

ABSTRACT

STROUD, JASON MICHAEL. *Partial Views and Private Interest: Corruption and Rhetoric in Colonial North Carolina, 1754-1760*. (Under the direction of Holly Brewer.)

Under the governorship of Arthur Dobbs (r.1754-1763) colonial North Carolina witnessed a number of serious political debates that culminated in an effort by opposition political leaders to unseat the governor. This thesis examines the role of political corruption, both as a practice and a discourse, in these debates. It argues that the rhetoric of corruption was largely driven by anxieties about the ability of corrupt practices, especially patronage, to cement political ties among the colony's elites on the one hand and to enable the governor to fill the colony's posts with pliant factors on the other. These anxieties stemmed from both eighteenth century political thought and realities in North Carolina, a society largely held together by personal connections. Three political events are considered—Arthur Dobbs's removal of James Murray and John Rutherford from the executive council, the dispute over a Parliamentary grant to the colony, and civic disturbances in the Granville District. Most studies of these disputes have focused on Arthur Dobbs's attempts to crush the political factions that assembled in opposition to his leadership and the exercise of royal prerogative in the colony. By emphasizing the intensely personal political environment of colonial North Carolina, this thesis argues that the discourse of political corruption used in these political contests was used by both the governor and his adversaries in support of and in opposition to executive power. It further argues that corrupt practice and discourse were severely destabilizing forces in colonial North Carolina, and contrasts the rhetoric of mid-century politics with that used by the Regulators against corruption more than a decade later.

Partial Views and Private Interest: Corruption and Politics
in Colonial North Carolina, 1754-1760

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

History

Raleigh, North Carolina

2010

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DEDICATION

To my family.

BIOGRAPHY

Jason Stroud was born in Charlotte, North Carolina and raised in nearby Union County.

After receiving his B.A. in History from The Citadel, he taught social studies at Roanoke Rapids High School in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina for nine years. In 2008, he entered North Carolina State University, and will graduate in August with a M.A. in History. He resides in Roanoke Rapids with his wife, Jamie and their two boys Noah and Lucas.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is in part about the relationships of dependence that characterized eighteenth century North Carolina politics. It is fitting, then, that the whole project should serve as a reminder of how totally dependent I am on the people around me. While in graduate school, I benefited from the wisdom of several professors, especially Steven Vincent, Jim Crisp, and Holly Brewer. Both in their seminars and in conversation, they have challenged, encouraged, and taught me more than I ever expected to learn in two years. Dr. Brewer, in particular, agreed to direct my thesis when she had many other things to do, and I am grateful for her enthusiasm, knowledge, and perhaps above all, her kindness and patience with my often glacial progress. It was the encouragement and guidance of NC State professors David Zonderman and Jim Clark that encouraged me to attend NC State in the first place, and I remain indebted to them. There are no words sufficient to express my gratitude to my parents, without whom this whole endeavor would have been impossible for me and my family. My children, Noah and Lucas, have kept my focus where it should be, even during the busiest of times, and my parents-in-law have put in long hours to make it possible to complete my work. Of my wife, Jamie, all I can say in this limited space is that anything worthwhile about this work, as well as everything else, is far more the result of her efforts than my own.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

The following is a list of eighteenth-century British and North Carolina politicians that figure prominently in the narrative below.

James Abercromby- North Carolina's colonial agent in London. Abercromby was strongly connected to several of the colony's political leaders, especially John Rutherford and Samuel Swann. He also served as agent to Virginia, and was a political rival of Henry McCulloh.

John, Lord Carteret, 1st Earl of Granville- English politician who inherited one-eighth of the proprietary colony of Carolina. Unlike the other seven proprietors, he opted not to sell his grant back to the Crown, and was given an expanse of land that made up the northern half of North Carolina. The corruption of his land agents was one cause of the Enfield Riots, along with his rivalry with Henry McCulloh, the colony's other major landholder. He was President of the Privy Council, a position with enormous power and influence, throughout the 1750s to his death in 1763.

Thomas Child- English placeman and attorney for Lord Granville. He replaced Francis Corbin as proprietary land agent after the Enfield Riots and became the leader of the unsuccessful movement among many of the colony's politicians to remove governor Arthur Dobbs from office.

Francis Corbin- English-born proprietary agent and attorney in the province for Granville from 1749-1759. As Granville's agent, he conducted business in the Earl's land office, a position which brought him considerable political influence in the colony, including a seat on the executive Council. In retaliation for corruption and illegal grants made under his supervision, he was forcibly detained by a crowd during the Enfield Riots. He joined several other influential politicians in the resistance to Arthur Dobbs in 1759 and 1760.

Arthur Dobbs- Irish-born governor of North Carolina from 1754 to his death in 1765. Dobbs, an ardent imperialist and supporter of the power of the Crown, met with strong resistance on a variety of issues from factions within the colonial assembly. He was a close associate of Henry McCulloh, a relationship that aroused jealousy among many colonial elites.

Gabriel Johnston- Governor of North Carolina from 1734 to his death in 1752. A native of Scotland, he appointed his countrymen James Murray and John Rutherford to the governor's council. His administration was marred by a bitter dispute between politicians from the northern Albemarle counties and those from the Cape Fear region.

Robert Jones- Born in Virginia, he settled in Northampton County, in the Granville District, and represented the county in the Assembly from 1754 to 1761. He became the colony's attorney general in 1756, but left the office in 1759 to serve as collector of the quitrents for the Granville District. He opposed the administration of Arthur Dobbs after the governor passed him over for a number of lucrative appointments.

Alexander McCulloch- Nephew of land speculator Henry McCulloh and a favorite of Arthur Dobbs, served as deputy auditor of the province throughout the 1750s. A prominent planter, land speculator and multiple office holder in Edgecombe and later Halifax County, he is believed to have been the leader of the Enfield rioters.

Henry McCulloh- London merchant and land speculator with massive land holdings in North Carolina. McCulloh aggressively pursued his interests in the colony, and he played a pivotal role in many of the colony's political controversies. He was a friend and ally of Arthur Dobbs, who helped to advance his interests in the province.

James Murray- Scottish-born merchant and planter who settled in the Cape Fear region outside of Wilmington in 1735. He was a friend and supporter of governor Gabriel Johnston, and became a rival of Arthur Dobbs, who suspended him from the Council in late 1757.

John Rutherford- Murray's cousin, also born in Scotland, and another prominent figure in Cape Fear and colonial politics. Rutherford became collector-general of the quitrents for the Crown at mid-century, and in this capacity he signed a series of paper notes issued by Murray, an offense for which the governor suspended both men.

John Starkey- Powerful English-born politician from Onslow County, he served in the Assembly from 1739 to his death in 1765. He became one of the colony's treasurers in 1750, and used his position to cultivate a considerable degree of political influence. A "declared Republican" according to Dobbs, he became one of the governor's fiercest rivals.

Samuel Swann- North Carolina-born Onslow County planter and politician. Swann became Speaker of the House in 1743, and was another member of the legislative opposition to the governor in the late 1750s. His brother John served on the Council under Dobbs.

CHAPTER 1 “Base and Unworthy Men”

“If I had been disposed to record disputes that originated in pride, resentment, the spirit of party, avarice, or a dishonest temper, I might have swelled this work to a considerable bulk. Such details of follies and vices cannot be interesting.”

—Hugh Williamson, *The History of North Carolina* (1812)

On the 23rd of May 1760, the lower house of the North Carolina colonial assembly met in closed, secret session to debate a petition to George II seeking redress for a series of grievances against royal governor Arthur Dobbs. Warning other members, at least a few of whom were allies of the governor, not to “discover the words or the Purport of the words” spoken in the proceedings, the Assembly leaders crafted twenty resolves that alleged a litany of abuses of power and incidents of corruption that spanned Dobbs’s five years in office. The resolutions accompanied a “Humble Address” to King George II that forecast “total Ruin” for his “faithful subjects” in North Carolina without the monarch’s “justice and speedy relief” in the form of drastic punitive action against the governor—ideally, his dismissal. This remarkable step on the part of the colony’s representative leadership was the culmination of a long-escalating feud between Dobbs and the lower house over a series of issues that involved fundamental issues of sovereignty, prerogative, and the rights of colonial assemblies within the British Empire.¹ These struggles brought the Assembly to a near-standstill by 1759, as Dobbs and the leaders of a rapidly crystallizing opposition faction traded increasingly serious accusations of corruption and malfeasance. Examining the

¹Lower House Minutes, 23 May 1760, William L. Saunders, ed., *The Colonial Records of North Carolina* (hereafter *NCCR*), vol. 6, 1759 to 1765 (Raleigh: Josephus Daniels, 1888): 409-418. Samuel Swann, the Speaker of the House, also enclosed a copy of “The Humble Address of the Assembly of North Carolina,” to Earl Granville on the same day. The copy of the address is enclosed with a letter from Swann, Speaker of the lower house, to Granville, at the time the President of the Privy Council, seeking his support for removing the governor. Samuel Swann to Granville, 23 May 1760, Granville District Papers from the Marquess of Bath Collection, microfilm at North Carolina Archives.

language used in these debates—including its origins—can reveal much about the relationship between rhetoric and political realities in the eighteenth century world.

These debates, however bitter, were nothing new—colonial North Carolina politics had long been remarkably contentious, and corruption at every level of provincial and local government was widely recognized as a serious political problem. Yet despite the eventful political history of the colony—Dobbs was the third royal governor to face a concerted removal attempt—the historiography of colonial North Carolina is notoriously sparse when compared to that of the New England and middle colonies and Virginia. Most historians who thought North Carolina politics and society worthy of study at all have focused their attention on the Regulator movement of the late 1760s and early 1770s, itself rooted in complaints about corruption of local officials. Many of these studies have viewed the events of the preceding decades, including those of the Dobbs administration, teleologically, as part of a process leading inexorably toward the Regulation, and ultimately the conflagration of the American Revolution.

Nineteenth and early twentieth century narrative histories, like those of William Saunders, North Carolina secretary of state and editor of the ten volume *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, and Samuel A'Court Ashe, portray the conflicts of the 1750s as a struggle against Dobbs, an “arbitrary and exacting figure,” whose expectation to “govern by prerogative alone” precipitated a series of clashes with the lower house of the assembly, whose members jealously guarded their liberties as guaranteed by the colonial charter and the British constitution. According to these Whig historians, North Carolinians, as Dobbs’s quarrels with the Assembly seemed to suggest, were “a people singularly impatient of control

under the happiest of circumstances.”² In their history of the colony, published in 1975, Hugh Lefler and William Powell conclude that mid-century struggles, like those throughout the royal period in North Carolina politics, could ultimately be explained as a clash between the imperial interests of British officials and the more parochial concerns of local elites.³

Outside these broad studies, however, politics and society in North Carolina went relatively unexamined by early American historians until the work of Jack Greene, who situated the political debates in North Carolina in the context of a broader movement toward the supremacy of colonial assemblies.⁴ But Greene’s study, while valuable in its analysis of colonial political institutions, does not specifically focus on North Carolina, but rather on Southern colonial assemblies. Marvin L. Michael Kay, as part of his work on the background to the Regulation, examined colonial North Carolina’s tax structure and found innumerable opportunities for, and examples of, embezzlement and other forms of corruption, which he saw as the consequences of the emergence of a self-interested colonial elite. Kay argued, at least with respect to the colonial tax structure, that imperial control, in the form of Dobbs and his successor William Tryon, served as a bulwark against the

²Samuel A’Court Ashe, *A History of North Carolina*, vol. 1 (Greensboro, NC: Charles L. Van Noppen, 1908): 294; William L. Saunders, Preface to Volume 5 of *NCCR* (Raleigh, NC: Josephus Daniels, 1887), vii. Interestingly, Saunders’s appraisal of Dobbs’s behavior is much more critical in his preface to Volume 6 (1759-1765), where he describes Dobbs as having an “utter contempt” for the authority of the Assembly, and characterizes his actions as “pure despotism,” motivated in part by “filthy lucre”. The Assembly, he notes approvingly, was primarily moved by their commitment to “republican sentiments”. *NCCR* 6:iii-xxxv. Perhaps the most balanced early twentieth-century account of the politics of the period can be found in Charles L. Raper’s 1908 study entitled *North Carolina: A Study in Colonial Government* (Spartanburg, SC: The Reprint Company, 1973), 52-60.

