to fight the Tuscarora Indians in 1711. Grandsons of Yeamans, Maurice laid out Brunswick and Roger became Lord of Orton Plantation. They, along with others, persuaded the Proprietors to reopen the area; and large plantations soon prospered here; but the lack of a yeoman class greatly handicapped the development of the settlement.

The Brunswick settlers were noted for their patriotism. It was the citizens of this area who took action by resisting British attempts to enforce the Stamp Act.

Brunswick County was formed in 1764 from New Hanover and Bladen Counties. It was named in honor of the House of Brunswick (the House of King George of England). Provision was made to hold court in the town of Smithville, named for Governor Smith. After the county seat was established here, Smithville was renamed Southport.

During the Civil War, Fort Fisher guarded the port of Wilmington, which was the last Southern port to fall to the Union blockade. This completely sealed the South off from outside assistance and eventually forced its surrender.

The end of the war saw the end of the plantation system and the old rice empire. Ocean-front shipping and other occupations relating to the sea declined. Brunswick County became a land of small farmers, struggling for survival in an isolated, thinly populated locale. By the latter part of the 19th Century the county had changed little from its earlier history.

Reference Date Manual, Brunswick County Southeastern Economic Development Commission  
Elizabethtown, N.C. May 1971

BRUNSWICK COUNTY: PERMANENT SETTLEMENT

As late as the winter of 1724-25, according to Governor George Burrington who was there, the Cape Fear region was uninhabited. Sometime between then and the spring of 1726, the settlement had begun. The earliest known resident was Maurice Moore, who was there on April 30, 1726, when the South Carolina Assembly requested his aid in the recovery of stolen property from a band of Tuscarora Indians. The warriors had been in South Carolina and were expected to pass through the Lower Cape Fear on their way home. It is unlikely that Moore was there alone, the number and identity of his neighbors are not known. By the end of June 1726, Moore had laid out Brunswick Town in a new settlement and had sold the first lot. At the time, or soon thereafter, the South Carolinians were arriving. By the following spring the population had increased to the extent that a ferry was operating between the town and the opposite bank of the river. In December, 1728, the settlement was described as a "dispersed multitude of People residing up and down Cape Fear." According to the land grants records, the "multitude" consisted of relatively few persons, but in seeking the scattered tracts of the most desirable land they had become "dispersed".

Like Burrington before him, Governor Richard Everard continued to grant land with an easy conscience. Before he left office in February, 1731 the land records indicate that almost 115,000 acres of Cape Fear land had passed into private hands and this generous bounty had been shared by only thirty-five individuals. Because many of the small group were related by blood or marriage, they became known as the "Family". In addition to Maurice and Roger Moore and their brother, Nathaniel, the recipients readily identified as members of this group were Eleazer Allen, John Porter, Edward Moseley, John Baptista Ashe, Samuel Swann, John Swann, Jehu Davis, John Grange, Edward Hyrne, Thomas Jones, Edward Smith and Moseley Vail. Collectively, these fifteen grantees acquired more than 80,000 acres, with Maurice and Roger Moore receiving almost 25,000 acres each. Among those not connected with the "Family", George Burrington was the major recipient with 10,000 acres. A more general reflection of the size of the holdings is the fact that twenty-three persons received more than 1,000 each, and a combined total of approximately 105,000 acres. Most of the remaining grantees acquired only slightly less than 1,000.

For several reasons the land records, which are confined to patents, are not an exact guide to the residents of the early Cape Fear settlement nor to the extent of land owned. In some cases persons received patents before they took up the land. Other persons occupied their land on the basis of warrants before patents were issued. There were conveyances between individuals that were not

always placed on record. To add to the confusion, the area of land occupied or claimed often exceeded that specified in the original grant. Nevertheless, the records do disclose one indisputable fact. Before and after the settlement began, a few men, most of them joined by blood or marriage, acquired vast areas of Cape Fear land, and they chose the most desirable tracts along the banks of the navigable streams. This concentration of land in the hands of a few established the plantation pattern that characterized the region for many years. Moreover, it increased the difficulty of acquisition by others. This deterrent to a more numerous population became the source of bitter controversy, and it was stirred up by none other than George Burrington.

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On November 1734, Gabriel Johnston became Governor of North Carolina and held that office for eighteen years. He inherited the quarrel with the "Family" from Burrington and stirred it to even greater intensity. Ordered by his superiors to investigate land tenure, Johnston saw in the problem a general cause for alarm, but he was most concerned over "blank patents." Blank patents were conveyance forms signed by the governor and council members but with the balance of the form left incomplete. They were turned over to the secretary of the province. When occasion arose and according to proper procedure, the secretary issued the patents after completing them by inserting the name of the grantee, the date, the number of acres, and the description of the tract conveyed. The practice of signing the form in advance was common under the Proprietors, and in spite of the obvious danger it was followed without undue incident until Richard Everard's administration. At that time, many of the forms were said to have found their way into the hands of private individuals who needed only to fill in the blank spaces to claim whatever vacant land they chose. Johnston was convinced that thousands of acres had already been acquired in this manner and that numerous blank patents were still in circulation and that they could be used later. Most of these patents, he said, were held by members of the "Family".

