

Campbell, John ^[1]

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by Thomas C. Parramore, 1979

ca. 1700–1781

John Campbell, legislator, political leader, and merchant, is believed to have been a native of northern Ireland, possibly from the town of Coleraine. He purchased land in Hertford ^[2] (then Bertie) County in 1737 and by or before 1743 was settled as a merchant at Edenton ^[3]. He seems to have been associated in these early years with Benjamin Hill of Bertie, whose daughter Mary he married before 1740. By 1747 he had moved to Lazy Hill Plantation on the Chowan River in Bertie, where he remained for the rest of his life.

Campbell became politically active in 1744 with his election to the House of Burgesses from Chowan County ^[4]. Following in the political footsteps of his father-in-law, he succeeded Benjamin Hill as one of the leaders of the northern faction who opposed Governor Gabriel Johnston ^[5]'s efforts to equalize the representation of southern and northern counties in the colonial legislature. He served as a commissioner for the Port of Roanoke in 1752 and in 1754 was elected to another term in the legislature. At this session, the factional issue came to a head in a struggle over the speakership between supporters of Campbell and Samuel Swann ^[6]. Each received twenty-two votes in the balloting, but Swann at length yielded and Campbell became speaker, a position he held for two years before resigning because of ill health. He was only intermittently active in public affairs for some years after this, holding among other minor positions, those of assistant judge in 1756 and mail contractor in 1757.

After almost a decade of ill health and attention mainly to his private interests, Campbell served again in the legislature from 1767 to 1769 as a representative from Bertie; he served yet again in 1773 and closed his public career after his election to the provincial congress ^[7] at Halifax in 1776.

The basis of Campbell's political influence was the considerable estate he accumulated in North Carolina and his success in mercantile pursuits. Governor Arthur Dobbs ^[8] in 1760 referred to him as "the most eminent Trader in this Province"; and his landed properties included thousands of acres in Bertie ^[9], Chowan ^[4], Hertford, and other eastern counties, besides 12,500 acres in Anson County ^[10]. A French visitor at Lazy Hill in 1765 described him as "a man generally Esteemed, and of the greatest property of any man in this part of the province. . . ." A portion of his success may have been linked to his relations with Joseph Montfort ^[11] and Alexander McCulloch ^[12], two other men of considerable wealth and influence who were also sons-in-law of Benjamin Hill.

In spite of an integrity that seems to have been universally acknowledged, Campbell's private life was for many of his later years a source of scandal and turbulence. Having discovered evidence in 1759 that his wife was involved in an affair with the family physician, Dr. Robert Lenox, Campbell brought suit against the doctor for having seduced Mrs. Campbell. The plaintiff won a heavy assessment of damages against Lenox, procured an annulment or divorce from Mary Hill Campbell, and, before the case against Lenox was well begun, married Mrs. Priscilla Curle, a widow of Hampton, Va. In 1763, two years after Campbell's marriage to Mrs. Curle, Lenox brought suit against him for slander and was awarded half the damages assessed against him in the seduction suit. Campbell's second marriage had in the meantime turned sour, and he procured a divorce from Mrs. Curle, a daughter of Virginia merchant Andrew Meade. Before he wrote his will in 1777, Campbell had procured a third wife, who had the good fortune to be a principal beneficiary of his will.

Campbell left two sons, James and John, and a daughter, Sarah, who married Richard Brownrigg of Chowan. All were children of his first wife. Family tradition recalls the patriarch as a man of decided convictions, who, as a loyal Church of England ^[13] man, "would not suffer a Baptist ^[14] to come within his gates." His irascibility caused him to be known even among his intimates as "the bear." Near the end of his life he mourned to Joseph Hewes ^[15] that far too many were attempting to profit from the war with England, that avarice "is now the ruling passion. High and low, rich and poor, have cast off humanity and conscience in dealing. . . . The people, ignorant of their danger, continue gaming, trading, forestalling, extortion, etc., etc. They will neither pump nor bail. . . ." He trusted, nevertheless, that Hewes and his colleagues would conduct the ship of state "well into Liberty Harbour, there to moor her safely and to remain forever."

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Additional Resources:

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