 Cornelius Harnett II, the American revolutionary, left an indelible mark on North Carolina history. Called with good reason, the “Samuel Adams of North Carolina,” Harnett more than any North Carolinian spearheaded the movement for independence against Great Britain. A merchant and owner of the estate Maynard north of Wilmington and the plantation Popular Grove along the coast, Harnett not only helped to launch a revolution but to create governments for both the state of North Carolina and the United States. He died in British custody on the eve of the successful conclusion of the American Revolution. But what about his progenitor, his namesake, the man who sired the revolutionary – his father, Cornelius I?

When Cornelius Harnett I appeared in the public records of Chowan Precinct, North Carolina, in 1720, he found himself in a province formed in 1663 and owned by prominent Englishmen known as the lords proprietors. Despite its six decades, the colony was still in its infancy, just recovering from an internecine struggle termed Cary’s Rebellion and, more disastrously, from a contest with Native Americans called the Tuscarora War. In fact, North Carolina had exhibited a long history of internal unrest featuring Indians, religious dissension, sectional tensions, pro- and anti-proprietary factionalism, pirates, and friction with Virginia. Compounding those troubles was the hard-scrabble existence led by most colonials who eked out a living from the soil, forest, sea, or Indian trade. Nonetheless, North Carolina was a land of opportunity – and refuge – for those who sought to start life anew.

At the time of Harnett’s entrée, North Carolina was well on its way toward recovery from its strife. Following the Tuscarora War a measure of political stability returned to the colony. Albemarle County of which Chowan was a part controlled provincial politics. The General Assembly dominated a politically feeble, proprietary-appointed governor, Charles Eden. Piracy fairly concluded with the deaths of Blackbeard and Stede Bonnet in 1718. Population grew rapidly, leading to the incorporation of three towns, the de facto capital of Edenton in 1722, and New Bern and Beaufort in 1723. And the defeat of the Tuscarora opened the way for future growth of the colony to the west and the south – the Lower Cape Fear.

The arrival of Harnett also coincided with renewed interest in North Carolina by the proprietors. Having lost control of their more favored colony, South Carolina, to the crown in 1719, and facing the recommendation of the Board of Trade the following year to annex North Carolina to the royal colony of Virginia, the proprietors moved to protect their northern province. In 1723, they named a new governor, George Burington, who received far more detailed instructions than those given to his predecessors, and in 1724 the proprietors appointed other important officials – provost marshal and attorney general – who theretofore had been designated by the governor. The proprietors also attempted to reinvigorate the Church of England, intended to be the established church in the colony.

Harnett, “bred a merchant in Dublin,” found himself in a poor, rural colony featuring a scattered population with a few small towns. Mercantile opportunities, at least those with a reasonable chance of success, were limited. Thus Harnett may have considered planting, the occupation of most men at the time, after immigrating to North Carolina. He failed to appear on a list of Chowan landowners in 1720, but resided in the colony by that time, for he witnessed two deeds in September of that year. In 1721 he purchased 120 acres of land on the south-west side of Queen Anne’s Creek, presumably near Edenton, which he promptly sold the next year to Christopher Gale, the Chief Justice of the colony, for a substantial profit. Thereafter Harnett may have rented or boarded with others.
Harnett rose quickly from obscurity. The General Court of the colony in 1722 permitted him to stand security for a man accused of theft, though admittedly the money involved was relatively small—the cost of a pair of mittens. Subsequently he recovered his former status. Harnett’s star grew, for he regularly served on grand and petit juries of the General Court. The former was particularly important because grand juries issued presentments for breaches of criminal law and considered indictments by the attorney general against persons for criminal behavior or misdemeanors. And service on the juries would indicate a status of freetholder and hence the ownership of land, though the records are mute on that point.

