WILLIAM DRY: PASSIVE PATRIOT

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William Dry, Brunswick planter and planter in colonial North Carolina, has been a relatively neglected figure in the history of the state. Perhaps the advent of the bicentennial celebration of the American Revolution provides sufficient reason to recognize the influence of this Cape Fear revolutionary. Although Dry was one of the colony’s most vocal supporters of the movement to secure independence, he never participated actively on its behalf. Indeed, his fulsome verbal encouragement for the Revolution constituted the extent of his patriotism. Dry’s reluctance is understandable; he had benefited from his appointive offices in the government while his vast fortune in landed investments throughout the southern part of the colony inclined him toward conservatism. Why did Dry opt for revolution? Hopefully this vignette of William Dry will not only illuminate aspects of the life of this prominent resident of the Cape Fear but also adduce some explanation for his patriotism.

The progenitor of the Dry family in Carolina was Robert Dry who immigrated to South Carolina about 1680. His son, William Dry I, inherited the home plantation near Charles Town which he bequeathed to William Dry II. The latter purchased a second plantation near the Goose Creek Bridge fronting the King’s Highway whereon he lived. He augmented this realty as one of the original grantees of the town of Beaufort but promptly sold his lots and plantations in anticipation of his departure to the Cape Fear. The marriage of William Dry II to the sister of Roger, Maurice, and Nathaniel Moore probably prompted him to join the Cape Fear enterprise initiated by the Moores in the 1720’s. Dry moved his family including sixteen-year-old William Dry III to Brunswick in 1736 where he became a prominent merchant, justice of the peace, and militia captain until his death in 1746 or 1747.1

William Dry III, the revolutionary, stood ready to succeed his father as one of the leading citizens of the Cape Fear. He retained the magistrate’s office and militia command in the family. In 1746 he had married Mary Jane Rhett, maternal granddaughter of Nicholas Trott and paternal granddaughter of the notorious William Rhett of South Carolina, and “a lady of great fortune and merit” in her own right.2 His wife’s estate supplemented Dry’s inheritance of his father’s mercantile and planting interests to allow Dry to follow the leisurely life of a gentleman at an early age. Acting upon the prevailing ideology in colonial America which emphasized the responsibility of the elite to use their time, talent, and wealth to serve the public, Dry participated in projects to extend military protection to the province, develop the navigability of the Cape Fear River, and improve the transportation facilities of New Hanover County. Moreover, he was an active member of the vestry of St. James Parish where he served conscientiously at a time when religion seemed almost devoid of influence in the area.3

Dry’s militia post first catapulted the young man into provincial prominence. As the War of Jenkins’ Ear merged with King George’s War in the 1740’s, the Spanish made preparations to raid the Carolina coast. While the North Carolinians procrastinated in their efforts to defend the colony, particularly by erecting a fort to guard the entrance of the Cape Fear River and Brunswick, the Spanish conducted a number of inland forays along the coast. At Ocracoke, Core Sound, Bear Inlet, and the Cape Fear they murdered colonists, seized slaves, and wreaked considerable property damage. The most devastating attack occurred at Brunswick on September 4, 1748 where the Spanish in a surprise attack routed the townspeople who left their homes and belongings to enemy plunder.4

As captain of the local militia William Dry attempted to regroup the colonial forces. The alarm was spread throughout the area and a message sent to the commanders of British warships in the Charles Town harbor requesting assistance. By September 6, Dry had gathered some eighty men including Brunswick citizens, farmers, sailors, and slaves with whom he determined to counterattack. Overconfident from their easy success, the Spaniards became the victims of surprise, losing ten killed and thirty wounded. The remainder fled to their ships anchored in the Cape Fear River.5

The largest of their three ships, a twenty-four gun (Continued on Page Two)
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sloop, opened fire on Brunswick but was soon silenced by an explosion which destroyed the boat. The commander of the remaining vessels offered a truce arrangement to Dry whereby the Spanish would cease shelling the town if allowed to leave quietly with their booty. Dry replied that he would permit departure only after all stolen property was returned and English prisoners released. Yet, he was powerless to stop the Spanish since he did not possess the ships to contest their control of the river. Consequently the enemy prepared to depart.6

The next day Major John Swann from Wilmington at the head of 130 men came to the aid of Brunswick. Swann, supplanting Dry as the leader of the colonial forces, tried to intercept the Spanish before they had partially completed Fort Johnston located on the present site of Southport. The enemy escaped, however, and after an abortive attempt to exchange prisoners left the North Carolina coast. Less than a month later the signing of the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle formally ended the hostilities.7