³ Hugh T. Lefler and William S. Powell, *Colonial North Carolina: A History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1973).

⁴Jack P. Greene, *Quest for Power: The Lower Houses of Assembly in the Southern Royal Colonies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963).

corruption of local officials, especially sheriffs, and their allies in the lower house.⁵ Other historians, particularly Alan Watson, have similarly connected much of the colony's internal turmoil to systemic problems within the colony's underdeveloped political institutions.

Roger Ekirch combined many of these approaches in his book-length analysis—the first of its kind—of North Carolina politics and society from the end of the proprietary period in 1729 to the outbreak of the Revolution. Arguing that North Carolina politics at mid-century were exceptionally turbulent compared to other colonies, Ekirch examines the dynamics of “conflicting private, group, and regional interests” within these conflicts in an attempt to move beyond traditional Whig interpretations that implicated British tyranny and celebrated a vaguely defined spirit of independence that supposedly prevailed more in North Carolina than in other colonies.⁶

The events of the 1750s, the subject of this thesis, have recently attracted the attention of historians from a broad range of specialties. John R. Maass has placed the struggles that rocked North Carolina in the mid-eighteenth century in their imperial context by analyzing the colony's often-overlooked role in the Seven Years' War, and Wayne Lee examines the Enfield Riots, among other events of the period, as an example of the use of limited violence as a legitimate response to local grievances. Marjoleine Kars, while focusing, like many historians of colonial North Carolina, on the Regulator movement, describes the corrupt and

⁵ Marvin L. Michael Kay, “Provincial Taxes in North Carolina During the Administrations of Dobbs and Tryon”, *North Carolina Historical Review* (hereafter *NCHR*) 42, 4 (1965): 440-453.

⁶A. Roger Ekirch, *Poor Carolina: Politics and Society in Colonial North Carolina, 1729-1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981).

dysfunctional land practices in the Granville district, as well as elsewhere in the colony, as examples of the systemic problems confronting Piedmont settlers at mid-century.⁷

Other than Kay in his 1963 article, however, only Ekirch has attempted to assess the importance of political corruption in North Carolina politics before the Regulation, particularly the role of corruption in forging lower-house unity against imperial power in the form of the royal governor. “[C]orruption in North Carolina,” Ekirch posits, “probably served a vital function by contributing to political integration through the creation of bonds of mutual interest.” In addition, political corruption contributed to political growth by “tying the interests of talented individuals to government service and, in fact, to the public interest.” These arguments, influenced by the work of a number of twentieth-century social scientists and historians led by Arnold Heidenheimer, serve as caution, according to Ekirch, not to “erect rigid conceptual barriers in all cases between self-interest and a larger public interest.”⁸

In addition to constructing an expanded narrative of several crucial political events in mid-eighteenth century North Carolina, and exploring the impact of political corruption on the colony’s development, I will examine a different aspect of the problem—namely, the

⁷John R. Maass, “‘All this Poor Province Could Do’: North Carolina and the Seven Years’ War, 1757-1762, *NCHR* 79 (January 2002): 50-89; Marjoleine Kars, *Breaking Loose Together: The Regulator Rebellion in Pre-Revolutionary North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2002). Other fairly recent influential studies of the Regulator movement, expanded upon by first Ekirch and then Kars, include Marvin L. Michael Kay, “The North Carolina Regulation, 1766-1776: A Class Conflict,” in Alfred Young, ed., *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976):71-123; James P. Whittenburg, “Planters, Merchants, and Lawyers: Social Change and the Origins of the North Carolina Regulation” *William and Mary Quarterly* 34, 2 (April 1977), 215-238. The role of corruption of course occupies a central position in most studies of the Regulators, especially that of Kars, but as noted above, few have been interested in assessing its impact, on the earlier politics of the colony. Fewer still have explored the nature of the rhetoric used.

⁸ Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 159-160; Arnold J. Heidenheimer, ed., *Political Corruption: Readings in Comparative Analysis* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970); and Heidenheimer et al, ed., *Political Corruption: A Handbook* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1990); Heidenheimer and Michael Johnston, eds., *Political Corruption: Concepts and Contexts* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002) .

ways in which corruption was employed as a subject of discourse and a strategy during this particularly contentious period in North Carolina politics. While Dobbs indeed, in Ekirch's words, "openly opposed the corruption he found rooted in the political system" in North Carolina, his opponents among the colony's political elite also invoked a discourse that portrayed the governor as corrupt.⁹ Political alliances among the colonial elite in the 1750s often rested on corrupt foundations, but the same colonial elite mobilized opposition to Dobbs in the lower house, and even the governor's council, in part by asserting that his behavior was intended to usurp the rights and privileges of North Carolinians, usually, it was argued, in the interest of private gain. To dismiss their accusations as simply hypocritical, or to ignore the multitude of ways in which corruption was described, is to run into similar conceptual *culs-de-sac* as those described by Ekirch. One modern political scientist has observed that "[n]ext to tyranny, corruption is the great disease of governments."¹⁰ To colonial North Carolinians, the two concepts, corruption and tyranny, were intellectually intertwined and often rhetorically interchangeable.

In this thesis, I attempt to follow two main lines of inquiry, both of which are aimed at exploring the realities and rhetorical portrayals of corruption during the Dobbs administration. First, I attempt to discern the conceptual boundaries of corruption among eighteenth century North Carolinians, that is, to establish the points at which certain political activities were deemed to be beyond the pale of legitimacy. Second, I attempt to assess the impact of corruption, and accusations of corruption, on politics in the colony, a polity in which a certain culture of corruption seems to have prevailed. Finally, I connect the rhetoric

⁹ Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 159.

¹⁰ Juan D. Garrillo, "Corruption in Hierarchies," *Annales D'Économie et de Statistique* 59 (July-September 2000),38.

of corruption to the underlying political and social realities in the colony by investigating the sources of the accusations, including the intellectual and social contexts from which they emerged. Addressing the problem in this way, I suggest, can lead to somewhat different conclusions about the overall “utility” of political corruption. Corruption certainly facilitated the growth of unified political factions among the colony’s elite, and this development, I argue, greatly exacerbated the political unrest of the 1750s.

To expand on this point, I will emphasize what I call the “politics of the personal”—the conflation of public and private interests in the behavior of colonial politicians, as well as the close relationship in the worldview of eighteenth century public figures between one’s political actions and one’s character. This concept has been well-documented for the Regulators, who filled their petitions and pamphlets with accounts of the depraved state of public officials. But it was also present, albeit perhaps without the same moral force, among the colony’s political elite more than a decade earlier, especially in charges stemming from the use of political patronage. Eighteenth-century North Carolina was, like many other colonies, a “face-to-face agrarian society,” and in this context, the lines between political differences and personal grievances—as well as political alliances and personal connections—were usually blurry, and often nonexistent.¹¹ A colonial governor who placed his family and friends in positions of public trust was, it was thought, not simply practicing nepotism, he was building a network through which his power, and indeed the royal prerogative, could be projected. This was a frightening development, and one often represented as corrupt in contemporary discourse. Similarly, a colonial treasurer and

¹¹Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 111. Certainly personal relationships were a major factor in shaping politics in Great Britain as well. But I argue below that in colonial North Carolina, a number of factors made this tendency even more prevalent.

assemblyman who overlooked or even participated in embezzlement of tax funds was not simply lining his own pockets—he was accumulating tremendous political influence among local officials, who benefitted directly from his laxity. In eighteenth-century North Carolina, I argue, corruption as a component of political consciousness was thus shaped by the realities of provincial society. Yet, as largely eastward-looking British subjects, they could also draw on a vocabulary and a paradigm that stemmed not from local loyalties and jealousies, but from centuries of British thought, itself the convoluted product of more than a century of political struggles.

“Vicious, Debauched, Rotten”

Leo Strauss once claimed that all political action and thought were characterized by “a directedness towards knowledge of the good: of the good life, or of the good society.”¹² Indeed, a number of Western thinkers from Plato to Sir Thomas More and even James Harrington grappled with the concept of the ideal society, even if only heuristically. Yet the problem of corruption, the debasement of government and society, was among the questions that most occupied English thinkers in the early modern period. “Commonwealthmen” like Harrington, Algernon Sidney and other writers drew on a longstanding Western tradition when they used the word “corruption” to describe the degeneration of representative government into tyranny.¹³ J.G.A. Pocock has shown that English “Country” politicians, influenced by Harrington and a civic humanist tradition, employed the term “corruption” to describe the use of patronage and other forms of influence-mongering in Parliament, not only

¹² Leo Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” in Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988):9-10.

¹³ Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman: Studies in the Transmission, Development, and Circumstance of English Liberal Thought from the Restoration of Charles II until the War with the Thirteen Colonies* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004).

because they often involved “bribery and venality,” but also because they substituted “private for public authority” and “rendered representatives of the people” dependent on their benefactors.¹⁴ John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon’s *Cato’s Letters*, published in the wake of the South Sea Bubble fiasco, warned their readers to heed the example of ancient Rome, which:

...fell a victim to ambition and faction, to base and unworthy men, to parricides and traitors; and every other nation must run the same fortune, expect the same fatal catastrophe, who suffer themselves to be debauched with the same vices, and are actuated by the same principles and passions.¹⁵

Corruption was, the authors argued, a degenerative condition which inevitably led to the decline and fall of nations which deviated from their virtuous founding principles.

Yet there also existed in British thought, particularly since the time of Robert Walpole, the more pragmatic notion that in a complex (and increasingly commercial) modern society, corruption could be made to serve the common good. Whigs in the early eighteenth century—the very men the Country politicians opposed—thought it unrealistic to expect that a politician would not pursue and serve his own interests. They viewed bribes and emoluments more as rewards for loyalty than unethical attempts to sway votes and purchase influence. In this formulation, corruption served a purpose—it was a means of maintaining balance between competing elements in the British constitution—King and Parliament in England, or perhaps Governor and Assembly in the colonies.¹⁶ Indeed, Walpole might have

¹⁴ J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 407.

¹⁵ John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, *Cato’s Letters: Or Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and other Important Subjects*, Volume 1, ed. Ronald Hamowy (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1995), 131.

