

# Storm On The Cape Fear

**'Had the British officers been less pliant, the American Revolution would have started in North Carolina.'**

By Margaret McMahan  
Special Correspondent

It is mid-October, 1765, and near the turbulent waters of the Province of North Carolina's Cape Fear, a storm, out of the turbulence of men's minds, is brewing. Leaders have learned that the colony's first cargo of stamped paper is expected to arrive at Brunswick November 1st. Their long waiting period since passage of the tyrannical act in March is ending. Henceforth, seals upon blue parchment, ornamented with tinfoil and Royal devices, and naming a money value, must be glued to every official paper in the colony.

The very thought is maddening to the freedom-loving men who are making a new and democratic country; it is a flagrant exhibition of "taxation without representation," a violation of their fundamental rights as English citizens.

After months-long discussion in homes and abroad, the people of the Lower Cape Fear have chartered their course. Here, at the mouth of the province's great ocean-bound river, where is the center of trade, the odious stamps must be resisted. The aggressive speaker of the House of Commons, John Ashe, declares for all: "We must stand against them to the point of blood and death." Planters, politicians, merchants, define the reason: "The bulk of the import and export commerce of the province passes through Brunswick. We must make clear that vital necessities can be carried, by those versed in the art of smuggling, away from our river into hidden coastal inlets and passages, without stamps. If this is permitted, the Wilmington-Brunswick merchants will be ruined, and all those dependent upon them."

"Aye," interposes the impetuous Ashe, "we must lead our compatriots in stamping out the hateful stamps . . . show our grievance and protest in displays of armed force and organized resistance — if need be."

Cornelius Harnett, a planter and political leader who has earned the sobriquet, "Pride of the Cape Fear," makes a point: "Here is the logical place to begin,

for Governor Tryon is close by at Russellborough and some of his council members also live in the district."

Decision is made to assert their independence in another way. They will import no British goods as long as the stamps are required. At Cross Creek (Fayetteville), at Edenton, New Bern and at other places the people resolutely take the same stand.

On Oct. 19, to the lively Cape Fear port of Wilmington, comes bad news. Dr. William Houston, a respected planter and surgeon of Duplin County, has been appointed stamp collector for the province. Quickly, to show their disapproval, most of the town's near 500 citizens gather on the courthouse lawn and there string up an effigy. To some the stuffy figure represents the stampmaster. To others it is a symbol of the English parliamentarian, Lord Bute (deemed responsible for passage of the Stamp Act). Now, from glistening tar barrels a great bonfire is building. When its flames reach high and golden, it greedily receives the sad-looking remains of the effigy. The gentlemen of the town not already present are now brought to the scene. There, amid ringing cheers, all drink a toast: "Liberty, property and no stamp duty."

On the evening of Oct. 31 (Halloween), there is another gathering together of the menfolk, another building of a bonfire. The reason? News of the coming of the dreaded stamps has killed beloved Liberty. To the sound of muffled bell and mournful drumbeat, she goes to her last resting place. One patriot mourner, reluctant to give up Liberty, feels her pulse. "Oh joy! she still breathes." With great hilarity they bring her back to the bonfire. Partially recovered, she sits beside it with great state and dignity in a heavy "two-armed" chair. "Hurrah! Hurrah!" cry the prankster-patriots together. And their voices reverberate through the little town.

On Nov. 16, Stampmaster William Houston comes to Wilmington from his plantation home, Sacrete. The news spreads like wildfire. Three or four hundred defenders of liberty (later called Sons of Liberty) with drums beating

and flags flying, confront him at his lodging house. Says their spokesman, "Do you intend to perform your new office?" The answer is evasive, "I would not wish to execute any office disagreeable to the people . . ."

Spoken words are not enough, a written resignation is required. The mood of the visitors at once changes. Houston receives almost an ovation. He sits in an armchair held upon sturdy shoulders as he is carried around the courthouse square. At each corner, the carriers stop, get breath, then send on the air three resounding huzzahs. Back within his lodging house they treat him very genteelly with "the best liquors to be had."