As a result of his heroics at Brunswick, Dry was elevated to the rank of colonel in the militia. At the same time the assembly designated him one of the commissioners of Fort Johnston which not only protected the Cape Fear but also much of Dry's property along the river from Brunswick to Wilmington. The inferior condition of the fort little improved in the 1750's and, in fact, its dilapidated state exemplified North Carolina's entire defense effort.8

The outbreak of the French and Indian War in 1754 somewhat jarred the lethargic Carolinians. The ease with which the Spanish had moved into the Cape Fear in the 1740's convinced them that they must prepare for a similar eventuality during the current conflict. Therefore, Dry consented to repair Fort Johnston within two years for £2,900 proclamation money to be raised by a levy of two shillings per ton on every ship trading through the port of Brunswick.9 Fortunately the assembly proved lenient because in February 1764, five years after its original agreement with Dry, the fort's magazine still lacked flooring as well as a door, lock, and key. Furthermore, twenty feet of the outer wall or glacis on the northeast corner remained open. Not until October 1764 could Dry produce a certificate from the commanding officer of the fort corroborating the completion of the repairs according to the directions of the assembly.10 Ironically, by that time the war was over and the fort once more began to decay.

OPEN HOUSE?
The Latimer House was opened each Monday this summer from 10 until 4 with an average daily attendance of 12. Members were admitted free and others charged 50 cents which amounted to $41. It will require volunteers to keep the House open. If you are interested and will give at least 3 hours between 10 and 4 on a Monday please call Mrs. William Perdew, 762-6225. If you don't call, do not ask "When will the Latimer House be open?"

MEETING
Time: October 24, 1973, 8:00 P.M.
Place: St. James Great Hall
Speaker: Dr. David A. McLean
Subject: Archaeological work in Robeson County, and the Indian Museum of the Carolinas, Laurinburg.

Dr. McLean is the Chairman of the Department of Anthropology at St. Andrews Presbyterian College in Laurinburg, N. C., and a lecturer in the Christianity and Culture Courses. He holds degrees from Davidson College, Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, and the University of Witwaterstrand, South Africa. He has been engaged in archaeological work in Scotland and Robeson Counties.

NEW MEMBERS
Col. and Mrs. Andrew H. Harris Jr., Wilmington
Mr. and Mrs. Wayne Arnold, Burgaw
Mr. and Mrs. William A. Lamont, Wilmington
Bank of North Carolina NA, Wilmington
Mrs. John Strecker, Wilmington
Miss Sarah Gayle Hunter, Richmond, Va.
Mrs. Frank L. Tolar, Wilmington
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H. William Gillen, M.D., Wilmington
Dr. Lockert B. Mason, Wilmington
Mr. William J. King, Wilmington
Mrs. J. Lawrence Hiatt, Jr., Wilmington
In the meantime Dry continued to play an integral part in Cape Fear society by serving the community in various capacities. He was one of the commissioners of the roads in the southwest district of New Hanover County from 1745 to 1764 when the county abandoned the commissioner system and relied upon the county court to supervise the construction and repair of the roads. The assembly also appointed Dry commissioner of pilotage for the Cape Fear River with the authority to examine and license pilots to assist ships in making their way past the bar and up the river.11

Although lacking a formal education, Dry had acquired the rudiments of surveying in his youth which proved useful in overseeing his personal estate as well as aiding the public. In 1764 he was named one of the commissioners to determine the dividing line between Bladen and newly-created Brunswick County. Eight years later he and Receiver General of the Quittrents, John Rutherford, joined representatives of South Carolina to survey a much needed extension of the boundary between the colonies.12

Amid these services to the colony Dry at the rather late age of forty evinced an interest in politics. In 1760 he became one of the charter aldermen of Wilmington and successfully stood for election to the provincial assembly from the town of Brunswick.13 After a brief and rather colorless career in the lower house, an appointment to the council ensued in 1763. When councilor John Swann died in 1761, Governor Arthur Dobbs wrote the Board of Trade to recommend Dry as a replacement. He characterized Dry as "a Gentleman of Great Worth and Fortune and zealous in Supporting His Majesty's Rights. . ."14 After the usual delay attending such administrative matters, Dry received his appointment in 1763 but did not assume his position on the council until the summer of 1764.15

Dry's service to the king as councilor was preceded by his employment in the customs department as Collector of the Port of Brunswick in 1761, a seemingly innocuous position which proved remunerative for the labor involved in registering ships trading in the Cape Fear.16 Little did Dry realize that his office would embroil him in the imperial politics of the Stamp Act controversy which brought Carolinians to the verge of rebellion and endangered the collector's reputable standing in the community.