¹⁶ Isaac Kramnick, *Bolingbroke and his Circle: The Politics of Nostalgia in the Age of Walpole* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), 121-124.

agreed with Edward Gibbon's sardonic observation that corruption was "the most infallible symptom of constitutional liberty."¹⁷

British North Carolinians, then, were the heirs to a somewhat contradictory intellectual tradition which, taken as a whole, provided neither a clear definition of corruption nor an uncontested judgment as to the acceptability of venality, nepotism, and other questionable practices in politics. As one political historian has shown in both France and Britain, the bounds of corruption were by their nature slippery, varying, like other moral judgments, from one person to the next, particularly in times of party strife.¹⁸ While critics like Trenchard and Gordon warned of subtle, insidious schemes against British liberties, those in politics who sought to govern an increasingly complex nation-state adopted practices more suited to the worldly view of men like Walpole. In reality, the promise of wealth and security, even ill-gotten wealth, lured talented men to positions of public trust, and some eighteenth century observers argued that a system that attracted such figures, and offered them opportunities for advancement, could hardly be construed as corrupt, as it served the national interest.

Further complicating the question, at least in attempting to reconstruct an eighteenth-century definition of political corruption in North Carolina, is the fact that North Carolinians seemed reluctant to use the term "corruption" even in the bitterest political quarrels. The term, for example, never appears in the Assembly's resolutions to remove Dobbs from office

¹⁷ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Vol. II*, [1776] ed. William Smith (New York: Charles C. Bigelow and Co., 1911), 525.

¹⁸ Maryvonne Genaux, "Early Modern Corruption in English and French Fields of Vision," in Heidenheimer and Johnson, eds., *Political Corruption, Concepts and Contexts*, 3rd edition (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 111. See also Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press), 209.

in 1760, a document that emerged from a body whose leaders seethed with frustration and enmity toward the governor. Dobbs himself only used the word once in his published correspondence, as part of a plea in 1762 to Daniel Burton, secretary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, to send more trained ministers to “this Unfortunate Province,” where an “increase” in “sectaries” contributed to a “corruption of manners.”¹⁹ The colony’s political elites may have refrained from using the word in part out of a sense of aristocratic decorum, though few outside observers saw North Carolina politicians as particularly polished in that sense. More likely, I suggest, are the extreme connotations the word carried in eighteenth century discourse. Samuel Johnson’s dictionary defined the verb “corrupt” as “to infect, to defile, to bribe”, and in its adjective form, the word meant “vicious, debauched, rotten.” The noun “corruption” could mean “wickedness” or “pus”, a duality of meaning that reflected a popular analogy among civic humanist thinkers between a polity and the human body.²⁰ It was, in short, a term that seems to have evoked extreme images in the minds of eighteenth century Englishmen. It was one thing for a political theorist to use the term in the abstract in reference to political systems or historical archetypes; it was quite another for a provincial politician to use it in reference to a peer in the Assembly, or, still worse, to a royally appointed governor or a member of his council.

Other factors, particularly the lack of protection for political speech, militated against the use of such harsh words as “corruption” in eighteenth century North Carolina political

¹⁹ Arthur Dobbs to Daniel Burton, March 30, 1762, *NCCR* 6:709-710.

²⁰ Samuel Johnson, Richard Todd, *Johnson’s Dictionary, Improved by Todd* (Boston: Charles J. Hendee, 1836)82; Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 443. The analogy between the state and the body persists. Recent scholars, influenced by the biopolitical approaches pioneered by, among others, Michel Foucault, have noted that discourses of corruption from the eighteenth century to the present have often equated corrupt political behavior with various forms of sexual deviance, especially exploitation. Ruth Austin Miller, *The Erotics of Corruption: Law, Scandal and Political Perversion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2008).

debates. The celebrated John Peter Zenger case of 1735, which circumscribed the legal definition of seditious libel in New York, was notable primarily as an exception in the colonies, including North Carolina. Writing in 1745, Henry McCulloh described a North Carolina act “that subjects any person to the Pillory who will openly sensure the Conduct of the Governor Council and Assembly.”²¹ One man was “stripped naked tyed and whipt” in 1759 by Richard Speight, an associate justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court and nephew of the governor, for allegedly “writing or copying a libel” against Speight and his wife.²² In a political society where printers and public officials were often accused of “affronts”, “breaches of privilege”, and “indignities”, prudent politicians chose their words carefully.²³

Yet political discourse in North Carolina was replete with charges of behavior that some contemporaries recognized as corrupt. Rather than using that loaded word, Dobbs’s enemies accused him of “maladministration,” “favoritism” or even “oppressive” acts, all of which threatened to subvert their constitutional liberties. They claimed, in particular, that he sought to use his position to advance the interests of his “countrymen” or “family,” or even that of his powerful friend Henry McCulloh, whose “Pimps” and “hangers” exerted an undue

²¹Quoted in Greene, *Quest for Power*, 215.

²²Memorandum by Richard Speight to the Board of Trade, *NCCR* 6:275. Admittedly, the punishment meted out by Speight was illegal by North Carolina law without a jury trial, and he offered only the defense that he had not done so in the capacity of a Supreme Court justice, but in “the heat of passion...without...ever reflecting or considering that he was a magistrate or Associate Justice.” But Core’s treatment suggests an environment in which North Carolinians could not comment publicly on the character of influential men without the possibility of some type of reprisal.

²³Harold L. Nelson, “Seditious Libel in Colonial America,” *The American Journal of Legal History* 3, 2 (April 1959): 163. The charge of “breach of privilege” frequently appears in the Assembly Journals in the North Carolina Colonial Records. Joshua Bodley, for example, was charged with breach of privilege when, in an incident described below, he accused assemblyman Francis Brown of “forswearing himself” before a committee appointed to investigate abuses in the Granville District. When the committee was satisfied that Bodley’s accusations were accurate, he was released from custody and Brown was removed from the House. *NCCR* 5:1042-1045.

and corrupt influence over government. Dobbs, on the other hand, constantly attacked those who sought public office solely for private “emolument”, and worried about the influence of corrupt “Juntos” within the Assembly composed of powerful men and their “favorites,” “friends,” or “creatures.” These words were cultural markers that connoted political behavior motivated by self-interest, which in the minds of many eighteenth century thinkers, led inexorably to the corruption of government and precisely the destructive factionalism for which North Carolina became known at mid-century.²⁴

Numerous studies have detailed the relatively underdeveloped state of intellectual life in colonial North Carolina.²⁵ But despite the underdeveloped state of education, and the relative shortage of printed material in the colony, North Carolinians had access to the mainstream of English thought, including varying discourses of corruption.²⁶ Volumes of *Cato’s Letters* appear in the estate inventories of wealthy North Carolinians, alongside the collected works of Jonathan Swift, Cicero’s *Morals* and Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*, all of which stressed the effects of political corruption in varying ways.²⁷ The *Virginia Gazette*, published in Williamsburg, had such a large North Carolina readership that its editors

²⁴Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1992), 35-47.

²⁵ See Stephen Beauregard Weeks, *Libraries and Literature in Colonial North Carolina* (Washington D.C.: G.P.O., 1896); Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 41-46; Patrick M. Valentine, “Libraries and Print Culture in Early North Carolina”, *NCHR* 82, 1, 293-325.

²⁶ It should also be noted here that a very high proportion of the colony’s political leadership were not born in the colony, but in Britain. In 1757, for example, every member of the Council except for Albemarle planter Lewis De Rossett, who apparently immigrated from Switzerland as a youth, was born in either England, Scotland, or Ireland. The same was true for the Assembly, where Dobbs’ most powerful opponents, including speaker Samuel Swann, John Starkey, and many others, like Attorney General and assemblyman Robert Jones, had entered the colony from Virginia or South Carolina. Other possible implications of this fact will be considered below.

²⁷ See estate inventories for Jeremiah Vail (1760) and John Eustace(1760), in J. Bryan Grimes, *North Carolina Wills and Inventories* (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton Printing Company, 1912) 491, 568. Eustace, a Wilmington physician, had a massive library, and corresponded with such English literary figures as Laurence Sterne. He was a personal friend of Arthur Dobbs, and sent Sterne a walking cane that had belonged to the governor. Lawrence Sterne, *Works*, Vol. VII (Cambridge, Mass.: The University Press, 1904) 213.

routinely published the proceedings of the North Carolina Assembly, governor's proclamations and other sources of information about political debates in the colonies. North Carolina readers could thus reach their own conclusions about the legitimacy of their politicians' actions, a fact that the leaders of the colony knew well—they sometimes wrote to the publishers of the *Gazette* to offer justifications for their actions.²⁸ In New Bern, James Reed's newspaper, the *North Carolina Gazette*, typically contained very little commentary on local politics, but often reprinted accounts of corruption in British politics. In particular, a 1757 appeal in the *Bristol Journal* to William Pitt, printed in its entirety in the April 15, 1757 edition of the *North Carolina Gazette*, called on the minister to “restrain the number of placemen,” in an attempt to stop the corruption that had afflicted British government since the ministry of Robert Walpole. Readers were invited to see in Walpole an archetype of political corruption who “...secured himself in power by bribery and corruption,” with “...his distinguishing talent, to know the price of every man, and buy them off from opposing his administration.” This appeal offered North Carolina readers a short, but evocative primer in Country ideology and in the nature and language of political corruption itself:

His [Walpole's] underlings copied his example, and introduced corruption in every corner of the Land, established a Kind of System for buying and selling votes in P—t... The Effect of this was a heavy burden on the Nation... bringing on heavy Taxes; it also covered the Land with an Intolerable Load of Guilt, the Guilt of Perjury, and many other Crimes, which have drawn on us the Evils we now Suffer.²⁹

Readers could thus access an intellectual tradition in which political corruption, defined in terms of nepotism and bribery, threatened to “eat out the Bowels of the Nation.”

²⁸See Willie Jones to “Honestus,” *Virginia Gazette*, (Williamsburg: Purdie and Dixon), March 19, 1772, 3. Jones sought to defend his father Robert's conduct, and that of his own, in the wake of the Regulator movement.

²⁹ *North Carolina Gazette*, April 15, 1757 (New Bern, NC: James Davis)

The authors invoked both civic humanist and perhaps more recognizable religious eschatological anxieties to forecast a bitter end to the British body politic: “The Times,” the authors warned, “now demand... Wholesome medicine, or Death must follow.” “The Times” were difficult: Britain, along with its colonies in America, was embroiled in the Seven Years’ War, and success was by no means assured in 1757. In a trope frequently drawn upon by Dobbs himself, the authors characterized the war at once as “an Appeal to God” and as divine retribution for “debauchery.” Only by rooting out corruption, they warned, could Britain’s leaders rescue the nation from decline or even destruction. In other editions, readers of the *Gazette* and later the *North Carolina Magazine* could read excerpts of treatises and sermons on virtue and civic-mindedness. These moralistic pieces condemned self-interest as a motive for civic involvement and often celebrated the supposedly stoic virtues of past political figures.³⁰

North Carolinians could also read political pamphlets like that published by several members of the Assembly in defense of their unsuccessful attempts to unseat Attorney General William Smith in 1739. The pamphlet began with an excerpt from Proverbs aimed at corrupt officials, and accused the Attorney General of “iniquities” and “Male administrations in office” in an attempt to rouse popular support for his removal.³¹ Indeed, this pamphlet reveals an obscure but obvious source of knowledge about corruption for

³⁰ Ibid, April 15, 1757. James Davis, the printer of the *Gazette*, was appointed by the Assembly to the post of public printer, and that he held that position while he printed the newspaper. He was later accused of neglect of duty by Dobbs, and removed from office in 1764. The incident led to another confrontation between Dobbs and the lower house when the governor named the new printer, Andrew Steuart of Philadelphia, “His Majesty’s Printer” for North Carolina. The Assembly saw this as a breach of their rights and named Davis printer again. Lefler and Powell, *Colonial North Carolina*, 216.