In the evening, another bonfire is made and a command goes round: "No person is permitted on the streets tonight without having Liberty in large letters on his hat." The great fire, as if aware of its importance, crackles and sparkles, throws into relief, in its broad bright blaze, the resolute patriots' faces. Near it a table is laden with several sorts of liquors. The celebrants drink favorite American toasts "in great form, giving three cheers at the conclusion of each."

Midnight comes upon them unawares. One thing more before they disperse! From the meticulous Andrew Steuart, the public printer and newspaper editor, they extort a promise to print his North Carolina Gazette without stamps.

He more than obliges. His next issue bears a skull and crossbones where the stamps, by English law, should be. He pridefully notes also that these exhibitions of patriotism were conducted "with great decorum, and not the least insult offered to any person."

Gov. William Tryon, seeing the serious turn affairs have taken, now seeks to woo the people. By circular letter he invites "near 50 merchants of New Hanover and Brunswick" to dine at his house, "Russellborough" (now part of Orton Plantation) on Nov. 18. He hopes that the warmth of his hospitality and the powers of his persuasion, will dissolve their differences, that they will at last find the Stamp Act advantageous to trade and "acceptable."

The dinner is pleasant. There is excellent food and fine table talk. The "reason for being" is temporarily ignored. Now comes conference. Tryon, an officer of the Army, a gentleman by birth and education, social-minded and accomplished, presses his points. "Gentlemen," he pleads, "you will find the circulation of stamps expedient. . . . If you will let the act go into partial operation, I will pay at my own expense the duty on all stamped paper on which I am entitled to fees (a considerable amount — fees on land patents, testimonials, injunctions in chancery, letters of administration, wine licenses, etc.)"

His overtures are useless. The Stamp Act, the visitors answer in a communication the next day, is "most dangerous to our liberties as British subjects." As to the governor's offer to pay certain fees, "With an approval of part we cannot deny the Act's validity as a whole. . . ." The issue is not a matter of money, but of principle. Every effort will be used to prevent insult and violence to officers of the Crown, except the distributors of stamps: "They are too much detested to be secure from the resentment of the colonists. . . ."

Governor Tryon and the English Parliament even now are not too disturbed. Bonfires and burnings-in-effigy have been a British custom since time immemorial, "bibulous affairs for the roistering and undisciplined." Those upstart Americans would learn their lesson in time!



THE ARBITRARY AND STUBBORN King George III, seeking stricter control of the colonies, encouraged his ministers to pass the Stamp Act.

And now, in late November, 1765, the people of the Cape Fear learn that the overdue British sloop-of-war, the Diligence, bringing from Virginia the colony's first cargo of stamps, is not far away. Crisis is at hand. By open hostility, by the use of arms if need be, they must prove their words, "We will resist them to the death."

The captain of the Diligence, Constantine John Phipps, has been cruising slowly in Virginia and North Carolina coastal waters. He is a distinguished naval officer, often a voyager to cold climes (he would some day be Lord Mulgrave and write "A Voyage Toward the North Pole.") He is in no hurry, for in these Southern waters the soft air of summer yet seems to linger. Pacing his deck he contemplates his destination, recalls the mouth-watering delicacies he has enjoyed on previous trips, at the tables of the Cape Fear gentry. Hopefully, these pleasures will soon be repeated. The thought of terra firma is exhilarating for another reason. The deer hunts in the fragrant piney woods about Brunswick, to the music of the hounds, are equal to any in the homeland, and have about them the added interests and excitements of a novel and expansive country.

