Sterne, Shandy and North Carolina
By Arthur S. Marks

As published in London between 1760 and 1767, Laurence Sterne’s eccentric novel, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, was eagerly awaited by an audience that quickly came to include Britain’s American colonies. There Shandy’s popularity was sustained. Over the succeeding years, including the time when those colonies became a nation, many readers commented favorably about the book, its author, and his other writings. One of Sterne’s American admirers was a colonial physician, Dr. John Eustace of Wilmington, North Carolina. He was so satisfied and impressed by his reading that in 1767, on finishing the final volume of Tristram Shandy, Eustace felt compelled to send the author a present, a unique walking stick together with an accompanying complimentary letter. In response Eustace received an extended note of thanks from Sterne that included several illuminating remarks about the novel that were provoked by the gift. The texts of their brief exchange are well worth recalling, if only because they encourage a fuller examination of several early connections between Laurence Sterne, the colony, and eventually the state of North Carolina.

Of John Eustace’s life we know little. Neither the place nor date of his birth has yet been discovered. He may have descended from a Virginia branch of an English family that originated in the

Chiltern Hundreds of Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire. His death at Wilmington, though not its precise date, is marked by his will; the appended inventory of his property was sworn to by his widow, Margaret, on 8 April 1769. The same month she applied to be declared Administratrix of her late husband’s estate. Of their marriage nothing further is known.

Eustace practiced and prospered as a physician in Wilmington. His medical services were well regarded and remembered. His name also appears on legal documents and in various town records, the earliest from March 1765 when he witnessed a will. Like Sterne Eustace was a Whig.


2 Donald W. Eustace, The Eustaces of the Chiltern Hundreds II, London, 1979, pp. 17-20, notes a Virginia branch but there is no mention of this John Eustace.


4 Recorded in New Hanover County Deed Book, 1769-F73, New Hanover County Court House, Wilmington, North Carolina. Eustace is described as a “Physician deceased.” The document was signed on an undated April day and registered September 20, 1769.

5 Her maiden name has been given as Morning. See [author] The Lonely Road, a history of the physicks and physicians of the Lower Cape Fear 1735-1776, Wilmington, 1978, p. 122.

His name appears on the petition of 15 February 1766 that was handed to William Dry, the Collector of Customs for the port, to protest the seizure of the Sloops Dobbs and Patience for violating the detested Stamp Act passed by Parliament the previous year. Eustace was sufficiently prominent to obtain appointment from the royal governor, William Tryon, as a Justice of the Peace. For the last few years of his life he attended court regularly. Besides administering justice, he also was a violator of the law, and on 19 September 1768 he was one of thirty-nine persons fined forty shillings for failing to provide his home with the mandatory fire buckets. The location of the residence is not given.

To judge from his inventory, Dr. Eustace lived comfortably. A good bit of Silver is listed and he must have had one of the larger local collections of what were commonly described as “pictures.” In all likelihood most were engravings rather than paintings. Included was “a print of Mr. pitt,” who would be William Pitt, the Great Commoner and radical Whig hero. As leader of the opposition, he was especially revered by Americans, whose cause he championed in the Parliamentary Stamp Act debates. It was to Pitt, who until 1760 and accession of George III had been Prime Minister, that Sterne dedicated both the first and last volumes of Tristram Shandy. In the latter, coming at a time when to the disapproval of many supporters he had accepted a peerage (as the Earl of Chatham), he is identified not by name but as “A Great Man.”

Wilmington was a major port. Many visitors at the time commented on how poorly cultured, ill-bred and lacking in gentility was the local society. There was an educated nucleus to the population, including a surfeit of doctors, though many of these may have possessed questionable professional training and been self designated. Whatever legitimacy the titles physician and doctor may have possessed in England, in the American colonies such credentials were often questioned. There were also prosperous merchants, learned clergymen and, because Wilmington was an administrative and legal center, an abundance of lawyers. Given such a literate core it is not surprising that around 1760 a public lending library, The Cape Fear Literary Institute, was founded. The same year a classical academy opened to students. There were a number of substantial private libraries, including Eustace’s. His inventory lists 292 volumes. 118 of which were medical. The remainder formed a varied collection. There was a volume of his own poetry and such recent works as James Thomson’s Seasons; Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels, though only the first volume; nine volumes of Voltaire; various novels and, of course, Sterne’s Tristram Shandy, a full set.