³¹ “A True and Faithful Narrative of the Proceedings of the House of Burgesses of North Carolina,” (Williamsburg, Va: William Parks, 1740)1-2. The verse from Proverbs is “When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice, but when the wicked beareth rule the people mourn.”

literate North Carolinians—the history of the colony itself. As early as 1689, proprietary governor Seth Sothel was removed from office for corruption, including accepting bribes and arbitrarily seizing estates for his own profit. More recently, both of Dobbs’s predecessors as royal governor, George Burrington and Gabriel Johnston, faced allegations of corruption and abuses of power. Many of the major political figures of the late 1750s were old enough to remember these events and to interpret current events in light of past political traditions, including those of England, North Carolina itself, South Carolina and especially Virginia. While no published history of the colony existed at the time, even the politicians who were recent arrivals to North Carolina had a sense of their perceived political heritage—they routinely asserted their liberties as derived from the original charter granted to the Lords Proprietors in 1663. Dobbs himself wrote the Board of Trade complaining that the Assembly still held that the original charter “still subsisted,” even after thirty years of royal rule.³²

“Hungry as hawks”

These sources, especially the *Virginia Gazette*, contributed to a vocabulary that could be brought to bear against the widespread corruption that many of them experienced as a daily reality. Especially in the backcountry, small farmers and other settlers confronted corrupt sheriffs who embezzled tax money, county clerks and land agents who charged exorbitant fees, and countless other examples of malfeasance. “[T]he officers (in North Carolina) are hungry as hawks, and like them make a prey of every poor creature that falls into their pounces,” Virginia grandee William Byrd II warned a Swiss settler.³³ The methods

³² Saunders, Introduction to the *NCCR* 6:iii-iv.

³³ William Byrd II to Johann Rudolph Ochs, July 15, 1736, *The Correspondence of the Three William Byrds of Westover, Virginia 1684-1774*, vol. 1, Marion Tinling, ed. (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1977), 491.

they employed in protesting these grievances, which included the limited riots and other forms of quasi-ceremonial violence described by Wayne Lee, seem to have had roots deep in British plebeian culture, and represent in a sense their own form of political discourse employed in opposition to corruption. However they have viewed the origins and motives of the agrarian protests of the 1760s and 1770s, most recent historians have agreed that their leaders expressed their grievances in language at least partially derived from the mainstream of Country ideology.³⁴

By the mid-eighteenth century, both of North Carolina's neighboring colonies had a firm tradition of representative government, with powerful legislatures winning such privileges as the appointment of colonial agents, approval of fees for land patents, licenses, and other expenses, and, crucially, the right to approve or reject new taxes and expenditures. These rights had largely been established in the political struggles of the early eighteenth century, and with the exception of a few minor political skirmishes, they enjoyed relative political tranquility by the 1750s.³⁵ In North Carolina, however, the situation was different. Since it became a royal colony in 1729, two of North Carolina's governors—George Burrington and Gabriel Johnston—had tried and failed to negotiate with particularly contentious factions in the lower house, even on fundamental questions like quitrent collection. As a result, both men, especially Johnston, presided over a colony rocked by political quarrels, including the regional squabbles that developed between the Cape Fear and Albemarle regions, the problems inherent in governing a colony divided by the proprietary Granville District, and the corruption that inevitably attended the rampant land speculation in

³⁴See Lee, *Crowds and Soldiers in Colonial North Carolina*, 13-28; Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 184-192.

³⁵Greene, *Quest for Power*, 3-18.

the southern regions of the colony. Ultimately, both men faced concerted removal efforts by the lower house—Burrington even survived an assassination attempt before returning to England.³⁶

Arthur Dobbs, appointed to replace Johnston after his death in 1752, arrived in North Carolina from Ireland two years later to take control of a colony divided among regional factions, split geographically by massive land grants, and threatened by frontier Indian tribes and an impending war with France. He also carried a mandate from the Board of Trade to solidify royal control over the colony, an agenda never likely to secure many supporters among local elites. Despite all of these headaches, Dobbs seems to have enjoyed a “cordial and largely cooperative relationship” with the Assembly early in his tenure, partly because of his studied refusal to become involved in many of the regional disputes that had split the colony under Johnston, but more directly due to his success in “dramatizing the French threat,” especially after the disastrous defeat of Edward Braddock in September of 1755.³⁷ But while the first three years of Dobbs’s tenure were characterized by relative unity, by 1757 the governor found himself embroiled in a series of political disputes involving issues as varied as patronage, the use of a wartime grant from Parliament, and the repeal of a judiciary act in 1755 that left the colony without any higher courts.³⁸ These debates would continue and intensify until, in 1760, the Assembly petitioned the Crown for Dobbs’ removal. They can be understood, as Greene has suggested, as part of a larger trend in which colonial assemblies attempted to exercise more power at the expense of the governor’s prerogative, and in North Carolina, these struggles were particularly intense. Clearly, they

³⁶ Lefler and Powell, *Colonial North Carolina*, 113-125.

³⁷ Maass, “All this Poor Province Could Do”: 51; Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 116.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 121-127.

were shaped in no small part by a set of ideological assumptions in which, in Joyce Appleby's words, "the republican polarities of virtue and corruption, disinterest and interestedness, public spirit and private ambition, participation and passivity, structured the world of politics."³⁹ But the rhetoric of corruption, though perhaps rooted in a republican worldview, was not limited to a critique of prescriptive authority or royal prerogative. It could be, and often was, employed by royal officials, including governors like Dobbs, to attack the behavior of the very colonial elites who were beginning to assert their political authority in the mid-eighteenth century.

This thesis will analyze three important events in North Carolina politics during the Dobbs administration in an attempt to shed light on both corrupt behavior and the use of corruption in colonial political discourse. The second chapter will consider the controversy surrounding Dobbs's use of political patronage, a political row that escalated with the dismissal of John Rutherford and James Murray from the executive council. The third chapter will examine the quarrels over the proper allocation of a parliamentary grant that was intended to reimburse the colony for expenses incurred during the Seven Years' War. The fourth will address the unrest that broke out in the Granville District, where the actions of unscrupulous proprietary land agents as well as the clashing interests of powerful landed interests led to civil unrest that culminated with the kidnapping of Granville's agents in the colony, an event known as the Enfield Riots. These complex political disputes did not occur in isolation—in many cases they occurred simultaneously. Further, their causes were often interrelated, with the role of patronage and the formation of "cabals" being particularly

³⁹Joyce Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 22.

pervasive concerns. The acrimony between governor and legislature reached a climax—but not an end—in May of 1760 when the Assembly, meeting in secret session, sent a series of resolutions to the Crown in an attempt to secure Dobbs’s dismissal.

A close examination of these political struggles reveals, I argue, a uniquely adaptable definition of political corruption among the North Carolina colonial elite. While many of its core assumptions—the degenerative nature of government, and the correlation between tyranny and corruption to cite two examples—were rooted in a republican worldview, the rhetoric was used in support of two vastly different ideological positions. On the one hand, Dobbs and others could point to the malfeasance of public officials, especially among his enemies in the lower house of the Assembly, and argue that their behavior was ultimately motivated by self-interest and not the best interests of the colony. He could, as Roger Ekirch has noted, “discern a mercenary motive” in every act of opposition on the part of the Assembly, even while he decried a growing spirit of “republicanism” among the colony’s elite.⁴⁰ Yet Dobbs’s enemies in the Assembly framed their rhetoric against the governor in the same terms. Along with familiar allegations of nepotism, they accused him of a form of corruption that was at least as dangerous to the body politic—attempting to arrogate political power to the executive branch in a way that was injurious to the liberties of North Carolinians. Each side accused the other (with justification) of influence peddling through the dispensing of patronage—Dobbs complained that Corbin and others secured and strengthened the “Junto” that opposed his every move by awarding lucrative offices to assembly members, and the colony’s elite complained that Dobbs practiced nepotism, disappointing qualified office-seekers in order to award sinecures to his “favorites”-- family

⁴⁰Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 156.

members and associates of Henry McCulloh, the governor's partner in land speculation. They alleged that Dobbs even, for political gain, protected—indeed awarded offices to—the leaders of the Enfield Riots, characterized by the colony's elite as brigands and common criminals. The accusations of both sides in this political squabble were founded, at least ostensibly, on the assumption that the actions of the other were not simply ill-advised or philosophically flawed. While the realities of political life in colonial North Carolina perhaps dictated a certain amount of ambivalence to a range of practices verging on corruption, politicians were also apt to view these activities in light of their ability to cultivate the influence that lay at the heart of political power.

This rhetoric of corruption, rooted in long-standing Western traditions, was part of an especially powerful mode of political discourse in the sharply divided politics of colonial North Carolina. In many cases, it was inextricably related to the actual practice of political corruption in the form of nepotism and venality. The accusations, simply put, were frequently quite well-founded, and they were informed by a worldview that tended to frame political disputes in highly personal terms. In this atmosphere, corrupt political practices, while certainly “tying the interests of talented men to government service,” facilitated the formation of tightly knit, if fluid, political factions that contributed to the contentious nature of North Carolina politics from the end of the proprietary period to the Revolution. The language in which political disputes were conducted, a language whose terms could be evoked by governor, assemblyman, and local official, often had a similar effect, making compromise on even basic matters of colonial governance not only difficult, but by definition immoral.

CHAPTER 2

“The Least Deserving of Favour”

The early years of Arthur Dobbs’s administration were marked by a remarkable degree of tranquility, particularly in comparison to Gabriel Johnston’s years as governor. This uncharacteristic harmony was due in part to a major external factor—the threat posed by the outbreak of the French and Indian War, which served to unify the colony’s political elite to an extent unknown since its transition to royal control in 1729. Dobbs, an ardent imperialist, repeatedly emphasized the need for unity in his early addresses, warning the legislature of the threat posed by the “insatiable and rapacious House of Bourbon,” with their “worse than Punic faith.” The Assembly leaders responded by expressing their pleasure at the “prospect of a coalition under your Excellency’s Administration”, and promised to “proceed with unanimity and publick spirit toward the “general Good of the Province.”¹ Over the ensuing two years, however, the governor’s repeated demands for monetary grants met with increasing resistance from the lower house, and the spirit of unity initially acknowledged by both executive and legislature in 1754 gradually gave way to a series of serious disputes over a number of issues.

