

Instructions to Royal Governors ^[1]

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Instructions to Royal Governors

by David A. Norris, 2006

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Every governor of Great Britain's royal [colonies](#) ^[3] received an official commission and a set of instructions from the [Board of Trade](#) ^[4] that were to guide his actions while in office. The instructions detailed the powers of the [governor](#) ^[2], executive council, and Assembly and touched on nearly all administrative and executive matters. Written in England by officials who were unaware of the colonies' political realities, the instructions often placed the governors in an awkward position. Governors were required to abide by the instructions, which were intended to assert stronger British control of the colonies and make them more profitable for the homeland. This brought the governors time and again into conflict with the Assembly and colonists of the unruly province of North Carolina until the [final break](#) ^[5] with Britain in 1775. British authorities regarded the instructions as having the force of royal commands, whereas the colonists viewed them as no more than guidelines or suggestions and bristled at the thought that they were mandatory.

Governors' commissions were public documents, but the royal instructions were secret documents intended for the governor alone, although occasionally he might make parts of their contents known to the council or Assembly. This secrecy was another source of colonial resentment. Usually, a royal governor's instructions were drawn up by the [Board of Trade](#) ^[4], sent to the secretary of state and the Privy Council for approval, and finally endorsed by the king. The instructions were cumulative; that is, instructions sent to one governor were binding on his successors unless changed.

The pressure to obey instructions from the Board of Trade made it difficult for a governor to rule in North Carolina. The colonial Assembly, which dated back to the Proprietary [charters of 1663 and 1665](#) ^[6], was used to operating without much restraint from British authority, but after 1729 the Crown held that the Assembly's authority existed only by royal decree and tried to limit its powers. The colonists believed that the powers of the Crown were still restricted by the Carolina charter, and that rights and privileges granted the colony by the charter were still valid. The Assembly, which retained much control of the colony's finances, reacted to British pressure by refusing to pay the salaries of royal officials and quarreling over the governors' appropriations. Governors often had to disobey parts of their instructions in order to reach compromises with the Assembly to attain at least some of their goals. These compromises sometimes resulted in laws that were rejected by the Crown when news of them reached England.

[Josiah Martin](#) ^[7], North Carolina's last royal governor, strictly adhered to his instructions, insisted that they required obedience from the Assembly as well as himself, and made little effort to understand the colonists' views. In 1773 the Assembly added to a vital courts bill an [attachment clause](#) ^[8] that permitted the seizure of property of non-North Carolinians who owed a debt in the province. Martin, citing his instructions, refused to allow the bill. The Assembly refused to pass a courts bill without it, and therefore after 1773 there were no courts in the colony except those of the county magistrates. Martin tried to use his authority to create new criminal courts, but the Assembly refused to pay for them. In response to Martin's blind regard to his instructions, the Assembly also established a Committee of Correspondence to keep in touch with the increasingly rebellious representatives of the other colonies.

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