As a solution to the whole problem of land ownership, Johnston recommended to the Board of Trade that all patents issued since the closing of the land office in 1716 be voided and that new patents be issued by the Crown as justified. This drastic step was not taken because of Governor never proved his accusations. Various members of the "Family" disavowed any knowledge of blank patents and denied illegal possession of any land. Surprisingly, George Burrington, then a private citizen and residing in England, came to their defense. As Governor, Burrington had investigated rumors of blank patents but had uncovered no evidence of their existence. As former Governor, he sounded little like his old self when he wrote to the Board of Trade:

Several Gentlemen and Industrious Planters from from South Carolina, and Other his Majesty's Dominions on the Continent of America and from

the islands, are settled on Cape Fear River all or the Greatest part of the Land they possess is purchased

After being at great Charges, and Expenses and the fatigues they have gone through, in removing themselves and familys; buying Lands building houses, and making Plantations, it will Appear very severe and unjust if they should be stript of what has cost them so dear and drove out of possessions they Expected to enjoy quietly during their lives and bequeath to the posterity when they left this world.

The fued with the "Family" begun by Burrington and carried on by Johnston did little to resolve the question of land. Like Burrington before him, and those who followed him, Gabriel Johnston failed to obtain an acceptable law requiring all persons to register their holdings. As a consequence, the possession of land remained a subject of dispute as long as the Lower Cape Fear remained under the Crown of England.

#### BRUNSWICK TOWN: EARLY OCCUPATIONS

The people of Brunswick Town, like those in Wilmington, followed numerous and widely diverse pursuits. If they differed in any noticeable extent, it was because of the relatively greater proportins of merchants and men who followed the sea among the residents of Brunswick, Too, because the population was smaller, the distinguished inhabitants of Brunswick stood out more prominently. Among them was Edward Moseley. Others equally distinguished were intimately associated with the town, but they did not live within its bounds. In fact, the two most prominent residents, the royal governors Arthur Dobbs and William Tryon, lived just beyond the limits of the town.

The resident of the royal governors in Brunswick did not mean as much as might have been expected. The Council sessions were held there from time to time, especially under Tryon, bu the General Assembly never met there. Nevertheless, the village was the seat of the executive branch of the government, and, as such, it was the nearestthing to a capital that North Carolina had during these years. Afterwards, it still remained the important port it had been before the coming of the governors.

-The Cape Fear in Colonial Days  
Lawrence Lee

University of North Carolina Press 1965

The State's Ranking Commander

North Carolina had just one major general in the Revolutionary War. He was Robert Howe of Brunswick County. Howe was one of the few generals who served throughout the war. He commanded the first military force sent from North Carolina to help a neighboring state. He was commander at West Point when Benedict Arnold began his treason there. Throughout the war he was the center of much controversy and he was the target of much intrigue, but he retained the confidence of General Washington, with whom he often had correspondence both during and after the war. Due to affairs of gallantry, to which he was supposed to be prone, he was often in trouble.

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Little is known about the youth and upbringing of Robert Howe, but his courtly manners and command of written English is proof that he profited by a two years' stay in England beginning when he was about sixteen years old. At an early age - too early his friends thought - he married Sarah Grange, daughter of a Cape Fear plantation owner, but the marriage was not a happy one, and in 1772 a legal separation was agreed to, in which he made provision for his wife and children. One son was named Robert Howe' jr, who became his chief heir.

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In 1771, Howe was appointed on a commission to study a dispute over a law securing debts owed to British merchants by North Carolina subjects. Other members were Richard Caswell of Dobbs County and Alexander Martin of Guilford. All three were in a few years officers in the Revolutionary; the latter two became governors of North Carolina.

A year later, the New Hanover colonists as well as others in the State were much excited by the British government's trade restrictions aimed at Massachusetts Bay. At a meeting in Wilmington, July 21, 1774, of which William Hooper was chairman, Howe was appointed on a committee to prepare a circular letter recounting the "oppression of our Sister Colony". Fellow members were James Moore, John Ancrum, Fred Jones, Samuel Ashe, Robert Hogg, Francis Clayton and Archibald Maclaine. In the same year, Howe was elected to the first Provincial Convention at New Bern August 25, 1774, and in December he was placed on the original North Carolina Committee of Correspondence. Other members were Harvey, Harnett, Hooper, Caswell, Vail, and Ashe. A year later, its name was changed to Committee of Safety and Howe's was the first signature on a letter to Samuel Johnson dated May 31, 1775 - soon after the Battle of Lexington - urging the "expediency of calling a Provincial Congress."

In August, 1775, Howe and James Moore attended the Provincial Congress at Hillsboro where Howe was appointed on a committee to "prepare a test" to be signed by all members; three days later he and Moore signed the oath to "maintain and support" the orders of the Continental and Provincial Congresses. This test was afterward used - sometimes with harshness - to separate the patriots from the loyalists.

In the same month Howe and Moore were named to a committee, along with Maurice Moore, William Hooper, Richard Caswell, and Joseph Hewes, to prepare an address to all inhabitants of the province "stating the present Controversy in an easy familiar style and manner." But much more momentous was the next task in which Howe was asked to take part. The flight of Governor Martin from the palace so recently built at New Bern by Governor Tryon had left North Carolina without a government, and it became highly necessary to improve one. Accordingly, Howe was named on a committee to prepare a plan "for the regulation of internal peace, order and safety of the Province." These appointments indicate the standing and influence that Robert Howe had at these critical moments when North Carolina was being suddenly transformed from a royal province into an independent state.

- NORTH CAROLINA IN THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR

by Phillips Russell

Heritage Printers, Inc. 1965

JOINT MEETING, TUESDAY, MAY 8, AT 7:00 PM

The Brunswick County Historical Society and the Southport Historical Society will have a joint meeting on Tuesday, May 8, at Brunswick Town at 7:00 pm. There will be display of the Regulation of the Lords Proprietors, and a translation into modern English of the Regulations by the Director of the North Carolina Museum of History at Raleigh. Refreshments will be served at 7:00 and the lecture will begin at 7:30. Bring friends and prospects.