

Franck, John Martin ^[1]

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by Charles R. Holloman, 1986

ca. 1680–May 1745

John Martin Franck, a leader among the Palatine and Swiss colonists ^[2] who founded New Bern in 1710, member of the colonial Assembly, county official, merchant, planter, and educator, is said in family tradition to have been born in the vicinity of Heidelberg in what was then the Upper Palatinate of the Rhine, the son of a prominent schoolmaster. The tradition says that on the journey to North Carolina he was married aboard ship to Civilla (variously spelled), a daughter of Jacob Mueller, another of the Palatine colonists in the first of the two von Graffenried ^[3] expeditions sent from England to settle the Neuse River ^[4] country in North Carolina. The earliest extant written family history note is by General David Blackshear, Franck's grandson, who was born at New Germany on the Trent River on 31 Jan. 1764. General Blackshear's note reports the year of arrival as 1735 but mentions no family traditions relating to nativity, parentage, marriage, kindred, and so forth of his immigrant ancestor. Intensive research has not disclosed his parentage or the place of his birth. No writings of his have been found other than a few formal legal documents bearing only the slightest hints of possible past associations. His first home plantation, established on a large grant on the Trent River about seven miles upstream from the present town of Trenton, he named New Germany. This thread of fact has helped inspire much legend and romance.

Research identifies Franck first as a young European who came from Canada to Virginia to serve as an assistant and interpreter for Francis Louis Michels ^[5], who was employed by the Canton of Berne and encouraged by other Swiss and English groups and individuals "to find out a Tract of land in the English America, where that Republick might settle some of their People." Michels conducted investigations in Virginia and neighboring areas of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and coastal Carolina from 1701 to 10 Jan. 1709. Franck seems to have been the "very ingenious French Gentleman" with whom John Lawson ^[6], the historian, says he frequently conversed in company with "my ingenious Friend, Mr. Francis Louis Mitchell, of Berne, Switzerland." It seems that Michels was the person whom Lawson notes he met accidentally in London in 1700 and whose exciting conversation turned Lawson's thoughts from going to Rome to going to Carolina, a place described by this much traveled chance acquaintance as "the best Country I could go to." In any event, Michels was at his work in Virginia by 1701. He and Lawson met for long visits at intervals during the years that followed until they sailed for England together in mid-January 1710, having agreed and arranged with supportive friends to seek the diversion of the next expeditions of Palatine and Swiss colonists from the previously proposed Potomac River destination to the Neuse River ^[4]. Franck probably accompanied them to England on this mission. He is believed to have been one of the persons appointed as overseers on board ship during the trip from Gravesend near London to the James River in Virginia, and from Williamsburg to the confluence of the Neuse and Trent where the refugees from Palatine camps around London arrived in late May 1710. Nearly half of the approximately six hundred who sailed are reported to have died on the journey.

The journals of Baron Christoph von Graffenried ^[3] and of John Lawson rarely mention names of subordinates or persons other than individuals regarded as ranking above the yeoman class. Franck is not named in any of von Graffenried's three versions of his journal or in Lawson's writings. The records of Archdale (later Craven) Precinct for the period prior to October 1711 were lost when the Tuscaroras ^[7] burned the precinct court building and much of the town of New Bern in the first onslaught of the Tuscarora Indian War ^[8] (22 Sept. 1711–24 Mar. 1713). The name of Martin Franck does appear on a series of Craven Precinct lists running from 1712 to 1719. Each year is represented by one or more of the following: a poll tax list, a land tax list, or a list of titheables. Franck also appears on a list of Tuscarora Indian War claims paid residents of Craven Precinct (including deceased persons). The extant list reports payments only in 1714 and makes reference to two earlier lists not now in the records. In 1713, Franck sold his lot in the town of New Bern, evidently in preparation for moving to his new plantation home on Mill Creek in the New Germany tract.

