

Borough Towns ^[1]

Borough Towns

by David A. Norris, 2006

Borough towns were towns that were entitled to send a member to the legislature of North Carolina. These towns sent representatives to the colonial Assembly, the five [Provincial Congresses](#) ^[2], the postrevolutionary [General Assembly](#) ^[3], and the [Constitutional Conventions](#) ^[4] of 1788 and 1789. In 1715 the North Carolina Assembly passed a law that gave each town with more than 60 families the right to send a representative. The law's intent was to perpetuate the forms of British government-Parliament had, for centuries, had borough members, in special consideration of cities' dense population and commercial interests-and to encourage the growth of towns and commerce. At that time, North Carolina had only two towns, neither of which had 60 families. New Bern had been nearly wiped out during the [Tuscarora War](#) ^[5] in 1711, and [Bath](#) ^[6] had not grown much since incorporation in 1706.

[Edenton](#) ^[7] officially became the first borough town when it sent two representatives to the Assembly of 1725. The Assembly of 1731 had members from three borough towns, Edenton, Bath, and New Bern. [Wilmington](#) ^[8] joined that group in 1740.

The legality of borough representation in North Carolina was doubtful for much of the eighteenth century, as the towns were granted this right only by the Assembly. English borough towns were granted that right by a charter from the [Crown](#) ^[9], and British authorities at times regarded borough charters granted only by a colonial assembly as invalid. In practice, the British usually allowed North Carolina's borough charters but made it clear that towns held that right through the Crown. Instructions for Governor [Arthur Dobbs](#) ^[10] dated 17 June 1754 allowed Bath, Edenton, New Bern, and Wilmington representation in the Assembly but forbade the addition of other borough towns. However, [Brunswick](#) ^[11] began sending a representative later that year. Rather than spark a fight with the Assembly, Dobbs granted permission for Brunswick to be a borough.

In 1760 the town of [Halifax](#) ^[12] on its own accord elected a member to the Assembly. The [Board of Trade](#) ^[13] disallowed the election, whereupon the member applied to Dobbs for a charter, which the governor granted. The Board of Trade eventually came to accept the law of 1715, which it cited in other cases involving borough representation. Marking growth and settlement in the western part of the colony, Campbellton began sending representatives to the Assembly in 1768, Salisbury in 1769, and Hillsborough in 1771. Tarboro sent a representative in 1773, but the town election was disallowed by the Assembly on the grounds of insufficient population. Nixonton (in 1766) and Beaufort (in 1773) made unsuccessful attempts to elect their own representatives to the colonial Assembly.

After North Carolina and other colonies achieved independence, the concept of borough representation continued in the Provincial Congresses and the General Assembly, although Bath, Brunswick, and Campbellton lost their seats. Towns held seats in the new State House of Commons but not in the Senate. Campbellton, as part of Fayetteville, regained its seat in 1789. Towns had different economic interests from rural areas, being more dependent on trade than agriculture, as was sometimes reflected in the voting patterns of borough representatives. Boroughs tended to elect [Federalists](#) ^[14] and supporters of [internal improvements](#) ^[15].

Borough town representatives formed only a small percentage of the membership of the state's legislature from 1722 to 1835. However, they provided urban and commercial interests a voice in a legislature dominated by rural and agricultural interests. Without borough town votes, the bill proposing the [Constitutional Convention of 1835](#) ^[16] would not have passed in the House. Ironically, then, the most lasting effect of borough representation on North Carolina history was in permitting the convention that drafted a constitution abolishing borough towns.

References:

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