Seeking revenue to ease the heavy debt burden of England and counter the increasing cost of the royal military and civil establishments in the American colonies after the close of the French and Indian War, Parliament passed the Sugar Act in 1764. This legislation attempted to raise money via tariffs on colonial importations of sugar, molasses, and other goods. At the same time the British government announced its intention to impose a stamp tax on the colonies similar to one which had been in force in England since the early years of the eighteenth century.

The Americans were given a year to suggest an alternative means of taxation, but apparently the Grenville ministry had already decided upon the desirability of a stamp duty. Thus, the Stamp Act passed Parliament with little opposition and was scheduled to become effective on November 1, 1765. The legislation required the purchase of stamps from British officials in the colonies which would be affixed to dice, playing cards, newspapers, diplomas, legal documents, and ship clearances among a host of items. The burden of the tax was intensified by the provision that the stamp duty was payable only in specie of which there was little in North Carolina. More obnoxious to the colonials was the abridgment of their constitutional rights as Englishmen which resulted from their failure to determine their own taxation. Furthermore, violations of the act were to be tried in the vice-admiralty courts wherein there were no juries to protect the colonials from the harsh decrees of judge-oriented justice.17

The reaction to the Stamp Act in the Cape Fear region was as explosive as in any locale on the eastern coast. While the Stamp Act Congress met in New York in October 1765 to protest the impending tax, Wilmitonians hanged an effigy of a resident of the town who expressed approval of the legislation. Later, a crowd of some five hundred burned the effigy and forced all in town to the bonfire to drink toasts to "LIBERTY, PROPERTY and no STAMP DUTY."18 On October 31, the day before the Stamp Act became operative, another crowd gathered to celebrate an effigy of "Liberty," again before a large bonfire. Apparently the people of Wilmington intended to prevent the execution of the British legislation.

The date of the enforcement of the statute, November 1, passed without incident. The stamps did not arrive in the colony until November 28. However, when Doctor William Houston, a resident of Duplin County who had been appointed Stamp Receiver without his knowledge, arrived in Wilmington on November 16, he was greeted by over three hundred residents who demanded and received his resignation as stamp agent. Another celebration followed as the bewildered Houston contemplated the events of the day.19

Governor William Tryon, confined to his home Bellfont to the north of Brunswick, invited the leading citizens of Brunswick, Bladen, and New Hanover counties to dine with him on the evening of November 18 in order to entreat them to accept the stamp duty. The governor promised to pay the tax on all documents for which he received fees and agreed to intercede with the home government to ask that North Carolina be exempted from the Stamp Act due to the scarcity of specie in the colony. He further pointed out the enormous economic loss which would result from the stoppage of commerce if the colony refused to admit the stamps. His guests replied by averring their loyalty to the crown but refusing to accept the Stamp Act because it was injurious of their liberties.20

The arrival of the stamps ten days later created little concern in the colony since Houston had resigned. Still, the province's refusal to use the stamps caused a cessation of commerce and court business to the detriment of the economy. This lull was abruptly disturbed in January 1766 when Captain Jacob Lobb, commander of the armed sloop Viper, seized three ships attempting to enter the Cape Fear without properly stamped papers. The commander sent the papers to Dry as collector of the port of Brunswick. Acting on orders from the surveyor general of the customs, Dry forwarded the papers to Robert Jones, Attorney General of the colony, for advice on the proper legal proceedings. Jones replied that the ships should be taken to the vice-admiralty court in Halifax, Nova Scotia for prosecution.21

The reaction by the Carolinians was swift. Forty prominent inhabitants of the Cape Fear area wrote to Dry on February 15 that the attorney general's opinion was unacceptable. They added that they were "apprehensive of
the very ill Consequences that will attend this affair should you suffer these Vessels or the Papers belonging to them to be carried out of the River. If the People of the Country come down in a Body which we are informed they are determined to do, We leave you to judge how far our Properties or yours may be Secure.\textsuperscript{22} When Dry showed the letter to Tryon, the governor advised the collector to place the papers on board the Viper for safekeeping. Dry discounted this admonition, replying that “they might take them from [me] but [I will] never give them up without Capt[ain] Lobb[']s order.”\textsuperscript{23} Tryon’s reservations were well-grounded however. A group of Carolinians descended upon Dry’s office on February 19 and forcibly seized the ships’ papers.\textsuperscript{24}