Numerous petty lawsuits brought against him or by him in the courts of several precincts in North Carolina, and in a number of county and precinct courts in Virginia, disclose the nature and extent of his activities in trying to get food and other necessities for the colonists of the Neuse and Trent rivers during the starving time after the Tuscarora massacre of late September 1711. The massacre, which killed or decimated many families of the colonists, was followed by widespread depredations until the Indians were brought under siege in their own forts in the spring of 1712. The documentary evidence shows that Franck had the confidence of and credit with merchants and planters in old Albemarle County precincts and parts of Virginia. His boats gathered principally salt meats and grain and other necessities on promise to pay in such forest-derived commodities as bayberry wax, animal pelts ^[9], and cooperage and wood products. The quantities he committed himself to pay indicate organized cooperation of the other surviving settlers. Baron von Graffenried ^[3] is reported to have abandoned the New Bern colony some weeks after the outbreak of hostilities and also to have departed from North Carolina in the summer of 1712. The records of precinct courts in the Albemarle and neighboring Virginia disclose no known items of commercial activity by the baron or his representatives during the starving time or thereafter. His activity on behalf of himself can be noted in his journals and in the North Carolina chancery court records.

By May 1711, Franck seems to have become aware of what he perceived to be a dangerous unreliability on the part of the baron, the North Carolina Provincial Council, and possibly Governor Pollock ^[10] and John Lawson. The promise of grants of land to the Palatine and Swiss colonists (to be exempt from quitrents ^[11] for ten years) grew less and less likely of fulfillment. In May 1711, Franck visited the Indian tribes holding rights under the Tuscarora nation's council to lands between the Neuse and Trent rivers. He bought from the Indians acres of land in that area and, with their cooperation, surveyed ^[12] it and filed his claim with the provincial government. His objective was to make available modest tracts of this land to the cheated Palatine and Swiss colonists at low cost and on easy terms. The deed records of Craven show that his objective was attained in a significant degree over a period of several years. In 1730, title to the tract was contested by persons prominent in the provincial government. A resurvey proved that the area in Franck's 1711 claim approximated 16,000 acres, rather than 10,000. A compromise settlement left Franck and his purchasers with about 6,800 acres. Again, he had gone far toward performing for the Palatine and Swiss colonists the promises left abandoned by von Graffenried and others. This fidelity also led him to start a school on Rocky Run near his plantation home on Mill Creek. The school continued for many decades and closed at last with the consolidation of Jones County elementary schools after 1950.

Franck was elected by the Craven freeholders to the North Carolina General Assembly of 1715 and of 1727. He served as a justice of the county court for many years and for some years as treasurer of the county. He early established a gristmill ^[13] (when there were only two others in North Carolina). He also served on the vestry of the parish and in other positions of public trust.

Franck was married first late in 1711 or early in 1712 to Susannah, the war-widowed relict of Enoch Ward the elder, of Craven Precinct. Susannah died about 1720; she was survived by her husband and at least five of his children who lived to be grown. In August 1722, Gasper Timberman (alias Timmerman), another Palatine, died survived by his young wife Civilla and an infant daughter, Mary. Timberman's widow married Franck in 1723 and had by him at least six children to reach adulthood. The names of Franck's children who are of record in adulthood are William (b. ca. 1713, living in 1761 in Rowan County ^[14]), Susannah (b. ca. 1714), Mary (b. ca. 1716), Jacob (b. ca. 1717, d. 1793 in Cabarrus County ^[15]), Elizabeth (b. ca. 1719), David (b. ca. 1724), Edward (b. ca. 1725), Catherine (b. ca. 1728), Anna Civilla (b. ca. 1729), John Martin, Jr. (b. ca. 1730), and Barbara (b. ca. 1732). The last two appear as minors under guardianship after their father's death. Barbara married Captain Daniel Shine and is the Barbara Shine who entertained President George Washington at Shine's Inn on his southern tour. Her nephew, General David Blackshear, reports that she died in 1814 at age ninety-five. The records prove she was much younger in 1814 and married late in life a second husband named Jacov (?) Johnston. On 7 Nov. 1814 she made a deed to her son, James Shine.

Late in life Franck moved to his White Rock plantation on the north side of Trent River. He made this plantation a showplace of progressive agriculture and entertained hospitably both as private host and as proprietor of the White Rock Tavern. He died there and was probably buried in that vicinity. His wife Civilla survived him and married as her third husband another aging Palatine of considerable distinction, Jacob Sheets. The fact that she had at least one child by this husband is some evidence that she was born after 1700. She was living and active as late as 1758. Civilla most likely was the daughter of John Wixdell (alias Waxdale) whose will was probated in Craven in 1739.

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