

Bright, Simon, Jr. ^[1]

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by Charles R. Holloman, 1979

ca. 1734–December 1776

Simon Bright, Jr., Continental Army officer, colonial planter, legislator, county official, and member of revolutionary provincial congresses ^[2] of North Carolina, was born about 1734 in Craven Precinct at his father's ^[3] plantation, The Briery. Known throughout his life as Simon Bright, Jr., he was the son of Colonel Simon Bright ^[3] and his wife, Mary Reel.

The grantee index of deeds (1746–1880) of old Johnston ^[4], old Dobbs, and early Lenoir counties ^[5] indicates that in or about 1758 deeds from Simon Bright the elder were registered by his sons Simon and James. On 3 Mar. 1759 a Johnston County ^[4] land grant for two hundred acres was issued to Captain Simon Bright, son of Colonel Simon Bright. The latter document is the conclusive proof of Captain Bright's parentage, and land grants have been used to estimate his year of birth.

On 21 Apr. 1759, Bright was named on the first list of justices commissioned for the new county of Dobbs. He was one of the original purchasers of lots in Kinston when the town was founded in 1762, and he was appointed to the town's original board of directors and trustees. In 1761 he left the office of justice to serve briefly as high sheriff of Dobbs; returning to the bench in February 1763, he continued as a justice until 1768. In 1769 he again became high sheriff of Dobbs, holding the office until 1773. In the latter year, he resumed the office of justice and was also elected to the North Carolina General Assembly ^[6]. He and Richard Caswell ^[7] represented Dobbs County in the assembly in 1773, 1774, and 1775, serving concurrently also as justices.

In the War of the Regulation in 1771, Bright commanded a company of Dobbs militia under regimental commander Colonel Richard Caswell in the expedition mounted by the royal governor, William Tryon ^[8], against the Regulators ^[9]. Bright's company saw action at the Battle of Alamance ^[10].

Bright was one of the six Dobbs County residents elected to the first provincial congress ^[2] of North Carolina that met in New Bern in August 1774. Bright was elected to represent Dobbs in each of five successive provincial congresses, serving in all but the second provincial congress, held 13 Apr. 1775 at Hillsborough. Organized opposition to the provincial congress appeared in Dobbs County in the form of a petition to the royal governor, ^[11] circulated in February 1775. The pro-congress leadership was needed at home, and consequently, only delegate Richard Caswell attended the second congress, although Bright and others had been elected.

On 1 Sept. 1775, Bright accepted command of a company in the Second Battalion (later designated Regiment) of the North Carolina Continental Line. During the following six months, he was in the field working to develop the military preparedness of the state. While thus engaged, he suffered in November 1775 an illness so severe that he despaired of recovery and wrote his will. Soon afterward, however, he recovered sufficiently to resume his military duties. In the late winter he suffered a relapse and temporarily retired to his home to recuperate. While on this leave, he was elected a delegate to the fourth provincial congress, to be held at Halifax ^[12] on 4 Apr. 1776. This congress adopted the famous Halifax Resolves ^[13] concerning independence. Despite the delicate condition of his health, he attended the congress, but returned home in such a weakened condition that he became despondent and resigned his Continental command, doubting that he would regain the health to serve it. During the following summer, his health improved, only to relapse again in late autumn after he had been elected to represent his county in the fifth provincial congress, to convene at Halifax on 12 Nov. 1776. Again he left his sick bed to serve his county and state.

The fifth provincial congress wrote the original constitution of North Carolina and elected civil and military officers to serve the state and its counties until a general election could be held pursuant to the new constitution. Richard Caswell presided over the convention and was elected governor ^[14] of the state for the interim period. As the delegation rode back toward Dobbs County, Bright became very ill and died soon afterwards. According to family legend, he was buried near his father's grave in the old Caswell cemetery at Newington-on-the-Hill, the site now known as Vernon Hall in Kinston.

Bright was married in about 1756 to Mary Graves, daughter of Thomas Graves of the Contentnea Neck of Craven County ^[15]. He was survived by his wife and seven children: Simon, Graves, James, Mary, Nancy, Sarah, and Elizabeth. All of Bright's sons attained prominence in the political, social and economic life of Lenoir County ^[5]. Two of them, Simon and James, served in the state legislature.

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Additional Resources:

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Subjects:

Biographies ^[17]

Planters ^[18]

Public officials ^[19]

Authors:

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Origin - location:

Craven County ^[21]

Johnston County ^[22]

Lenoir County ^[23]

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1 January 1979 | Holloman, Charles R.

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