It was probably with the just-read last volume of Tristram Shandy in mind that Eustace, in late 1767 or early the next year, had a delightful encounter. By chance he was given a remarkable walking stick, a piece of “true Shandean statuary,” as he described it, which he found so uniquely formed that he felt compelled to forward it to Sterne. Accompanying the stick was this laudatory letter which included a brief history of the gift:

Sir,

When I assure you that I am a very great admirer of Tristram Shandy, and have ever been, since his introduction to the world, one of his most zealous defenders against the repeated assaults [sic] of prejudice and misapprehension; I hope you will not treat my unexpected appearance in your company as an intrusion.

You know it is an observation as remarkable for its truth as its antiquity, that a similitude of sentiments is the general parent of friendship. It cannot be wondered at, that I should conceive an esteem for a person, whom nature has most indulgently enabled to frisk and curve with ease, through all the intricacies of sentiment, which from irresistible propensity, she had impelled me to trudge through without merit and distinction.

The only reason that gave rise to this address to you, is my accidentally having met with a piece of truly Shandean sculpture, . . . It was made by a very ingenious gentleman of this province, and presented to the late Governour Dobbs; after his death Mrs. Dobbs gave it to me; its singularity made many desirous of procuring it, but I had resolved at first not to part with it, until upon reflection, I

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9 Colonial Records, VII, p. 279, for an order by the Governor, December 1, 1766, that Eustace “be reinstated in the Commission of the peace for the County of New Hanover.” For his attendance see New Hanover County Court Minutes, ed. Alexander MacDonald Walker, Bethesda, 1958-1962, I, passim. His first appearance was September 1, 1767, and the last, which narrows down the time of his death, was January 7, 1769 (p. 95).
15 Grimes, Wills and Inventories, pp. 490-92.
thought it would be very proper, and probably not an unacceptable compliment to my favourite author, and in his hands might prove as ample a field for meditation as a button hole or a broom stick.

Eustace’s letter is of an unknown date, but as Sterne’s prompt reply dated 9 February 1768 indicates, it was written probably the previous November or at the latest early December. Responding from his London rooms on Old Bond Street, which he had first occupied at the new year, and where the parcel presumably had been forwarded from Yorkshire, Sterne expressed gratitude for this unexpected though much appreciated gift. Through the device of the unusually formed stick, he provided his correspondent with a striking and terse insight into his sense of the novel and the myriad ways which, like the stick, it too might be grasped:

Sir:

I this moment received your obliging letter and Shandean piece of sculpture along with it, of both which testimonies of your regard, I have the justest sense, and return you, dear sir, my best thanks and acknowledgments. Your walking stick is in no sense more Shandaick than in that of its having more handles than one; the parallel breaks only in this, that in using the stick every one will take the handle that suits his convenience; in Tristram Shandy, the handle is taken which suits their passions, their ignorance or sensibility.

... I wish I could have got an act of parliament when the books first appeared, that none but wise men should look into them; it is too much to write books and find heads to understand them. ... the reception it has met with in France, Italy and Germany, have engaged one part of the world to give it a second reading, and the other part of it, in order to be on the strongest side, have at length agreed to speak well of it too; a few hypocrites and tartuffes, whose approbation could do it nothing but dishonour, remain unconverted.

I am very proud sir, to have a man like you on my side from the beginning, but it is not in the power of every one to taste humour, however he may wish it; it is the gift of God; and besides, a true feeler always brings half the entertainment along with him; his own ideas are only called forth by what he reads; and the vibrations within him so entirely correspond with those excited; it is like reading himself, and not the book.

In a week’s time I shall be delivered of two volumes of the Sentimental Journey of Mr. Yorick, through France and Italy. But alas! the ship sails three days too soon, and I have this to lament, it deprives me of the pleasure of presenting them to you.

I am, dear sir, with great thanks for the honour you have done me, and with true esteem, your obliged and humble servant.

LAU. STERNE.