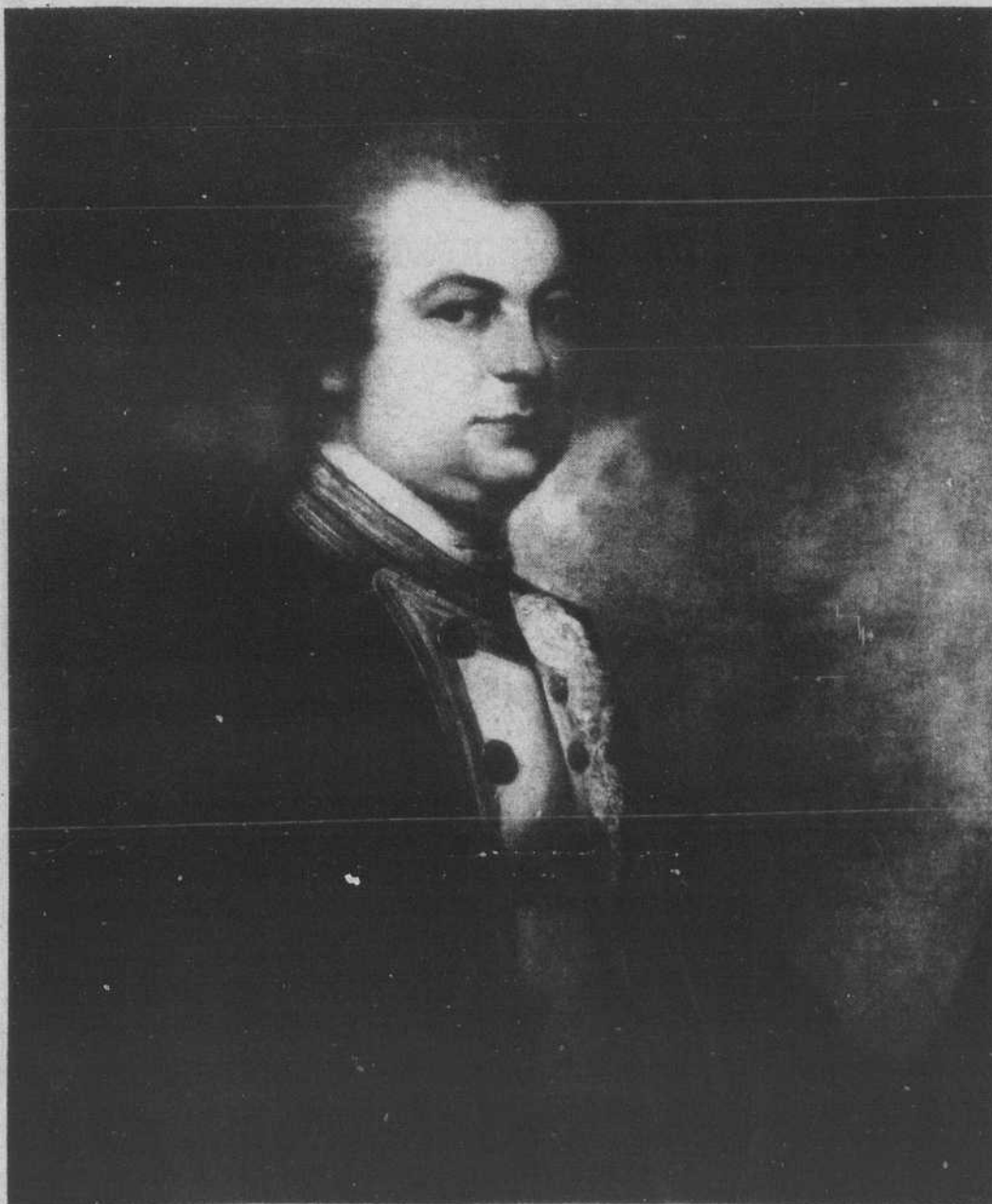
The idea of resistance to

the stamps does not occur to him. Of course, the Cape Fear District, first, and then the Province, will accept them, for are they not living in a Crown Colony and owing loyal support to the King and Parliament?