This chapter deals primarily with a major source of discord in North Carolina politics—the dispensation of positions of profit or prestige in colonial government. Patronage was a well-established institution in British government, including that of North Carolina, in the eighteenth century. Despite a shortage of positions to offer in the relatively underdeveloped colonial governments, a governor’s ability to judiciously dispense political patronage could be a major boon to his prospects in office. His use of influence in obtaining

¹ Lower House Minutes, December 12-18, 1754, *NCCR* 5:218.

and granting positions to place-seekers could forge alliances or stoke rivalries with powerful colonial elites. This chapter will also address another controversial political subject in eighteenth-century North Carolina—the emission of paper money to address the chronic currency shortage in the colony. These two contentious issues, both often the subjects of corrupt discourse in the Anglo-American political world, intersected in a seminal political event in Dobbs’s tenure—the governor’s dismissal in December 1757 of councilors James Murray and John Rutherford, two of the most influential men in the colony.

Dobbs seems to have failed to grasp the opportunities presented by the power to award public positions, and his politically insensitive utilization of what patronage was available to him contributed to the first of many political quarrels during his tenure. His failure (or refusal) to bring the colony’s most important and influential politicians into positions of influence and profit angered these men, and provided them with the first of many issues that they could rally around in opposition to his administration. Their disillusionment reached a climax in December of 1757, when the governor, citing several serious breaches of public faith, suspended Rutherford and Murray from the council. The governor privately acknowledged that their suspensions were a result of their opposition to his policies, a suspicion already held by his political opponents in the colony. In the political atmosphere of North Carolina, however, the leaders of this burgeoning opposition faction, including the two deposed councilors, viewed the maneuver as part of a corrupt design to replace his political rivals with pliant factors in an effort to usurp representative government in the colony.

“Influence, Favor, and Protection”

Significantly, Dobbs’s opponents did not argue that seeking or awarding patronage were inherently corrupt activities. Office-seeking was a fact of political life among

metropolitan and colonial elites, and it was widely expected that powerful men would help ambitious and talented office-seekers find positions commensurate with their abilities and connections. In the words of Lewis Namier, it was “contrary to the decencies of eighteenth-century politics” for a politician not to “exercise his power and patronage” on behalf of a loyal friend.² Yet among mid-eighteenth century North Carolinians, as in England, accusations of corruption relating to patronage were a central theme in political discourse. It was at once, as one historian has observed in an English context, “the system through which administrative and political results were achieved” and a system “that carried with it an intrinsic leaning toward corrupt practice.”³ This dichotomy was characteristic of political discourse in North Carolina—while politicians frequently expressed anxieties about the corrosive effects of corruption in patronage in their rhetoric, their behavior demonstrated a worldly acceptance of its importance in advancing their own interests and careers.

North Carolina was not unique in this respect. One historian, analyzing voting records in the New Jersey Assembly, has shown that the dispensation of patronage was a major factor in shaping political coalitions in a colony divided by religion, ethnicity and geography. While the lack of roll call voting records makes this type of study impossible for colonial North Carolina, it seems clear that the desire for lucrative and powerful positions often transcended even the most fundamental political differences, even the regional factionalism that threatened to tear the colony apart in the 1740s and early 1750s.⁴ William

² Lewis Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1963), 22-23.

³ Philip Woodfine, “Tempters or Tempted? The Rhetoric and Practice of Corruption in Walpolean Politics” in Emmanuel Kreike and William Chester Jordan, eds., *Corrupt Histories* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2004), 167.

⁴ Thomas L. Purvis, *Proprietors, Patronage, and Paper Money: Legislative Politics in New Jersey, 1703-1776* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 111-143. New Jersey was unique in that its assembly

Faris, a Cape Fear planter and southern partisan, wrote Dobbs, at the time a staunch supporter of the Albemarle faction, in 1750 for the express purpose of securing the future governor's backing for the position of collector of either Brunswick or Bath—preferably Brunswick, since it was considerably more lucrative.⁵ Patronage was also important to the exercise of imperial authority. As Richard Bushman observes in his study of colonial Massachusetts, “Without these interlocking chains of dependency, the crown would have to rely solely on persuasion and claims to legitimate authority, weak reeds when unpopular measures had to be enforced.” It was through patronage that loyalties were cemented, mutual interests became clear, and authority—metropolitan and local—was enforced.⁶

In North Carolina as elsewhere, colonial elites struggled without remorse to snap up profitable positions. The news that a public official was in ill health often occasioned a scramble for support among ambitious office seekers who hoped to secure the position. Bertie County planter George Pollock wrote Corbin Morris, an influential acquaintance in England, in part to report “an indisposition of the Gent[leman] who holds the Collectorship of Edenton which seems to destroy all hopes of his Recovery,” and to ask Morris to “use your best endeavor to obtain it for me on any reasonable terms,” while Pollock wrote Granville to seek his “Interest in my behalf.”⁷ When James Murray heard rumors in 1736 that “Mr Solivol,” customs collector at Brunswick, was “a dying of a Dropsy,” he wrote Henry McCulloh to offer the powerful land baron up to £200 in “presents” if he would use

kept a written record of its roll call votes, allowing Purvis to determine how assemblymen voted on many measures.

⁵ Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 108.

⁶ Richard L. Bushman, *King and People in Colonial Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press) 63.

⁷ George Pollock to Corbin Morris, 1 August 1761, Thomas Pollock Papers, Pollock Letter Book, NCA.

his influence to help obtain the lucrative position.⁸ Bribes like those offered by Murray and Pollock were common practice, an ethically and financially acceptable cost for lubricating the wheels of influence.

Even the outright purchase of a position was common practice in Georgian society—Dobbs, like many other young men, paid for an officership in an Irish regiment at the age of twenty-two, and many members of Parliament purchased their seats. Obtaining a position in British government, whether colonial or metropolitan, usually required the “interest” of a powerful figure, and the ability to cultivate the good will of such men, by whatever means, was a crucial life skill for upwardly mobile young men. Namier, in his famous study of Parliament in the eighteenth-century, attributes this expectation primarily to the fact that appointments to the Civil Service and even the officer corps were made at pleasure, and were thus not subject to regulation.⁹ Most colonial posts were subject to even less direct oversight. And despite a powerful strain of British political discourse that valorized civic disinterestedness, the assumption that one should profit from a position in government, including colonial government, was so widely accepted as to be included in the language of commissions and warrants, which usually stipulated that the appointee was entitled to the “perquisites,” “fees,” “emoluments,” or “profits” that the post entailed. While it may seem reasonable to the modern reader that a public official should be compensated for their services, many eighteenth-century observers worried—and not without justification—that

⁸ Murray to Henry McCulloh, 3 May, 1736, in Nina Moore Tiffany, ed., *Letters of James Murray, Loyalist* (Boston: Susan I Lesley, 1901), 31.

⁹ Lewis Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1957)16

salaried government positions would become little more than sinecures.¹⁰ Colonial port collectorships, in particular, were prized because they promised large fees, and because the execution of the office required less exertion and travel than others, especially supreme court justices and land agents.

Other positions attracted office-seekers because of the influence they carried. Seats on the Governor's Council, which, like most major positions within the colony, were awarded by the Board of Trade upon the governor's nomination, were desirable in part because they had the power to approve the governor's appointments of justices of the peace and associate judges.¹¹ North Carolina's governors, like those of most colonies, also had official authority to appoint sheriffs—among the “highest paid officials in the colony”—though they had to choose from a slate of three men nominated by each county court.¹²

Cultivating influence was not just imperative for appointed officials, but for elected assemblymen as well. Members of the lower house of the Assembly, frequently plural office-holders themselves, often won elections through the personal friendship cultivated among the freeholders in their counties to win elections. Sheriffs were particularly important allies, since they conducted the county's elections, in which individual voters revealed their choices orally and in public, in many cases standing before the candidates themselves. In this atmosphere, a vote was more an expression of friendship—in the eighteenth century, political sense of the word—than a statement of political will. Powerful men conferred their

¹⁰ See for example, “Commission to Appoint Alexander McCulloch as Deputy Auditor of North Carolina,” *NCCR* 5:782 or “Memorial of Charles Berry Concerning the power of appointing clerks of the courts,” *NCCR* 6:1000-1001; William Doyle, “Changing Notions of Public Corruption, c.1770-c.1830,” in Kreike and Jordan, eds., *Corrupt Histories*, 83-95.

¹¹ Instructions to Arthur Dobbs concerning the government of North Carolina...,” *NCCR* 5:1104. Dobbs's initial instructions were given in the form of revisions to those of George Burrington and Gabriel Johnston, with revisions made in areas that had proven problematic.

¹² Julian P. Boyd, “The Sheriff in North Carolina”, *NCHR* 5 (April 1928): 156-171.

votes (and influenced others to do the same) on assemblymen with an expectation of future loyalty, and those of lesser interest and standing hoped that their vote might cement a valuable friendship.¹³

Colonial governorships were themselves plums of patronage that were often relentlessly sought by ambitious British politicians. It was essentially a prerequisite for a royal governorship that the candidate should be well-connected. When former North Carolina governor George Burrington's recall became common knowledge in London in 1734, several influential politicians nominated their favorites, including the duke of Manchester, who recommended Christian Cole, a diplomat who needed the £500 salary the position was rumored to have offered, because "his misfortune has been to have lost in the South Seas and again lately in the Charitable Organization, which makes him desirous to leave his own country and to go abroad and would be very happy to have your Grace's favour and protection for this employment." Gabriel Johnston, who could count among his "friends" Lord Wilmington, the President of the Privy Council, ultimately secured the position. Arthur Dobbs himself, who had risen to prominence in part due to the "interest" of Robert Walpole, solicited his connections in London for a post that would allow him to "serve the government and British interests" in a "government on the continent of America" beginning in 1751. He owed his 1753 appointment to the post of North Carolina governor in

¹³For a detailed analysis of the personal dynamics of eighteenth century elections in Virginia, see Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 110-114.

part to the influence of his partner in land speculation, Henry McCulloh, as well as Lord Hertford, Lord of the Bedchamber to George II.¹⁴

Despite, (or perhaps because of) its importance in eighteenth century British government, the corrupt use of patronage became an important target for opposition writers during the first half of the eighteenth century. Central in this corrupt discourse was a critique of nepotism, which the author of an article in the opposition *Craftsman* magazine wrote on June 24, 1727:

We may also conclude that to be a *bad Administration*, in which all the *prime Officers* and *Honours* of the Kingdom are *engrossed* by one *Man, Family, or Tribe*. Such a monopoly and partiality to *Demerit* naturally excite the Hatred and Jealousy of the People in general, as well as the Resentment of knowing and deserving men in particular; so it must seem that no *Minister*, of good Sense, would risque all his Honours, Interests, and Acquisitions, by engrossing a nation in this manner, without some Particular Reason; which, upon enquiry, will, I am afraid, appear to be, that he is engaged in some designs or Measures, which no man of Honour or Understanding would promote, and with which he does not trust any Body, but his own Relations and Creatures, whose Characters and Fortunes depend absolutely upon him.¹⁵

While the reference was to Walpole, the principle could be applied to any political leader with public positions to dispense—indeed, its central themes were repeated in many complaints against Dobbs in the late 1750s. Like all corruption, the author argued, nepotism and venality were degenerative—they led inexorably to the total subversion of the balance of powers that were held to protect the liberties of British subjects. This argument still held considerable force in both the colonies and Britain throughout the eighteenth century—it received perhaps its most eloquent, if conspiratorial expression in Edmund Burke’s 1770

¹⁴ Labaree, *Royal Government in America: A Study of the British Colonial System before 1783* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930), 45-46; Desmond Clarke, *Arthur Dobbs, Esquire* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1957), 97-99.