The publication history of this correspondence is confusing. Consequently there remains the problem of establishing authoritative texts for this critically important exchange.16 Neither letter survives holographically. As given above, the texts are taken from their third published appearance. Initially they appeared in a London periodical, The Court Miscellany for 1770, where the instigator was described as “Dr. Eustace in America.”17

No other information nor any indication of their source was provided. As publication was in England, the texts were obtained, presumably from Sterne’s copy book and Eustace’s original letter, both of which probably remained in Sterne’s estate. In 1775, they were reprinted with grammatical and textual changes in Sterne’s Letters to His Friends, but no additional information about Eustace or their source was provided.18 As given above, the texts are from the Massachusetts Magazine of 1789.

According to the editors they were provided by someone identified only as “C” and are erroneously noted to have been “Never before published.” What gives this version greater authority than previous publications is the contributor’s knowledgeable remarks that Eustace was “a physician in Northcarolina [sic]” and the added note that the letters were “transcribed from the original copy of the first, and letter of the last, in possession of Mrs. Eustace, the Doctor’s widow.”19 Thus, unlike the previous appearances which derived from Sterne’s literary remains, these versions were taken from materials preserved in America in Eustace’s estate.

Rather than working with any of these published texts, the standard Curtis edition of Sterne’s correspondence uses instead transcriptions provided by yet another North Carolinian and Sterne enthusiast, James Iredell.20 Distressed family circumstances had brought Iredell, a native of Sussex, England, to America. Through the intervention of an influential relation he obtained the post of Comptroller of the Customs for Port Roanoke with an office at Edenton, which, after Wilmington, was the colony’s major port. He arrived at Boston in November, 1768, and allowing for his voyage south to North Carolina, it is likely that Eustace already was dead when Iredell arrived. At some subsequent time Iredell obtained access to the Eustace-Sterne exchange, though in what form and where is unknown. His copies were included in his collected correspondence edited by his son-in-law, G. J. McRae and

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17 The Court Miscellany, 6 (1770), p. 509. Generally, for the publication of this correspondence see Hartley, “Eustace-Sterne Correspondence.”
issued in 1857.\textsuperscript{21} There McRee states that they were found amongst the late judge’s papers and “are both taken from the originals.” Iredell may well have obtained access to holographs, but recalling the Massachusetts magazine’s reference to “original,” it is just as likely that what McRee found were copies taken from one of these earlier publications. The differences in text, whether in punctuation, word choice and order, or in the use of emphases, were not Sterne’s but Iredell’s or McRee’s. Apparently ignoring the variety of early printed versions and the lack of autograph material, Curtis unaccountably chose to give prominence and authority to the Iredell versions and it is these which are consistently cited in Sterne studies.\textsuperscript{22}

Laurence Sterne would have had little chance to display his new walking stick for his friends in fashionable London, for within five weeks of receiving it he was dead. A little more than a year later Eustace passed away. Despite its remarkable appearance, Eustace’s gift of a “truly Shandean sculpture” is yet another lost item in this story. Following his death, it may have been disposed of as part of “Mr. Sterne’s wearing apparel & trinkets,” which his daughter Lydia instructed that Sterne’s brother-in-law, John Botham, sell “to the best advantage.”\textsuperscript{23} In any case whatever particular associations the stick had with her father and his novel were either forgotten or unknown. The publication of the letters was still two years away. There were no safeguards to ensure its survival. The stick remains untraced and should it survive it was probably long ago shorn of its significance.

As Eustace had written, the walking-stick was originally the property of Arthur Dobbs, royal governor of North Carolina from 1754 till his death in 1765. His appointment as governor had followed upon a distinguished career as Surveyor-General of his native Ireland.\textsuperscript{24} The seat of government was whereever the governor chose to locate himself until, in 1766, Tryon designated New Bern as the capital.