The ascendance of Harnett may have resulted from his newfound and highly-placed friend, proprietary governor George Burrington. Appointed in 1723 and sworn into office in Edenton in early 1724, Burrington enjoyed a brief but eventful tenure. He spent the winter of 1724-1725 along the Cape Fear River, exploring the Lower Cape Fear. Together with Maurice Moore, a former South Carolina, Burrington was instrumental in attaching the area to North Carolina. Money to support settlement there by means of land grants of dubious legality. Those grants, along with the proprietors’ fear that the governor was planning to erect a separate colony along the Cape Fear River, contributed to Burrington’s dismissal in 1725. Meanwhile, Harnett’s association with Burrington proved dangerous, for the governor was a quarrelsome, violent man, though Harnett himself may have been less than a gentleman, having once been described as “a Ruffianly fellow.” In his first year in office Burrington openly insulted Chief Justice Gale. He subsequently attacked Gale’s house in Edenton, threatening to blow it up with gunpowder, and declared to Gale’s wife that he would “have the dogg her husband by the throat.” The chief justice thereafter went to England to seek the replacement of Burrington, carrying with him a supporting letter signed by three or more men for a private purpose. Rather than face the charges, Burrington and Harnett absconded, the former to England and the latter to the Cape Fear. Their case was continued through several sessions of the General Court during which, of course, the defendants failed to appear. Finally, in October 1728, Chief Justice Gale ordered the prisoner generally to enter a plea of nolle prosequi (“unwilling to pursue, thus do not prosecute”) against the accused. The attorney general complied, and the court discharged Burrington and Harnett from their presentments without paying costs.

The Lower Cape Fear not only offered an opportunity for Harnett to rehabilitate his reputation but also the chance, no doubt, to fulfill his original intention to improve the Lower Cape Fear region. By the time Burrington emerged from his sojourn in England (at least perhaps his family) moved to the Lower Cape Fear, he found himself on the outskirts of civilization, inhabiting an almost primeval world that was not as remote as it had been to Native Americans. Settlers confronted often impenetrable forests and swamps as well as high ground suitable for plantation, and a number of rivers, streams, and creeks which served to facilitate transportation.

The evolution of settlement and government required a great deal of effort and perseverance, but Harnett and immigrants from the Albemarle and South Carolina set about the task that eventuated quickly in the establishment of New Hanover Precinct (later county) to serve records and materials and disseminate information. As a profit 501(c)(3) corporation to collect and preserve records and materials and disseminate historical and information pertaining to the history of the Lower Cape Fear.

The Bulletin welcomes manuscripts for review. Articles should contain researched primary source material of Lower Cape Fear interest. We welcome all to read and critique this piece which aided in the production of this Bulletin.

The Bulletin is published each January, April and October by the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society, founded in 1936 as a non-political, non-profit 501(c)(3) corporation to collect and preserve records and materials and disseminate knowledge and information pertaining to the history of the Lower Cape Fear.
When Cornelius Harnett I died in 1742, his son Cornelius II had barely attained his legal majority of eighteen years of age. Yet, probably having spent the past decade and a half in Lower Cape Fear under his father’s tutelage, the younger Harnett acquired a wealth of experience in coping with life in that newly-opened frontier region and sensing the opportunities available—mercantile, land speculation, planting, lumbering, tavern and ferry keeping. Moreover, the father left a modest estate upon which an ambitious man might build. Ultimately, however, perhaps the greatest legacy enjoyed by Cornelius II was his father’s privileged status in public affairs, first as councilor but later as governor, the son not only imbued with a sense of privileged status in public affairs, first as councilor but ultimately appointed by the crown and Privy Council as opposed to speculation. Harnett may have entertained both. Six years later he again invested in Brunswick, buying lots from Moore, which he soon sold for a handsome gain.

As evidence of his enterprising spirit, at the time of the purchase of the first two lots, Harnett operated a tavern, the following year, before the charges against him in the Albemarle were dismissed, and possibly through the influence of Maurice Moore, he successfully petitioned the General Court in Edenton to keep a ferry for the ferryman’s service, travel across the river to the Haoulover, located on a peninsula between the Atlant Ocean and the east side of the Cape Fear River. The order by the General Court forbade competitive ferry services within ten miles, in essence giving Harnett a monopoly of the ferry traffic on the only road at the time that extended south along the coast from North Carolina to South Carolina.

Harnett no doubt operated the tavern in conjunction with the ferry. In general, taverns were lucrative businesses, for they offered food and drink to patrons from near and far, lodging for travelers, and opportuni ties for patronage. Travelers were particularly apt locations for taverns. Given the delays encountered at ferry crossings, occasioned by inclement weather, rough water, or calms which prevented appropriate service, travelers perforce spent much time waiting for transportation. Many years later, in 1767, the General Assembly recognized the need for refreshment of ferries and taverns, on account of taverns at the longer crossings in the colony.