¹⁵ *The Craftsman* 51, vol. 2, June 24, 1727 (London: R. Franklin, 1731), 41-46.

pamphlet *Thoughts on the Present Discontents*, which described the workings of “an influence, which operated without noise and without violence; an influence which converted the very antagonist, into the instrument, of power.”¹⁶ The signers of the Declaration of Independence described a similar phenomenon when they accused George III of sending “swarms of officers” to “harass our people and eat out our substance.”

Educated North Carolinians were well aware of this strain of political thought. Yet perhaps even more than in the metropole, it existed in tension with the importance of patronage within the political landscapes of American colonies, where social and political connections tended to resemble familial and personal relationships. It would have been difficult to conceive of them in any other way, given the intimacy of conditions in this overwhelmingly agrarian society. The cities that figure prominently in the letters and documents of the era as epicenters of political conflict were tiny even by colonial standards. The population of Edenton, for example, never reached 1,000 until the Revolution, and New Bern was less than half that size in 1765.¹⁷ And although North Carolina’s rapid expansion naturally led to an isolated existence (and, it was thought, an independent spirit) for many settlers, to do business or fulfill legal obligations—selling produce, patenting land, attending militia musters or bringing suit against a debtor—meant dealing directly with a relatively small and closely-knit group of individuals. These transactions, as historians of eighteenth century culture have demonstrated, tended to be conducted according to conventions—and often in physical locations—that reinforced and emphasized the paternalistic dominance of

¹⁶ Edmund Burke, “Thoughts on the Present Discontents”, in E.J. Payne, ed., *Burke: Select Works, Vol. 1* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1892), 10.

¹⁷ Allan D. Watson, *Society in Colonial North Carolina* (Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Cultural Resources, 1975), 77-78.

local elites. Assembly elections, as shown above, were perhaps the clearest expression of these power relationships. Small landowners, shopkeepers, and others depended on the “liberality” of local elites, who in turn defined and reinforced their standing through their generosity. North Carolina, like other colonies, was a “social system based on personal relationships—kinship, neighborhood, favors exchanged, patronage given, and deference returned.”¹⁸ While eighteenth century political rhetoric stressed independence, realities, especially in the intimate confines of the sparsely populated colonies, dictated that ambitious men should cultivate “friendships”—a term that connoted a false equality between patron and benefactor—with men whose power and wealth could help them on their way.¹⁹ Even eighteenth century commerce, often viewed by historians as partially responsible for the breakdown of this intensely personal society, depended on personal relationships, as James Murray demonstrated when he claimed to have “the advantage of two faithful correspondents, Gentlemen of Substance and Experience, one in England and one in the West Indies,” who were willing to “join Interests with me” in commercial endeavors.²⁰

Similarly, the political institutions of North Carolina, lilliputian by comparison with those of England, were founded on personal relationships. While the number of representatives grew throughout the 1750s, Assembly sessions rarely drew more than 40 members, and sometimes failed to even reach a quorum. The upper house/governor’s council, which, like those of the other royal colonies, included twelve members appointed for life, often faced the same problem. In these intimate environments, colonial politicians knew each other well, and political alliances and rivalries were often personal in nature. It is

¹⁸ Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia*, 113.

¹⁹ Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 57.

²⁰ James Murray to Andrew Bennet, 13 May 1735, *James Murray, Loyalist*, 17.

significant to realize that the “factions” and “juntos” described by Dobbs were often comprised of a mere handful of politicians connected by personal friendship as well as mutual interest. Many of these men, including House Speaker Samuel Swann, treasurer and assemblyman John Starkey, attorney general and assemblyman Robert Jones, and John Rutherford and James Murray, to name a few, had lived in the colony more than two decades by the 1750s, and by the time of Dobbs’s arrival in the colony, they certainly viewed themselves as a provincial elite. Each of them expected that they and those within their circles would be foremost in the governor’s consideration when positions of profit and influence were awarded.

Clearly, the personal nature of politics in the colony only increased the importance of patronage, which was based upon personal friendships and the accumulation of influence. The question posed here is what behaviors related to the dispensation of patronage—a system, after all, undergirded by the principle of favoritism—could be construed as corrupt in the minds of eighteenth-century colonial politicians? The answer is slippery, and inherently resistant to reductionism. As one historian of eighteenth century English politics has suggested, “when patronage comes to be the chief means of shaping the political career structure, then inequity and self-interest become normal, and an accusation of corruption is essentially a matter of degree rather than of kind.”²¹ Certainly, as seen above, patronage in all its forms was widely accepted as a fact of political, economic and social life in the Anglo-American world, including North Carolina. While the issue was at the heart of the earliest clash between Dobbs and the Assembly, the language employed by his rivals around 1755 was not a sweeping systemic critique of patronage in North Carolina, but rather the way

²¹ Woodfine, “Tempters or Tempted?” in Kreike and Jordan, eds, *Corrupt Histories*, 168.

patronage was employed to extend and enhance the governor's power in the colony. Dobbs's anxieties about the formation of "Juntos" arrayed in opposition to his administration stemmed from similar concerns. An examination of the early years of Dobbs's tenure as governor, including his rather fumbling dispensation of political patronage and his dismissal of councilors John Rutherford and James Murray in 1757, can shed light on the question.

"Countrymen and Country-born"

The outbreak of the French and Indian War shortly after Dobbs assumed office meant that the governor had more public positions to fill, especially in the form of militia officerships, than would have otherwise been available. Yet the governor squandered this opportunity to form alliances with colonial elites. Many of the most important commissions awarded during the early years of the conflict went to Dobbs's family and friends, including the governor's son, Edward Brice Dobbs, who commanded a company of North Carolinians in the ill-fated 1758 expedition against Fort Duquesne on the Ohio River led by Major General Edward Braddock. While Edward Dobbs was probably well-qualified for the commission—he was a professional soldier and officer in the British Army—his appointment was cause for consternation among the colony's elites, as was the governor's choice of his nephew Richard Speight as deputy paymaster for the expedition. At the age of nineteen, Hugh Waddell, whose father was apparently a friend of Dobbs in Ireland, led a company of rangers in the campaign of 1754 before constructing and assuming command of Fort Dobbs in Rowan County on the western frontier of the colony one year later. These appointments did not go unnoticed by colonial elites. As the governor would later observe to the Board of Trade, "the Country born as they are called here were displeased that any Europeans (Irish) should be employed." Dobbs defended his conduct by pointing out that the one North

Carolinian he commissioned captain in the Carolina Regiment, a Cape Fear “Gentleman of Good Fortune” named Caleb Grainger, had simply discharged “all the best men for money” and turned in his commission rather than leave Fort Johnston, near his plantation.²² But Dobbs continued to find places for his immediate family, appointing Speight to the post of colonial secretary in October of 1755, replacing the inveterate placeman Henry McCulloh, who had died only a few months after receiving the commission.²³

Four months later, Edward Dobbs, newly returned from the Braddock campaign, joined the council, and one year later, he became naval officer for the colony, a very lucrative position.²⁴ In the wake of this flagrantly nepotistic move, the governor revealed his hopes for his family in the province in a letter to a cousin in Ireland:

...I have reason to hope from England that Lord Halifax will recommend my nephew Dick Spaight to be Secretary worth about £500p.an[num]., and also to be of the Council as my son is already made one, and he is on the brink of wedlock with a pretty girl of 14 who has the best fortune and her mother of the best alliance in the Colony. She has a great many plantations and above one hundred Negroes, the articles are sygned, and nothing wanted but the wedding Cloaths from Virginia, where my man has gone to buy them, and is every day expected, so that his coming with me will turn out well, as he will have the best rank and fortune in this Province.²⁵

The governor’s favoritism in his early appointments was not limited to his immediate family. In December of 1754, the enormously influential Henry McCulloh (cousin of the

²² Memorandum from Arthur Dobbs to the Board of Trade, 1760, *NCCR* 6:283

²³ Alfred Moore Waddell, *A Colonial Officer and his Times: A Biographical Sketch of General Hugh Waddell* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards and Broughton, 1890), 30. McCulloch, the placeman who served as secretary for North Carolina from 1754 to 1755, should not be confused with father and son Henry McCulloh and Henry Eustace McCulloh. That historians have often (and perhaps understandably) made precisely this mistake is the argument in John Cannon, “Henry McCulloch and Henry McCulloh”, *WMQ* 15, 1 (January 1956), 71-73.

²⁴ “Commission to Appoint Edward Brice Dobbs to the North Carolina Governor’s Council”, February 16, 1756, *NCCR* 5:563; “Commission to Appoint Richard Speight as Secretary of North Carolina”, October 2, 1755, *NCCR* 5:442.

²⁵ Dobbs to Judge Moore, quoted in Clarke, *Arthur Dobbs, Esquire*, 136. The “pretty girl” in question was Mary Moore, daughter of Craven County politician and planter John Moore.

placeman), whose connections to the governor included massive land speculation in Anson County, received, with Dobbs's support, the post of commissary for North Carolina, a position that carried huge influence in the colony. In his capacity as commissary, McCulloh could enforce "Civil and Maritime Laws and Customs" relating to overseas trade, and collect substantial fees in the process.²⁶ Dobbs also saw to it that Alexander McCulloch, nephew of the land baron, received the position of deputy auditor for the colony, assuring a mutual friend in Ireland that he would "do anything I can for Aleck McCulloh."²⁷ McCulloch also served as agent for his uncle in the colony, and even received a militia commission in Orange County, a post he turned down on the grounds that it was a "grait Distance" from his home in Edgecombe County. The Crown, also with the governor's recommendation, awarded the lucrative collectorships for the ports of Beaufort and Currituck to Henry Eustace McCulloh, son of Henry McCulloh. Later the younger McCulloh secured the same position for the port at Roanoke.²⁸

Despite only briefly living in the colony, Henry McCulloh had been a powerful figure in North Carolina politics since the proprietary period. His interests often coincided with those of the governor. Because of their joint ventures in land speculation, Dobbs and McCulloh had both supported the northern counties in the regional political divisions of Gabriel Johnston's administration. While Dobbs carefully distanced himself from any regional affinity early in his governorship, and some of his former allies among northern

²⁶ "Commission to Appoint Henry McCulloh as commissary in North Carolina," December 6, 1754, *NCCR* 5:617-621.

²⁷ Charles B. Sellers, Jr., "Private Profits and British Colonial Policy: The Speculations of Henry McCulloh", *WMQ* 8, no. 4 (October 1951), 547; Dobbs to Thomas McAuley, March 17, 1757, Dobbs Papers, Colonial Governors' Papers, NCA.

