

Vassall, John ^[1]

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by James M. Clifton, 1996

1625–July 1688

John Vassall, colonial entrepreneur and chief promoter of the Clarendon County ^[2] settlement on the Lower Cape Fear in the 1660s, was born in Stepney, Middlesex County, England, the son of William and Anne King Vassall. His grandfather John Vassall had emigrated as a religious refugee from France to England, where he turned to merchandising with considerable success, developing his own fleet of vessels (two of his ships took part in the campaign against the Spanish Armada), and later to overseas colonization as a member of the Virginia Company. His uncle Samuel Vassall too became involved in overseas colonization as an incorporator of the Massachusetts Bay Company, in whose territory he secured huge patents of land. He also was actively, if unsuccessfully, interested in Sir Robert Heath ^[3]'s attempt to settle Carolana ^[4], challenging in 1663 Charles II's grant of the Carolana territory to the Lords Proprietors ^[5] on the grounds that he held an assignment from Heath of the southern half of the old Carolana grant. Although his claim was disallowed, it showed that he had a strong continuing interest in the area. William Vassall (John's father) became an assistant in the Massachusetts Company and one of its early settlers, bringing his family (which now included John at age ten and five daughters) in the summer of 1635 to Roxbury. Within a year the Vassall family moved to Scituate in the Plymouth ^[6] colony. Important by virtue of both wealth and ability, William Vassall became a leader in both colonies, especially in the movement to liberalize the suffrage. In 1646 he returned to England but two years later moved to Barbados, where he acquired sizable landholdings and died in 1655.

John Vassall remained in Scituate and joined the militia, ultimately achieving the rank of captain. Sometime in the 1650s he migrated first to Jamaica and then to Barbados, where he resided when Charles II granted the Carolina territory in 1663 to the eight Lords Proprietors. Perhaps influenced by his uncle Samuel Vassall, he and his cousin Henry Vassall (Samuel's son) became involved in an effort to colonize the area. They joined a group of Barbadians in financing an expedition led by William Hilton in the fall of 1663 to explore the territory around the Cape Fear River ^[7] (a year earlier Hilton, from Massachusetts, had led an unsuccessful attempt by people from that colony to settle the Cape Fear but still felt the area had real possibilities for colonization). The Barbadians who remained behind organized the Corporation of Barbados Adventurers and chose Thomas Modyford, a prominent planter and former governor of the island, and Peter Colleton, son of John Colleton (one of the Lords Proprietors), to negotiate the conditions on which they might settle in Carolina. However, John and Henry Vassall were not willing to work through the corporation, choosing rather to follow an independent course in dealing with the Lords Proprietors.

Accordingly, about the same time that Modyford and Colleton first communicated with the Proprietors, John Vassall wrote his own letter relative to a colony in Carolina. The Proprietors chose to deal with Modyford and Colleton. In response, the Vassalls, claiming to represent a majority of the corporation members, formed a separate body known as "the Adventurers and planters of Cape Feare." Henry Vassall was dispatched as agent for the group to London to obtain from the Proprietors the best possible terms of settlement. When Vassall met with the Lords, he was offered tentative terms that differed little if any from the "Declarations and Proposals" ^[8] (a treatise issued earlier by the Proprietors to govern settlement in the Carolina territory). Although the terms were not altogether pleasing to the Adventurers back in Barbados, they were accepted, and Henry Vassall was instructed to complete a formal agreement with the Lords Proprietors.

However, John Vassall chose not to wait for the final agreement. With the promise of support from associates left behind on the island, he set out with a group of Barbadians in the spring of 1664, reaching the Cape Fear on 29 May. By November 1664 the settlement was incorporated in Clarendon County by the Proprietors, with John Vassall as deputy governor and surveyor-general. Using the inducements of the promise of land, freedom of religion, and the right to vote, the Vassalls were able to attract settlers from New England, the West Indies, and Europe. Ultimately, Clarendon County would number about eight hundred inhabitants.

John Vassall's decision to migrate to the Cape Fear before Henry Vassall had reached a final decision with the Lords Proprietors proved to be a critical mistake. Henry Vassall was never able to conclude the agreement. A rival faction in Barbados led by John Yeamans ^[9] proposed a settlement farther to the south at Port Royal under conditions more favorable to the Proprietors. The Lords largely turned their back on Vassall's settlement and supported a move to develop Craven County ^[10] (later to become South Carolina) below Cape Romain. John Colleton alone of the Proprietors maintained an active interest in Vassall's efforts, and he unfortunately was removed by death in 1666. England's resumption of war with the Dutch in 1664 and the Great Plague and Great Fire in London in 1666 would have made it difficult for the Proprietors to provide much support for the Clarendon settlement; as it was, they provided none. Too, the Indians in the area became exceedingly hostile towards the settlement.

More and more people began to abandon the settlement until the whole effort was given up in 1667. Through it all, John Vassall acted with considerable courage and perspicacity. Even to the extent of using his personal fortune, he tried

desperately to hold the colony together. In the fall of 1666, he sent at his own expense an emissary to the Proprietors to convey the terrible state of affairs in Clarendon with the hope of securing aid, only to have the emissary captured en route to England. Moreover, Henry Vassall died in 1667, ending the settlement's only immediate link with the Proprietors. As a last resort, John Vassall appealed to Massachusetts for aid, and in May 1667 the Massachusetts colony voted to send relief to the Cape Fear. If such aid was ever forthcoming, it was too little and too late. In the summer of 1667, Clarendon was abandoned, with its settlers going to Virginia or Massachusetts. Vassall, by now a financially ruined and dejected man, went to Virginia, where on 6 October he wrote to John Colleton a melancholy account of the last days of Clarendon. Unknown to him, Colleton was already dead. He seems to have remained in Virginia for some time trying to obtain redress of grievances against the Lords Proprietors.

By March 1672 Vassall had migrated to Jamaica, where he and his wife, Anne Lewis Vassall, settled in St. Elizabeth's Parish. For the remainder of his life, however, he maintained connections with the mainland colonies, engaged in the carrying trade among them, the West Indies, and Europe. In his will, proved in Jamaica on 6 July 1688, he provided for his son Samuel to be educated at Harvard College ^[11]. Another son, Leonard, would live most of his life in Boston and die there. His descendants (notably his great-grandson, John Vassall) were living in the Boston-Cambridge area at the time of the American Revolution ^[12]. They chose the English side, with many of them moving to England. Their vast estates were confiscated, and the family name soon lost any significance in the United States.

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Authors:

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Origin - location:

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