The ever opportunistic Harnett may also have turned his attention to the occupation of land speculation, while evidencing an interest in planting and land speculation. Maintaining a store in conjunction with a tavern was not uncommon in early North Carolina; the duality of the business permitted an appeal to a broader clientele. By 1730, Harnett and a partner, the Rev. Richard Marsden, an Anglican minister, were importing goods from Bristol, England. Harnett also represented North Carolina as an instrument of land from the lower house of the General Assembly during his second gubernatorial charge, proved unable to adapt. As such, the Royal Governor Charles Eden appointed him as the first lieutenant governor of Lower South Carolina. Harnett served under Eden for two years, until Eden was succeeded by Lord Granville, who appointed Harnett as a royal counselor. Harnett was successful in regaining control of South Carolina, and in 1729 sold that province together with North Carolina to King George II. The crown proceeded to appoint a royal governor for North Carolina in 1730, none other than his successor in the General Assembly. The royal governor appointed by the crown on February 25, 1731, when Burgin in Edenton took the oath of office as the provincial executive. Given the former proprietary interest in the province, the governor’s authority was often but more often deeded than assigned. The Royal Governor’s power was temporary and his authority was conditioned by the terms of his appointment. The position was essentially that of a caretaker in a new colony, with no previous experience in the region.

Burgin’s tenure as governor proved stormy and brief. He might have expected opposition because a number of Carolinians, remembering the tempestuous days of his proprietary governorship, complained bitterly to the Board of Trade in 1730 about his appointment. The governor’s recommendations for members of the council also drew ire. A petition to the Board of Trade claimed that the men named by Burgin “are of so mean circumstances that put them all together [. . .] their Estates . . . won’t amount to L 1500, and [. . .] they are of [men of] . . . inferior characters . . . unworthy of being entrusted with such a public trust . . . whose detractors noted derogatorily that he kept “a little punch house.” .

Once in the colony, Burgin, who was faced by an often rebellious council and equally obstinate lower house of the General Assembly during his sec-
Motion of the organization of the new, royal government, Harnett made the onerous trip from the Cape Fear to Edenton to attend council meetings in April and May 1731. In so doing he quickly re
evoked a courage and independence that must have surprised Burlington, when he with others had the temerity to question the legitimacy of the governor’s decisions to suppress debate in council, to appoint judges for various courts, and to seek legal authority in council, to demean Chief Justice Smith, and to force the resignation of Edmund Porter from his judgeship on the vice-admiralty court of the prov-
cince. The latter was accomplished, but Harnett, whose house was confronted in his own house by the governor and called a “Fool, Blockhead, Puppy, [and] Ashes” [20].

Exacerbating the rift between the Burlington and Harnett was the attempt by Burlington to embarrass Harnett before the council in November 1731. The governor told the board that one Captain John Tate claimed that Burlington and the Rev. Richard Mason had failed to pay for a cargo of English goods imported from Bristol early in 1730, and that eighteen months earlier it had been reported that Tate was confirmed in the Cape Fear. The governor had been notified of the complaint while in the Cape Fear but waited until he returned to Edenton before summoning all the coun-
celors to meet in January 1732, together with Tate, to consider the complaint against Harnett. [19]

At the appointed time Harnett, sitting on the coun-
cil, came prepared. His defense, both legal and practical, consisted first of the contention that mat-
ters involving debt should be heard in court, not in c:

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The most important executive and ad-
ministrative officer in county government, the sheriffs, were the agents of the state in county matters. The sheriff was responsible for the security of the county. The sheriff was responsible for the security of the county. The most important executive and ad-
ministrative officer in county government, the sheriff, opened meetings of the court, summoned jurors and witnesses, and supervised the infliction of punishments ordered by the court – whippings, brandings, and hangings. The sheriffs also collected taxes and served legal process on those who refused to meet their responsibilities, supervised elections which gave him additional influence among the community.

Harnett served, unexpectedly if it seems, one term of two years as sheriff before relinquishing the position to Thomas Clark. While sheriff, Harnett returned to fer-

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Meanwhile, as a member of the New Hanover County court, Harnett faithfully attended the quarter-
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Harnett, like his able and courageous predecessor Governor Dorsey, was a toll-collector. In 1731 they collected tolls via a seat on the council and then as justice of the peace, the aspilng T

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Aspiring Harnett augmented his landed estate, Bur-

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