²⁸ Alexander McCulloh to Arthur Dobbs, December 19, 1754, Dobbs Papers, NCA; Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*; "Bond of Henry Eustace McCulloh for performance as Collector of the Port of Roanoke, *NCCR* 6:1045-1046.

politicians—Granville District land agent Francis Corbin, in particular—later became enemies, colonial elites hungry for government posts could detect a disturbing trend—Dobbs, they worried, was not only awarding positions to family members like Spaight and Edward Brice Dobbs, but to McCulloh’s factors in the colony. “The governor in his appointments and some say in his Councils,” James Murray observed as early as 1755, “has had such particular Regard to his own Relations and Countrymen as to give some Jealousy.”²⁹ Anglican minister James Moir put the matter more bluntly several years later when he complained that because Alexander McCulloh was the governor’s “Country-man, . . . his Excellency has . . . been loading him with Power and Dignity without any other Thing to recommend him.”³⁰ Admittedly, Dobbs’s support for the McCulloh family was perhaps born of political necessity—he knew well that the land speculator had played a major role in securing his position, and that his continued friendship was essential. McCulloh had tirelessly maneuvered on behalf of the opposition to Gabriel Johnston after the governor ruled against his interests in a series of land disputes.

Yet Moir’s criticism reflected a common anxiety among North Carolina elites. Well-established in the colony and long suspicious of Henry McCulloh, many provincial notables reacted with anger to what they saw as the governor’s attempt to marginalize them. One figure who felt particularly aggrieved at being snubbed by the governor was Robert Jones, a Northampton County assemblyman and the colony’s attorney general. Dobbs had elevated the Virginia native to attorney general, but Jones also hoped to secure the far more lucrative and less laborious port collectorships given to Henry Eustace McCulloh, the son of the

²⁹ Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 119. The McCullohs, including Henry, were Scots-Irish.

³⁰ James Moir to Secretary, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, April 6, 1763, *NCCR Second Series, The Church of England in North Carolina: Documents, 1742-1763* 11:347.

powerful land mogul. The younger McCulloh, regarded by many in the colony as somewhat of a scoundrel, was deemed unfit for the positions, especially when compared to Jones, who combined a metropolitan education with strong native connections. More significantly, some observers saw in the affair evidence of Henry McCulloh's corrupt influence over Dobbs and North Carolina politics in general. In London, North Carolina colonial agent James Abercromby, who had lobbied for Jones's appointment to the Beaufort collectorship, attributed his failure to the machinations of the elder McCulloh. "The Offices of Collector of Beaufort and Carteret added to Beaufort are given to a fellow the least deserving of Favour from Governmt," the colonial agent wrote Jones. "Henry McCulloch, who has for many years attended the Treasury under Promises, and in this Case has succeeded... I do assure you I am much concerned for your Disappointmt, and wish I could Devise any Method to make Reprisals on McCulloch."³¹ In the wake of this small controversy, Jones, also a quitrent collector for Lord Granville, apparently aligned himself with Dobbs's rivals in the colony, most notably Granville's land agent Francis Corbin. Dobbs made another powerful enemy when he passed over Cape Fear politician Samuel Swann for a seat on the Council alongside his brother John. Swann, a close friend of Abercromby and James Rutherford, soon became speaker of the lower house and a committed opponent of the governor and spokesperson for the power of the assembly.³²

³¹James Beckwith, Jr., "Robert Jones", in *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 3, ed. William S. Powell (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 326; Abercromby to Robert Jones, 3 August 1759; *The Letter Book of James Abercromby*, John C. Van Horne and George Reese, eds. (Richmond, Va.: Virginia State Library and Archives, 1991), 323-324. Abercromby claimed that the collectorships were actually secured by McCulloh from the Treasury under the understanding that they would in turn be awarded to his son, Henry Eustace.

³² Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 117-119.

These were powerful men with extensive connections in the colony, and their frustrations poisoned the previously cordial and cooperative relationship between Dobbs and the lower house, which contained several of the governor's spurned appointees in addition to Swann. Late in 1757, the house refused to approve a modest salary for the storekeeper at the newly constructed Fort Johnston, outside of Brunswick, partially because, by order of the Board of Trade, Dobbs would fill the post with one of his appointees.³³ The governor not only failed to secure allies within the colony's elite through his appointments, but he made a number of powerful enemies, who saw his actions as a threat to their standing in the colony. After he suspended councilors James Murray and John Rutherford in late 1757, these enemies increasingly attacked his approach to patronage as not simply unfair, but as a corrupt scheme to augment the powers of the executive in the colony.

“Contests in Government”

James Murray was no stranger to the complex world of patronage and “friendship”. Murray came to North Carolina from Scotland in 1735, determined to “push my fortune in any other part of the world” than his homeland. He had considerable connections with merchants in Britain and the West Indies, and could count among his friends Henry McCulloh and the newly appointed governor of North Carolina, fellow Scotsman Gabriel Johnston. Both men actively encouraged Scottish settlements in the Cape Fear region. “I am sure,” Murray wrote a friend, “of the Governor's interest to support me.”³⁴ Murray cultivated this relationship with Johnston from his arrival in the colony, and quickly became

³³John R. Maass, “All This Poor Province Could Do,” 55.

³⁴Murray to Andrew Bennet, 13 May 1735, in *Murray, Loyalist* 16-17; Bradford J. Wood, *This Remote Part of the World: Regional Formation in Lower Cape Fear, North Carolina, 1725-1775* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 28-29.

an important local politician, moving to the new village of Newton (later Wilmington) and becoming a justice of the peace and deputy naval officer. Within three years of his arrival, he secured a position on the council, where he joined forces with other Cape Fear politicians and the governor in the bitter factional disputes that split the colony under Johnston. After returning to Britain for five years, he came back to North Carolina, and by 1754, he again gained a seat on the council, as well as a highly lucrative appointment as deputy paymaster to the forces sent under James Innes as part of the Ohio campaign. While serving in this capacity, he apparently helped himself to more than twice his allowed commission, an act for which he was never punished.³⁵

The career of John Rutherford, Murray's cousin, followed a similar trajectory. Rutherford arrived in the Cape Fear from Scotland in 1739, and with the help of his cousin, opened a merchandising business in Wilmington. He quickly accumulated several important positions in local government, including roads commissioner in New Hanover County. In 1750 he returned to England, and with "assiduous personal effort" and the assistance of future Virginia governor and Surveyor General of the Customs Robert Dinwiddie, he secured the post of collector general of the quitrents for North Carolina. Rutherford enhanced his position, and potentially his fortune, by marrying Frances Johnston, the widow of the former governor, in 1754. Interestingly, Dobbs seems to have had a low opinion of Rutherford soon after his arrival in the colony, informing the Board of Trade that the receiver-general was "quite indolent" and asking whether threatening him with dismissal might "rouse him out of

³⁵ Donald R. Lennon, "James Murray", *DNCB* vol. 3, 351; Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 117.

his lethargy.” In any case, Dobbs averred, the position of receiver-general required great effort and was “a place not to be given out of favour.”³⁶

Both Murray and Rutherford had been active in the colony’s political controversies before. As an emerging politician, Murray became directly involved in a Cape Fear rivalry between his emerging town of Newton (Wilmington) and Brunswick politicians who saw Wilmington’s rise as ruinous to their town. Brunswick’s advocates in the assembly were especially outraged when Murray became collector for Wilmington at the same time as the town became the official port of entry on the Cape Fear. Gabriel Johnston appointed Murray, a fellow Scot, to the Council in part to break the pro-Brunswick majority in that body ahead of a scheduled vote on a bill to incorporate Wilmington. In return, Murray and his cousin sided with Gabriel Johnston (and by extension, against Henry McCulloh and Arthur Dobbs) in the regional disputes that plagued the later years of Johnston’s administration.³⁷

Rutherford also was a close friend and frequent correspondent of colonial agent James Abercromby, who, as Gabriel Johnston’s personal agent, had aligned himself with many of the same politicians as Rutherford and Murray. Abercromby’s relationship with Rutherford demonstrated the complexities involved in many of the trans-Atlantic personal connections cultivated by North Carolinians and other colonists—while the two corresponded warmly and frequently, the agent also bemoaned the fact that Rutherford’s failure to collect adequate quitrent revenues jeopardized his salary.³⁸

³⁶ Alan D. Watson, “John Rutherford”, in *NCDB* Volume 5 (P-S). Rutherford’s last name was sometimes spelled “Rutherford” by contemporaries; Dobbs to Board of Trade, November 9, 1754, *NCCR* 5: 145-146.

³⁷ Watson, *Wilmington, NC to 1861* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2003) 13-14; *Murray, Loyalist*, 51; “Memorandum by Members of the North Carolina Governor’s Council,” July 3, 1740, *NCCR* 4:464-465; Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 86-107.

³⁸ Abercromby to North Carolina Committee of Correspondence, July 12, 1757, *Abercromby Letter Book*, 205. Abercromby had served as personal agent to Gabriel Johnston during the latter years of his administration, and

Murray was initially enthusiastic about Dobbs, whom he described in 1755 as one of “the greatest Blessings this Province has seen.”³⁹ But by 1757, as the relationship between the governor and the lower house began to deteriorate, the two councilors sided with the governor’s opponents on a number of issues, including the dispensation of patronage. Murray, in particular, joined with lower house leaders in opposing Dobbs’s frequent requests for military appropriations. Increasingly, Dobbs came to view the two men as important abettors, if not actually leaders, of a legislative cabal committed to asserting the rights of the assembly against royal authority.

Abercromby’s frequent letters alerted Rutherford to increasing dissatisfaction in London—largely encouraged by the governor—with the quitrent revenues during his tenure as receiver general. In June of 1756, perhaps fearing dismissal, he wrote the Board of Trade a lengthy explanation of his conduct. Intending primarily to explain “the great Disproportion betwixt the sums received and which ought to be received,” he pointed to a number of factors, including the “obstinacy of the people,” war with the Cherokee Indians, inadequate legislation enforcing quitrent payment, and the absence of a rent roll, the compilation of which was among the duties of the deputy auditor for the colony, Alexander McCulloh. At the heart of the problem, however, according to Rutherford, was the loose monetary policy of the colony:

I have only further to take notice, of the miserable consequences of the Inhabitants of this place being allowed to make paper Currency in the manner

because Johnston had been unable to draw his salary from the quitrents collected in the colony, he died with his account over 13,000 sterling in arrears. He had therefore been unable to pay Abercromby his dues, the exact amounts of which are not specified in the records. Rutherford married Johnston’s widow, and thus assumed both the family’s claim on the arrears and Johnston’s debt to Abercromby, a fact which the London agent never tired of bringing up in his letters.

³⁹ Murray to Abercromby, February 26, 1755, quoted in Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 115.

they have hitherto done and are but still too inclineable to do, which can answer no purposes but to cheat men of Property by having half the value of what is owed to them paid in imaginary money.⁴⁰

Rutherford's allegations are typical of the way paper money itself was often the subject of corrupt discourse. A 1759 petition from a group of London merchants with interests in North Carolina claimed that emitting paper currency on par with proclamation money was a "breach of public faith...contrary to justice and equity," that would "totally destroy the credit of that Province." The merchants demanded that debts be settled "*ad valorem*", that is, at the market rate, rather than the much more generous rate mandated by provincial current laws of 1749 and 1754. Like Rutherford, Murray claimed that the "Poverty of this Province" could be attributed largely to "dabbling in a Paper Currency...under pretence of supporting the Credit of that Currency, but in truth to answer the ill designs of the Champions for it to enable them to pay their Creditors on their own terms."⁴¹ Payment of debts in paper money, it was argued along the same lines as Rutherford, had the effect of robbing creditors of half the value of their receipts. Continued emissions of paper currency were not simply ill-advised expedients to critics—they were fraudulent. The same problem, Rutherford claimed, hampered the collection of quitrents.⁴²

⁴⁰ Rutherford to Board of Trade, June 19, 1756, *NCCR* 5:586-589.