Upon his arrival Dobbs settled at New Bern. Eventually unhappy over the excessive rent he was being charged for accommodation, and displeasing the climate on the Albemarle Sound, he removed, in 1768, to Brunswick Town located on the west bank of the Cape Fear, sixteen miles down-river from Wilmington. There he obtained fifty-five acres at Russellborough, on the north side of the community. The plantation included the incomplete shell of a house which, pursuing a long-standing interest in architecture, he completed as a residence. Although called Castle Dobbs after his ancestral home in County Antrim, it was a modest structure. Rather than deriving his design from the several classically inspired architectural treatises he had brought with him from Ireland, Dobbs drew on a local building tradition initially brought to the area by settlers from Barbados and Charleston. With two stories of surrounding open galleries, called piazzas, the house was designed to take advantage of any passing breeze.\textsuperscript{25} Neither the house, nor Brunswick Town, survives other than as an archaeological site. Only St. Philips Church, whose construction Governor Dobbs encouraged, and where he was married a second time and was buried, remains a roofless ruin. There is no trace of his grave.

In what was widely perceived as a scandalous match, in 1762 the seventy-three-year old Dobbs, a widower since 1747, married Justina Davis of Wilmington. She was aged fifteen.\textsuperscript{26} Despite the enormous gap in their ages, their marriage was apparently a happy one, though not without its difficulties owing largely to his advancing years and declining health. In 1763, just prior to their intended departure for England, the governor suffered a stroke. For a time during his recuperation he was unable to walk, but gradually his health improved and he was able to get about with the aid of a sturdy walking-stick. By 1764 he seems to have recovered sufficiently, as he wrote a son in Ireland in early February, to walk without a “staff.”\textsuperscript{27} But on March 25 he suffered yet another stroke, this time fatal.

Perhaps it was this same staff that eventually passed into Eustace’s hands. Possibly given to assist in Dobbs’s recovery, the carrying of such sticks in public was a commonplace mark of a gentleman and an essential part of fashionable dress in the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{28} In certain hands, wielded as signs of civil authority, they also served as a mark of office and prestige. As such they appear in colonial portraits of community leaders, governors and prominent clergymen.

The stick given to Dobbs, as Eustace would write, was like the novel, “equally destitute of regularity or design.” Doubtless less pretentious than most, but possibly more imposing, it was made apparently of one piece of wood, perhaps some branch or root-ball that culminated in a series of gnarled secondary extensions suitably trimmed to form these varied grips. The handle may very well have looked like the crown of a pollarded tree. Such sticks are known, as are others whose handles were fabricated from pieces of deer antlers, with the points retained. These have a similar appearance.


\textsuperscript{22} Letters of Sterne, p. 404. Curtis notes only the publication in Court Miscellany.

\textsuperscript{23} Lydia Stone to Mrs. Montagu, April 5, 1768: Letters of Sterne, pp. 434-35.

\textsuperscript{24} See Desmond Clarke, Arthur Dobbs, Esquire, 1689-1765, surveyor-general of Ireland, prospector and Governor of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1957: and more recently the account by Richard Beale Davis, DNCE, II, pp. 83-86.

\textsuperscript{25} For the house see Stanley A. Smith, “Russelborough,” The Royal Governor’s Mansion at Brunswick Town,” North Carolina Historical Review, 44 (1967), pp. 360-72.

\textsuperscript{26} Childs, Dobbs, pp. 186-87. Also Jacqueline Drake Nash’s entry on Davis, DNCE II, p. 38.

\textsuperscript{27} Childs, Dobbs, pp. 189, 192.

Why Justina Dobbs chose to give Eustace the walking stick is unknown, nor do we know of any connection between the doctor, the governor and his young bride. Presumably the gift commemorated a relationship between the men, perhaps medical or very likely based on their shared literary interests. They shared cultural and community concerns, as their common interest in books suggests. Just as likely Eustace may have attended the governor professionally through his illnesses and his eventual death. The timing of the walking stick's presentation to Eustace, however, can be suggested, coming probably in early 1767, several months prior to his dispatching it to England. It must have been around that time that Justina Dobbs departed Brunswick Town for Halifax, North Carolina, where she married a young lawyer, Abner Nash (second governor of the state following independence). Perhaps, prior to her departure and forthcoming remarriage, Justina thought it prudent to divest herself of the more personal bits of her late husband's property, an act which brought the staff into Dr. Eustace's possession.

