Culpeper's Rebellion [1]

The Lords Proprietors, despite their careful plans and long documents, didn't do enough to put a functioning government into place in Carolina -- especially in what is now North Carolina. In Albemarle, settlers were scattered. Swamps and rivers made travel by land difficult, and the inlets and sounds were too shallow to allow big ships. The people who already lived there in the 1660s had no desire to be governed by the Lords Proprietors. Partly as a result of these conditions and partly from a lack of interest, the Proprietors appointed governors who were weak and ineffective. Some of them took advantage of the general chaos to make themselves wealthy. None of them ensured order or protected colonists from Indians and pirates.

In that environment, some kind of conflict between the colonists and their government was almost inevitable. The conflict that broke out would be known as Culpeper's Rebellion, and like a lot of rebellions, it started with a dispute over taxes.

Trade and taxes

The British government wanted its Ameican colonies to generate some income -- that was, after all, the main point of establishing those colonies. The economic theory of the time, called *mercantilism*, was that a country should export as much as possible and import as little as possible, and therefore store up as much money (gold and silver) as possible. Under that principle, the colonies should export only raw materials to Britain, while Britain should turn those raw materials into more expensive finished goods which it, in turn, could export to other countries or back to its colonies. For example, the American colonies were expected to export wood but not furniture, naval stores [2] but not ships, and crops such as tobacco and rice but not the tools needed to produce them. Producing the manufactured goods was Britain's job. And at every step of this trade, taxes should be collected.

To put these ideas into practice, Parliament passed a series of laws called Navigation Acts that controlled trade within the British empire. Under the Navigation Acts, colonial goods could be carried only on English and colonial ships, and all European goods bound for British colonies had to go through England first. Of course, whenever colonial goods passed through English ports, they were taxed. In addition, certain colonial goods such as tobacco, rice, and sugar could be shipped only to England -- not even to other British colonies unless they paid a tax first.

To encourage settlement, the Charter of Carolina had exempted Carolinians from paying export*duties*, or taxes, on goods such as tobacco -- but only for seven years, and in 1670, that exemption expired, and the Navigation Acts went into full force. The residents of Albemarle were unhappy with the Navigation Acts. They relied on tobacco for their income, and since Albemarle didn't have a good port, they sold much of their tobacco to traders from New England, whose small ships could get through narrow inlets. They considered the tax an unfair hardship. Worse, the taxes came on top of several years of bad harvests caused by major hurricanes, drought, and wild rains. And settlers also grumbled about the quitrents [3] they had to pay on their land, which were higher than in neighboring colonies.

In 1672, the Assembly of Albemarle sent the governor, Peter Carteret, to England to ask the Lords Proprietors not to collect the taxes required by the Navigation Acts. But the Proprietors refused -- in part because they feared that if they didn't enforce the laws, their charter might be revoked.

Rebellion

A new governor, John Jenkins, appointed Valentine Bird as the collector for the colony's customs duties, or export taxes. But Jenkins never really intended to enforce the laws. Two men who supported the Proprietors, Thomas Eastchurch and Thomas Miller, complained. Miller was thrown in jail for treason, but he escaped and went to England with Eastchurch to tell the Proprietors what was happening in Albemarle. The Proprietors then appointed Eastchurch as governor and Miller as customs collector.

Thomas Miller took the job of customs collector seriously. He not only collected the taxes but seized illegally imported goods and imposed fines. But when Eastchurch was delayed in England, Miller also had himself appointed interim governor, and he used that power to interfere with elections and to imprison his opponents, including George Durant, a prominent settler who had lived in Albemarle since before 1663. For protection -- or just to enhance his image -- Miller traveled with a guard of armed men.

In 1677, a group of about forty men opposed to the Proprietors decided to force Miller out of office. They were led by Durant, Valentine Bird, and John Culpeper, who had been thrown out of Charles Town and who, according to one historian, "had the reputation of a troublemaker who enjoyed a good fight."1 They armed themselves, arrested Miller and other officials, and took over the government.

The rebels then held new elections for an assembly that met at Durant's house. Acting as the colony's government, they tried Miller, convicted him and imprisoned him, and they warned Eastchurch, who had recently arrived in Virginia, to stay away.

But Miller again escaped from jail and went to England to report to the Proprietors. Culpeper followed him to make his

own case. The English government held an investigation, and Culpeper was tried for rebellion. The Lords Proprietors, though, wanted to keep the matter quiet. Lord Shaftesbury, one of the Proprietors, defended him, arguing that the colony had no settled government and that the colonists had every right to "riot" against the abuses of Miller and Eastchurch. Culpeper was acquitted and returned home to Albemarle a hero.

Aftermath

After Culpeper's Rebellion, the Proprietors made a more serious effort to get control of the colony. They appointed a new governor, Seth Sothel, who was himself a Proprietor -- he had bought Edward Hyde's share of the colony. But on his way to America, Sothel was captured by Turkish pirates! In his absence, George Durant governed the colony, even though he didn't have the title of governor. Durant restored order, pardoned the rebels, and collected the customs duties.

When Sothel finally arrived in North Carolina in 1683, he turned out to be so corrupt that the Assembly removed him from office and banished him from the colony. After further chaos and rebellion, Philip Ludwell became governor of all of Carolina in 1691. The Proprietors ordered him to simplify the government, ignoring the Fundamental Constitutions in favor of the original charter. Ludwell appointed long-time residents of the Albemarle to govern that region as his deputies. Finally, with peace and stability, the colony of North Carolina could begin to grow.

What's it all mean?

It's tempting to see Culpeper's Rebellion as foreshadowing the American Revolution. Burdened by high taxes, colonists threw out corrupt and tyrannical English officials and governed themselves. Of course, no one was trying to throw off British rule. While there seem to have been a few people who wanted no government at all, in the end, most people seem to have been satisfied with a governor who would simply do his job honestly. To say that Culpeper's Rebellion was a step towards independence would be exaggerating.

But the colonists had forced the Proprietors to listen to their needs and desires, and that set an important precedent [4]. Over time, the lower house of the assembly, which was elected by all landowners, would gain more and more power at the expense of the governor and Proprietors, including the powers to levy taxes, regulate businesses, and incorporate towns (that is, to grant towns their own municipal [5] governments). It was far from a revolution, but Culpeper's Rebellion played a role in establishing self-government and the beginnings of democracy in North Carolina.

- 1. Powell, William S., North Carolina through Four Centuries [6] (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 64.

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