The party which so rudely visited Dry was continually reinforced by armed provincials arriving from neighboring counties. Over a hundred called upon Tryon on the evening of the nineteenth seeking Captain Lobb. While conversing with the governor, the leaders of the crowd were informed that Lobb was aboard the Viper. The next day a delegation met Lobb and demanded the release of the ships. One of the vessels had already been freed on the recognizance of its owner. On February 20, Lobb authorized the release of the other two and assured the inhabitants that the port would henceforth be open to commercial traffic.\textsuperscript{25} Obviously the commander was awed by the size of the armed mob which had been gathering.

After cowing Lobb into submission, the mob decided to ensure their victory. They found Dry, the comptroller of the customs at Brunswick, clerks of the county courts, and other public officers and forced him to swear never to issue stamped paper in the province.\textsuperscript{26} Thus, the provincials successfully resisted the execution of the Stamp Act in North Carolina whereby they totally embarrassed the British government.

The Stamp Act crisis seems to have been a turning point in Dry’s career. Before the advent of that legislation, he was a partisan of the crown, enjoying a prestigious seat on the council and a position in the customs department. His economic fortunes were no less enviable. The collector’s landholdings were so vast that even he was unsure of their extent. At one time he owned Baldhead or the Cape Island, currently a focal point of ecological controversy, a large part of Eagles Island in the Cape Fear river opposite Wilmington, and acreage throughout the southeastern counties of the province. Town property included lots in Brunswick, Wilmington, New Bern, and Hillsborough.\textsuperscript{27}

The Stamp Act jeopardized this success by placing Dry in opposition to the popular majority in the colony. Not anticipating the violent reaction to the stamp legislation, Dry unwittingly incurred the wrath of the Cape Fear by virtue of his position as collector of the port of Brunswick which compelled him to act as an agent of the crown. His predicament stemmed from the truncated nature of American society and politics. Colonial society was incomplete, its basis resting finally in England wherein political preferment lay. Americans, then, depended ultimately upon the crown for advancement, but the estrangement of the colonies and Britain after 1763 brought increasing pressure upon members of the royal establishment and benefactors of the king. Eventually that pressure forced them to compromise their allegiance to the crown or join the ranks of the loyalists.

Often the onrushing advance of politics maneuvered colonials unknowingly into an anti-American position which isolated them from the mainstream of public opinion. Alienation occasioned greater dependence upon the crown which in turn contributed to their isolation. Some of these colonials managed to extract themselves from this vortex however. For example, Henry Laurens, wealthy Charles Town, South Carolina merchant, had voiced approval of the Stamp Act to the detriment of his public esteem. He found an opportunity to redeem his reputation three years later by accepting the popular views and strenuously opposing the crown when customs officials seized one of his ships for violating the navigation laws. Thereafter, Laurens continued to court popular favor and emerged as one of South Carolina’s revolutionary leaders.\textsuperscript{28}

Dry had duplicated Laurens’ error in the Stamp Act affair. Although he was not afforded a similar opportunity to recoup his popularity, he refused to allow his royal offices to draw him into the orbit of the crown. Instead, he worked assiduously over the ensuing years to gain the approval of his contemporaries and eventually appeared as a leading advocate of “republican principles.”

The transition proved relatively easy to make since Dry was fundamentally “a good-natured man” who made no pretense “to knowledge or understanding in anything” and lacked fixed political principles.\textsuperscript{29} And, importantly, he was not dependent upon the crown for the bulk of his income. The British obligingly presented the colonials, including Dry, several opportunities for criticism: the Townshend Acts, the Boston Massacre, and the Intolerable Acts. By 1774 the collector had definitely emerged on the side of the popular majority when he and other councilors contradicted instructions from the crown and exhortations from Governor Josiah Martin by supporting assembly bills which altered the nature of county and superior courts in the colony. When Martin demanded written explanations from the councilors, Dry answered that he had “acted from the independant Principles of rectitude and good conscience . . . .” His professed support for the crown was unconvincing, attached as it was to declarations of independent action which expressly denied royal competence in the colony.\textsuperscript{30}