The Diligence bows along, the beautiful bringer of an obnoxious cargo. At last (Nov. 28) she reaches the bay into which the Cape Fear widens. With colors flying and all her canvas set, she walks the waves slowly, majestically, crosses the bar like a great lady, poised, deliberate, sure of herself. Opposite Fort Johnston, she sends in greeting, a puff of white smoke from her port quarter and a roar from one of her guns.

And from the recently-completed fort, built to guard the province from the Spanish, comes an answering thunder of welcome. Now the Diligence proudly plies her sails toward the Town of Brunswick, eight miles farther up the river in the direction of Wilmington. In 60 minutes she sights the town. A little later, with a graceful sweep and a rushing keel, she glides toward her moorings opposite the Custom House of Brunswick. There is the shrill sound of the boatswain's whistle, then the clanging of chains, and her anchor is released.

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CAPTAIN JOHN PHIPPS, who brought the Diligence up the Cape Fear River to Brunswick.

CONTINUATION OF  
(November 20.) THE (Numb. 58.)  
NORTH-CAROLINA GAZETTE.

WILMINGTON, November 20.

ON Saturday the 19th of last Month, about Seven of the Clock in the Evening, near Five Hundred People assembled together in this Town, and exhibited the Effigy of a certain HONOURABLE GENTLEMAN; and after letting it hang by the Neck for some Time, near the Court-House, they made a large Bonfire with a Number of Tar-Barrels, &c. and committed it to the Flames. — The Reason assigned for the People's Dislike to that Gentleman, was, from being informed of his having several Times expressed himself much in Favour of the STAMP-DUTY. — After the Effigy was consumed, they went to every House in Town, and bro't all the Gentlemen to the Bonfire, and insisted upon their drinking, LIBERTY, PROPERTY, AND NO STAMP-DUTY, and Confusion to Lord Bute and all his Adherents, giving three Huzzas at the Conclusion of each Toast. — They continued together until 12 of the Clock, and then dispersed, without doing any Mischief. And,

On Thursday, 21st of the same Month, in the Evening, a great Number of People again assembled, and produced an Effigy of LIBERTY, which they put into a Coffin, and marched in solemn Procession with it to the Church-Yard, a Drum in Mourning beating before them, and the Town Bell, muffled, ringing a doleful Knell at the same Time; — But before they committed the Body to the Ground, they thought it advisable to feel its Pulse; and when finding some Remains of Life, they returned back to a Bonfire ready prepared, placed the Effigy before it in a large Two-arm'd Chair, and concluded the Evening with great Rejoicings, on finding that LIBERTY had still an Existence in the Colonies. — Not the least Injury was offered to any Person.

On Saturday the 16th of this Inst. WILLIAM HOUSTON, Esq; Distributor of STAMPS for this Province, came to this Town; upon which three or four Hundred People immediately gathered together, with Drums beating and Colours flying, and repaired to the House the said STAMP-OFFICER put up at, and insisted upon knowing, "Whether he intended to execute his said Office, or not?" He told them, "He should be very sorry to execute any Office disagreeable to the People of the Province." But they, not content with such a Declaration, carried him into the Court-House, where he signed a Resignation satisfactory to the Whole.

As soon as the STAMP-OFFICER had comply'd with their Desire, they placed him in an Arm-Chair, carried him first round the Court-House, giving three Huzzas at every Corner, and then proceeded with him round one of the Squares of the Town, and sat him down at the Door of his Lodgings, formed themselves in a large Circle round him, and gave him three Cheers: They then escorted him into the House, where was prepared the best Liquors to be had, and treated him very genteelly. In the Evening a large Bonfire was made, and no Person appeared in the Streets without having LIBERTY, in large Capital Letters, in his Hat. — They had a large Table near the Bonfire, well furnish'd with several Sorts of Liquors, where they drank in great Form, all the favourite AMERICAN Toasts, giving three Cheers at the Conclusion of each. The whole was conducted with great Decorum, and not the least Insult offered to any Person.

This is the Place to see the STAMP. — In Proof of this Page, Witness the Nature of a TRAGIC VILLAIN'S Subject.