It would have been within the span of a few months that Eustace received the stick, obtained and read the last volume of *Tristram Shandy*, and forwarded his gift to England. Less than two months after receiving it, Sterne was dead. About a year later, certainly before April 1769, Eustace too had died. Thus was concluded this curious and enduring, brief episode in Laurence Sterne's literary career. Of it, as has been seen, other than the differing printed texts of the letters, nothing seems to remain. Yet this does not conclude Sterne's early connection to North Carolina, nor possibly with John Eustace, for another Shandean link to Wilmington, and possibly to him, remains to be discussed. There is a house known as Shandy Hall.

A few miles east of Wilmington, along the Atlantic coast, especially along a channel comprising Masonboro and Greenville Sounds, and buffered from the ocean by barrier islands, there developed by mid-eighteenth century several small communities, consisting principally of summer houses. Situated to take advantage of cooling ocean breezes, these seasonal residences offered some respite from the unrelenting humid summer heat that settled on Wilmington and the nearby inland plantations. Land here had been disposed of by a 1737 crown grant to Thomas Connor, who in turn divided the tract into two hundred acre parcels. Initially the particular plot involved, located to the south of Lee's (now Bradley's) Creek and fronting on the channel (now the Inland Waterway), had been sold subsequently to two planters, John Mott and Caleb Mason, but in 1746 it passed to the socially prominent Joshua Grainger, one of Wilmington's founders. Already the deed indicates that a house was on the property. From Grainger the land passed by inheritance to his daughter and son-in-law, Mary and Henry Toomer. When they disposed of it in 1769 to John Kirkwood, the plot had been reduced to one hundred and fifty acres. From Kirkwood, in turn, in 1776, it passed to Charles Jewkes. When Jewkes and his wife sold the property in 1778 to Alexander Hostler, the legal description noted "together with improvement thereon..."
commonly called Shandy Hall. This is the earliest known citation of the house by this name.

As we learn early in the first volume of Tristram Shandy, Shandy Hall was the family home of Walter Shandy, Tristram's father. It was also the name Sterne gave to his own North Yorkshire home. The perpetual curacy of Coxwold, to which he was appointed in 1760, came with no parsonage. Instead he rented a house from his patron the Earl Fauconberg. Within months of establishing residence there he was referring to this fifteenth-century house as "this Shandy-Castle of mine." With the success of the novel, he tended to spend only the summers there. The remainder of the year he preferred being in London or on the continent, but with money provided by Fauconberg, and from his book sales, he made extensive renovations and improvements to the house. He gardened, added a stable, a carriage house and a summer house. In 1767, fantasizing that his beloved Eilza would join him at Coxwold, he introduced what he referred to as "sweet a set of romantic Apartments as You ever beheld." By that year, at least, he was calling the house Shandy Hall. As shandy means crazy in the local dialect, perhaps it was regarded in the area as an apt description of the altered and varied appearance of Sterne's House as well as his odd character.

Shandy Hall near Wilmington also still stands. Over the years it too has suffered extensive exterior and interior renovations and has become what a recent writer describes as "a rambling and picturesque cottage abounding in porches, gables, wood textures, varied fenestration and other architectural detail."

Through time it has become shandy. Certainly in appearance it reveals nothing of its original appearance.

Like Dobbs's house, it was built in the West Indian style. Architectural evidence indicates that it was a single house, being only one room deep and two storeys high with a central entry hall which contained the stairs. It is of a type that has been described as a Carolina plain house. Again, according to the climate, there were double tiered galleries extending the length of both the coastal and inland facades. Though most such houses have vanished, or like this example, have been altered beyond recognition, they were once commonplace in coastal South and North Carolina, extending from near the Georgia border northwards through the Cape Fear to Edenton. Peter DuBois, while visiting Wilmington in 1757, observed "the buildings in general very good" and referring to houses of this sort, "Many of brick, two and three stories [sic] high with double piazzas, which make a good appearance." In the countryside, wood was more readily available and became the material of choice, but the basic open tiered design remained the same.