The following year found Dry detaching himself completely from the royal cause. In April 1775 the collector met William Hooper, a North Carolina delegate to the Second Continental Congress, in Rogers’ Tavern in Brunswick. Upon bidding Hooper farewell, Dry wished him a safe return and urged him not to yield to the British in any negotiations.\textsuperscript{31} After revelations of the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts, Dry became even more outspoken in his encouragement of the Americans. In the summer of 1775 he invited recruiting officers from South Carolina to his home for dinner where he toasted three times “success to the American Arms,” adding that he ardently wished that they might prevail.\textsuperscript{32} At approximately the same time Janet Schaw found the collector the most zealous of the American partisans in Brunswick, a man who talked “treason by the hour.”\textsuperscript{33} Governor Martin suspended Dry from his seat on the council for the collector’s outspoken sentiments, noting that “his notorious unreserved and frequent avowals of his inclinations and favour to the present unprincipled revolt in America, by which imprudence and extravagance, so inconsistent with his interest as well as his duty, I am sure he has astonished even the foremost Leaders of sedition.”\textsuperscript{34}
Despite these protestations of support for the Americans, Dry did not prove to be a fervent patriot. Of course, a fifty-five-year-old man could not be expected to take the field of battle, but there were other means of assisting the war effort. Yet, Dry refused to become involved. When the legislature of the new state of North Carolina appointed him one of seven members of the Council of State, Dry declined to serve. In fact, no evidence exists to substantiate his active participation in the conflict with Britain.

Again, Dry’s character becomes of paramount importance. Basically he was a jovial planter who was more concerned with setting a fine table and entertaining guests than actively pursuing politics. Massachusetts journalist Josiah Quincy, Jr. found “Dry[s] is justly called the house of universal hospitality—his table abounds with plenty—his servants excell in cookery—and his sensible lady exceeds (at least I think equals) Sister Quincy in the pasty and nick-nack way.”

Before the war began in North Carolina in 1776, Dry had been relatively safe in his pro-American declarations. But during that year he suddenly found that the Cape Fear was as vulnerable to the British as it had been to the Spanish in the 1740’s. Even after the Tory advance had been halted at Moore’s Creek Bridge, the British under Sir Henry Clinton and Charles Cornwallis harassed the Cape Fear below Wilmington. Raiding parties looted Brunswick and burned Dry’s elegant home, Bellfont, formerly Russelborough, which he had purchased from Governor Tryon in 1771. Dry was the last occupant of that fine estate which was subsequently deserted and rediscovered over a hundred years later.

The British were not the only concern in North Carolina during the war. The revolutionary years were ones of constant ferment in which the heretofore voiceless lower orders of society began to constitute a political force in the state. The activism and democracy of this newer element, particularly strong in North Carolina, frightened many upper class conservatives who feared the leveling spirit would jeopardize their property rights as well as their traditional political leadership. Threatened by the British, loyalists, and American revolutionaries, Dry retired to the shelter of another of his plantation homes in Brunswick County.

Dry spent the remainder of his life on Blue Banks Plantation, a 3,800 acre estate which he had given to his elder daughter Sarah and her husband, Benjamin Smith, a future governor of the state. He died on June 3, 1781 at the age of sixty-one and was buried in St. Philip’s churchyard where most of his immediate family lies. An unwilling participant in the Stamp Act crisis and ambivalent revolutionary, Dry should best be remembered perhaps as one of those many overlooked Cape Fear residents whose time, effort, and wealth helped to shape the development of the southeastern region of North Carolina.

FOOTNOTES


7. Ibid., 234.

8. State Records, XXII, 389; Colonial Records, V, 163; IV, 1235.


12. Ibid., XXIII, 625; Colonial Records, IX, 302.


14. Ibid., VI, 600.

15. State Records, XI, 156; Colonial Records, VI, 1077.


19. Ibid., Colonial Records, VII, 124-125, 131, 143.


22. Ibid., VII, 177-178.

23. Ibid., VII, 169.

24. Ibid., VII, 170.

25. Ibid., VII, 170-171; North Carolina Gazette, Feb. 26, 1766; Virginia Gazette (Purdie), Mar. 21, 1766.


27. Will of William Dry, Sept. 21, 1779, Brunswick County Deed Book B, 162-165, Office if Register of Deeds, Brunswick County Courthouse, Southport, North Carolina; Colonial Records, IV, 334, 349, 594, 1245, 1250, 1252; V, 820.


30. Ibid., IX, 980.

31. Ibid., IX, 1239.

32. Ibid., X, 131.


35. Ibid., X, 1013; State Records, XI, 393; XXII, 906; XXIII, 986.


