Corbin, Francis [1]

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by George Stevenson, 1979; Revised by Andrea Smythe, November 2023

d. 1767

Cupola House. Courtesy of Cupola House Association. [2]

Francis Corbin was a council member, judge of the court of admiralty, associate justice of the general court, legislator, colonel of the militia, county justice, and agent and attorney to John Carteret, Earl Granville [3]. He was born in Great Britain, but it is not known who his parents were. Corbin was responsible for Granville's North Carolina proprietary affairs from November 14, 1744 until April 25, 1759.

On September 17, 1744 a charter granted most of the northern half of the colony of North Carolina to Earl Granville. Two months later, Granville sent Corbin to America with several documents including instructions for Edward Moseley [4], the Earl's agent in revenues from quitrents [5] since September 1740. Granville's instructions to Moseley indicated that Corbin was to be given responsibilities in the conduct of proprietary affairs. However, Moseley preferred to share his duties with Robert Halton [6] and ignored Granville's instructions. Corbin did not have a commission nor a power of attorney from Granville. This made it difficult to complete his proprietary duties. Consequently, Corbin found himself without immediate employment in North Carolina.

On September 5, 1746, Granville named commissioners to act for him in surveying the extension of the southern boundary of the proprietary. Corbin was included on the list along with Moseley, Robert Halton, Roger Moore [7], Matthew Rowan [8], James Hasell [9], James More, and John Swann [10]. This association with political opponents of Governor Gabriel Johnston [11] may account in part for Corbin's subsequent opposition to the governor. Shortly after the extension of the southern boundary was surveyed, Corbin returned to London. In 1748, he joined anti-Johnstonian [12] forces seeking the governor's removal. The strongest part of Johnston's London-based opposition was made up of Henry McCulloh [13], the land speculator, and his associates Arthur Dobbs [14], Jeremiah Joye, and Samuel Smith [15]. Acting upon information received from Moseley, Corbin and Thomas Child [16], added their testimony to charges against Johnston of maladministration and disloyalty to the Crown. The board of trade did not recommend Johnston's dismissal from office.

In October 1749, Granville commissioned Child and Corbin his proprietary agents and gave them powers of attorney for North Carolina; both men returned to the colony, set the proprietary affairs upon a business footing, and opened the land office in Edenton [17] in October 1750. Shortly thereafter, Child returned to London. Though Corbin was joined in the performance of his commission successively by James Innes [18] (1751–54), Benjamin Wheatley (1754–56), and Joshua Bodley [19] (1756–59), he remained the principal proprietary agent resident in the colony during the following decade.

By virtue of his commission as proprietary agent, Corbin was given appointments in the colony's royal government. He was simultaneously a member of the governor's council, judge of the court of vice admiralty, an associate justice in the

colony's general court system, colonel of the Chowan County militia, and a justice in Chowan's court of pleas and quarter sessions [20]. Though he fell into disfavor with Governor Arthur Dobbs and was removed from his various offices, Corbin appears to have performed his governmental duties well. His proprietary duties, however, were allowed to suffer neglect.

Corbin's conduct as agent to Earl Granville was critiqued, and as principal resident agent he was held accountable for the abuses practiced on the earl's tenants. Corbin's lieutenants charged excessive fees and made illegal and arbitrary decisions regarding disputed land claims; business was so ill-attended that the procedure of granting the land to tenants, which should have taken from six to twelve months, was dragged out for six to twelve years. The tenants' ill will toward the proprietary underofficers was eventually extended to Corbin.

Some of Corbin's actions upset some powerful people within the colony. He reported to Earl Granville that Governor Dobbs had illegally granted proprietary lands. Corbin disregarded a treaty between the earl and land speculator Henry McCulloh [13]. when he issued patents for land situated on a tract of nearly three hundred thousand acres within the proprietary reserved to McCulloh.

As a result of the management practices Corbin had allowed under his authority, Colonel Alexander McCulloch [21], nephew of Henry McCulloh, and an extralegal posse from Halifax [22], Edgecombe [23], and Granville counties [24], seized Corbin in Edenton and forcibly carried him off to Enfield in January 1759. He and his coagent, Joshua Bodley [19], were held under armed guard and forced to agree to open all land records for public inspection. Corbin was also required to give bond to appear at the spring term of superior court and sign an agreement promising to refund money taken illegally by his agents. This was later know as The Enfield Riot [25], and resulted in Corbin being stripped of all Crown offices in the colony except his seat on the governor's council. When Earl Granville revoked his power of attorney to Corbin on April 25, 1759, Dobbs removed him from the council as well.

Corbin ran for election and served as a member of the General Assembly [26] from Chowan County. From April 1760 through May 1765, Corbin represented Chowan County in the General Assembly. As a member of the assembly he joined with principal proprietary agent Thomas Child [16], Robert Jones [27], proprietary collector of quitrents [5], and former proprietary collector Thomas Barker [28] in opposing the administration of Governor Dobbs. On March 19, 1763 Dobbs commissioned Corbin as an associate justice on the bench of the Edenton District Superior Court. After the death of Dobbs, Governor William Tryon [29] proposed in 1766 to readmit Corbin to the governor's council. Corbin died before his readmittance occurred.

In 1761, Corbin married Jean Innes, widow of Colonel James Innes. From about 1764, the couple appear to have lived mostly at the Innes plantation in New Hanover County [30]. Corbin died sometime between January 16 and April 7, 1767. He was survived by his widow and Edmund Corbin, who may have been his brother. After the death of Jean Corbin, further administration of Corbin's estate was granted to Edmund Corbin in 1775 and then to Thomas Craike in 1783.

Corbin's Edenton town house, the Cupola House [31], still stands and has been designated as a National Historic Landmark. The town of Hillsborough was previously named Corbinton in honor of Francis Corbin. Corbin is still memorialized in the name of Corbin Street located in the town of Salisbury.

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