Because of his links to Sterne, legend has connected Dr. Eustace with the North Carolina Shandy Hall, but there is no actual documentation for such an association. The only known address for Eustace appears in the will of John Dubois, a wealthy Huguenot settler in Wilmington, and the father of the Peter DuBois cited above. In his will sworn in September 1767, and proved the following March, three adjoining brick houses on Dock Street, just up from the public dock on the Cape Fear River, were bequeathed to various children. To his daughter Margaret he gave "my lower brick tenement now occupied by Doctor Eustace." Other than this rented property where he presumably resided and practiced, no other Wilmington addresses of any sort are recorded for Eustace or his widow. With the onset of summer, together with many of their friends, John and Margaret Eustace may well have headed for the nearby coast, but in neither place does he ever seemed to have owned a home. His name never appears as an owner on any recorded New Hanover deeds. If a leaseholder he left no traces. Yet it is striking that a sale of the property by Henry and Mary Toomer, Joshua Grainger's daughter and son-in-law, is recorded on February 28, 1769, just about the time of Eustace's death, suggesting possibly that he had been the occupant and that

31 New Hanover County Deed Book, 1776-G194. For earlier histories of the property and house, see Emma Woodward MacMillan, *Wilmington's Vanished Homes and Buildings*, Raleigh, 1966, pp. 79-80 (which, working from its present appearance, erroneously dates the house to about 1880); Elizabeth F. McCoy, *Early Wilmington Block by Block from 1733 on*, Wilmington, 1967, pp. 75, 101-03; McCoy, *Early New Hanover County Records*, Wilmington, 1973, pp. 113-18, which gives the land transactions history; and her information sheet, "Shandy Hall on Greenvile sound," a copy of which is the the Local History Collection, New Hanover County Library, Wilmington. Also see David Foard Hood, Christopher Martin, and Edward F. Turberg, *Historic Architecture of New Hanover County*, Wilmington, 1986, p. 96 (where again the house is erroneously dated to about 1880); and the file of the Historic Sites Survey of the State of North Carolina Department of Archives and History, Survey Site NH598.

32 Letters of Sterne, p. 120, letter of August 3, 1760 to Mrs. Fenton.

33 Letters of Sterne, pp. 366-67, June 29, 1767 in the "Journal to Eliza."

34 Letters of Sterne, p. 380, July 16, 1767 in the "Journal to Eliza."

35 Hood et al., *Historic Architecture of New Hanover County*, p. 96.


37 Journal of a Lady of Quality, p. 284. His father's house was of this sort; see Tony P. Wrenn, *Wilmington, North Carolina; An Architectural and Historical Portrait*, Charlottesville, 1985, pp. 82-83.

38 *Wills and Inventories*, pp. 150-153. To his son Isaac he left a "wooden tenement . . . adjoining to the tenement where Doctor Eustace lives." For John Dubois see Vernon O. Stumpf's entry in *DNCB*, II, pp. 110-11.
the house was being sold on its becoming vacant. It may have been with recollections of his recent tenancy, and as a commemoration of his great admiration for Laurence Sterne, that this modest resort home appropriately came to be called Shandy Hall.

Surely many other eighteenth-century North Carolinians read and admired Sterne, but none seems to have been affected as much as John Eustace, at least not sufficiently to have inaugurated an important, albeit brief correspondence, or to have caused a house to be named in the author’s honor. The one monument to their relationship, the exchange of letters, is well known and shall endure.

Perhaps, if better known, the other Shandy Hall, the house at Shandy Point, as the surrounding Wilmington neighborhood has come to be called, will be preserved and remembered as a tribute to their fleeting friendship.

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30 New Hanover County Deed Book 1769-F122. It may be more than coincidental that Mary Grainger Toomer’s sister was apparently Ann, the third wife of Eustace’s in-town landlord John Dubois.

40 Located immediately to the south of this Shandy Hall another local house also gained a Shandean association. Called Tabby House by 1792, it eventually came to be regarded as a variant on Toby House and was associated with the home of Tristram’s uncle Toby Shandy, whose house had been near his brother’s (Tristram Shandy, I, chapt. 5); see McKoy, Early New Hanover County, pp. 28, 117-18; McKoy, Early Wilmington, pp. 74-75. More likely its name derived from a once coastal building material, tabby or taby, for which see Mills Lane, Architecture of the Old South, New York, 1996, p. 31.
Backyard view of Wilmington's Shandy Hall, which faces toward the water.

Photographer John Haley