⁴¹ Murray to Richard Oswald and Co., February 28, 1755, in *Murray, Loyalist*, 79.

⁴² "Petition from London and North Carolina concerning North Carolina Currency," *NCCR* 6:16-17. The merchants pointed out that £136.6.8 currency emitted under the Assembly statutes, despite being valued by law at £100 sterling, actually traded at £70 sterling. It should be noted, however, that even with the repeated emissions, currency shortages continued to hamper internal commerce. The problem of devalued currency hurt those who did business outside the colony, a situation that was exacerbated by the well-documented dearth of major ports in the colony that forced many merchants to do much of their business through Virginia and South Carolina, where North Carolina currency traded at a severe discount.

Both Rutherford and Murray were merchants, eastward-looking men who tended to view colonial policy in terms of its impact of their interest in the metropole.⁴³ Yet paper money seemed to many policy-makers, especially in the lower house, to be a necessary evil, if indeed it was an evil at all. Like virtually every other American colony, North Carolina consistently faced a shortage of currency. One colonial politician estimated that in 1731, there was not enough specie in the colony to pay one tenth of the quitrents owed, and in 1765, newly appointed governor William Tryon made a similar observation. For many years, provincial politicians had attempted to alleviate the problem by a number of means, most of which were commonplace, if not successful, in other colonies. Many North Carolina farmers simply traded in commodities such as tobacco, wheat, furs, or pork which, until mid-century, were acceptable as payment for quitrents or other taxes at rates set by the colonial legislature. While the colony briefly experimented in commodity notes, which were based on the value of warehouse stores of tobacco and other commodities, and a land bank, which emitted notes on mortgaged land, by far most currency in the colony (aside from Virginia and South Carolina bills) was proclamation money, which by mid-century had come to refer to any currency emitted and rated at a set value by the Assembly. Proclamation money nominally traded at a 133:100 ratio with sterling, but after repeated currency emissions, the market rate was closer to 2:1 by 1759.⁴⁴

⁴³Edward Countryman, *The American Revolution*, revised edition (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), xvi. Countryman uses the terms “westward-facing” and those who “looked eastward” to describe Marc Egnal’s concept of a dichotomy in pre-revolutionary Virginia between “expansionists” and “non-expansionists.” See also Egnal, “The Origins of the Revolution in Virginia: A Reinterpretation,” *WMQ* 37, 3 (July 1980): 401-428.

⁴⁴ Alan D. Watson, *Money and Monetary Problems in Early North Carolina* (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1980), 1-17.

These concerns, while almost a constant among North Carolina's elite since 1729, took on added gravity in the wake of several currency emissions in the total amount of £58,206 to finance the colony's contributions to the French and Indian War.⁴⁵ Many local politicians with commercial interests viewed Dobbs's proposal of a land bank to issue notes as catastrophic, and Murray and Rutherford led the opposition in the council to the measure. "Our Governor," Murray told a group of London merchants, "...does not understand the ill Tendency of a paper Currency, especially to a poor Colony, which will be evident to you when I send you his plan for a Land Bank."⁴⁶ The Assembly, and indeed London, was also lukewarm on Dobbs's proposal to strike a quantity of copper coins to retire some of the paper currency circulating in the colony.⁴⁷

Their opposition to cheap money notwithstanding, Murray and Rutherford hatched a scheme in 1757 that would compromise their position on the issue. In January of 1757, Murray issued £320 of promissory notes with a signed guarantee from Rutherford in his capacity as receiver general that the notes would be accepted as payment, with interest, for quitrents in New Hanover, Bladen, Duplin, and Cumberland counties. Murray exchanged these bills to purchase "corn and other Commoditys" from planters in these counties, and seems to have viewed the scheme as a way to recover his salary from his former service as colonial Secretary and Clerk of the Crown, which, like many official salaries, had been in arrears for many years. The plan would also have the happy side effect of securing the loyalties of cash-strapped Cape Fear planters by allowing them, through the generosity of

⁴⁵Of this total, £40,000 was emitted during the interim governorship of Matthew Rowan, a council member who held the office pending Dobbs's arrival in the colony. Watson, *Money and Monetary Problems in Early North Carolina*, 24.

⁴⁶Murray to Oswald and Co., February 28, 1755, *Murray, Loyalist*, 78.

⁴⁷Dobbs to Board of Trade, January 4, 1755, *NCCR* 5:324-326.

Rutherford and Murray, a convenient medium for fulfilling their quitrent obligations.⁴⁸ The two men were clearly stretching their bounds, particularly given their objections to Dobbs's land bank proposal, and the governor was quick to seize the opportunity to strike a blow against his perceived rivals within the council.

“Self-interested or Worse Purposes”

In a council meeting of December 1, 1757, Dobbs pounced on Murray and Rutherford, first presenting Rutherford's letter to the Board of Trade that decried “the miserable consequence attending the Inhabitants being allowed to make a Paper Currency.” The governor then produced several paper notes, issued with Murray's signature, seal, and a promise that Rutherford or one of his deputy collectors—i.e., sheriffs within his power to influence-- would accept them as payment for quitrents. The Council, including Rutherford and Murray, then heard a number of depositions charging the collector general with several acts of malfeasance—first, accepting the notes issued by Murray as payment for quitrents; second, that contrary to his repeated claims, he had a quitrent roll for New Hanover County; and finally, that he had allowed Craven county sheriff Joseph Carruthers to use quitrent proceeds to settle a private debt. Dobbs then issued a proclamation forbidding any quitrent collectors from accepting the bills issued by Murray.⁴⁹ One week later, the Council resolved that Rutherford was guilty of a “misdemeanor” and that issuing printed notes payable for the quitrents had “a tendency to depreciate the present Paper Currency” of the colony. Dobbs

⁴⁸ “Report by John Rutherford concerning his actions as Receiver General of Quit Rents...” *NCCR* 5:397-398.

⁴⁹ Minutes of the North Carolina Governor's Council, December 1, 1757, *NCCR* 5:821-822. Rutherford had repeatedly cited the lack of adequate quitrent rolls as a major problem in collecting the quitrents, and Dobbs, by summoning a sheriff who had actually received a roll for his county from Rutherford, apparently sought to refute this excuse.

accordingly suspended Rutherford from his position as receiver general, and both men from the Council pending a decision on the matter by the Board of Trade.⁵⁰

Dobbs thus charged the councilors with corruption on two fronts. First, they had violated the public trust by using their positions for personal profit. This was not inherently corrupt—indeed it was almost an expectation in the mind of the eighteenth-century politician. But the two men, Dobbs charged, understood that their actions would add to the problem of currency devaluation in the colony—a situation both men had previously cited as part of their broader critiques of the governor. Whether they hoped to cultivate influence in the Cape Fear by passing the notes to area planters for payment of quitrents, or whether Murray simply hoped to regain some of the arrears on his long-overdue salary, the two men had, Dobbs intoned, used their positions for private gain to the detriment of the public good. “In his (Rutherford’s) letter to the Board of Trade,” the governor observed, “he makes great complaints against the paper currency and that if any more were issued it would depreciate the Bills they being now considerably under par.” Rutherford had nonetheless, “while sensible of this publick loss...allowed his friend and adviser Mr. Murray to issue printed notes under hand and seal without limitation to be allowed in payment of Quit Rents.” Dobbs also argued, with justification, that the scheme gave Murray preferential treatment in that it allowed him to receive his arrears before other colonial officials, many of whom had gone without pay for even longer.⁵¹ He had used his private connections to procure an unwarranted favor from the government.

⁵⁰ Council Minutes, December 14, 1757, *NCCR* 5:827-828.

⁵¹ Dobbs to Lords of the Treasury, December 26, 1757, *NCCR* 5:940.

These charges, while clearly exaggerating the fiscal impact of Murray and Rutherford's actions, seemed reasonable enough. In a letter to the Board of Trade, however, the governor revealed what seem to have been his most salient reasons for suspending the two councilors. While repeating the charge that the actions of the two men could only further deflate the currency, and that Rutherford had used quitrent revenues for purposes beyond his authority, Dobbs mentioned "further reasons not fit to be mentioned in Council"—namely that Murray "piqued himself in leading and advising the Junto that he as one of the Council endeavoured to lessen his Majesty's prerogative and add to the power of the Assembly." In particular, according to many of the governor's allies in the Assembly, he had opposed a military aid bill under consideration by the Assembly by inserting clauses that would not have passed the upper house, all part of an attempt to "form a party in the Assembly to make himself popular against the Government" and to "encourage a republican party." With Murray and Rutherford among the leaders, Dobbs warned ominously, "they and the Assembly are driving...to raise their own power and lessen their dependence on the Crown." That the accusations of corruption were a pretext (or perhaps an opportunity) for removing two apparent rivals within the council was confirmed by the governor himself, who informed the Board of Trade that he "did not think it prudent to mention it in Council as a charge against him but delayed it until by his schemes something further could appear against him."⁵²

Rutherford seems to have confirmed the governor's suspicions when he recommended Southern District Treasurer and assemblyman John Starkey to the Board of Trade as his temporary replacement. Starkey, an inveterate advocate for the rights of the

⁵² Dobbs to Board of Trade, December 27, 1757, *NCCR* 5:945-950.

assembly, was in Dobbs's view a "violent Republican" and perhaps the last man the governor wanted on the Council. Dobbs instead recommended the colony's chief justice Peter Henley and assemblymen Thomas Barker and Maurice Moore, Jr. to replace the suspended councilors. Moore, in particular, seems to have been a favorite of Dobbs, who made other unsuccessful attempts to secure him a seat in the council.⁵³

Stung by these allegations and by his removal, Rutherford responded in a report to the Council that Murray had only issued £320 in promissory notes, an amount that was hardly likely to impact the value of provincial currency. In any case, he claimed, most of the notes had already been removed from circulation by the time Dobbs brought his case before the Council. The distribution of the notes, he argued, could have the happy effect of "easing the Tenant and ... putting him in mind to pay his rents," which would help address a fundamental problem confronting the colony, especially as many colonial officials, Rutherford included, depended on quitrent revenue for their salaries.⁵⁴ Both councilors appealed their suspensions to the Board of Trade, claiming that the governor had wrongly dismissed them without, in Murray's words, "being accused of or being conscious to himself of being guilty of any crime or misdemeanor whatsoever." In an appeal that demonstrated the importance of personal connections and reputation in the dispensation of public positions, Rutherford asked to be made aware of the specific charges so that he could answer not only for his own reputation, but that of those who stood as his securities to the Crown for the post.⁵⁵

⁵³ Dobbs to Board of Trade, December 27, 1757, *NCCR* 5:945-948; Barker was treasurer for the northern district, and was hardly an ally of the governor. It is unclear why Dobbs chose to add his name to the list of nominees, unless he simply saw him as a better option than Starkey, if not an ideal candidate. In any case, neither man joined the council.

⁵⁴ "Report by John Rutherford concerning his actions as Receiver General," December 1757, *NCCR* 5: 935-939.

⁵⁵ "Memorial from James Murray," December 30, 1757; "Memorial from John Rutherford," March 13, 1758, *NCCR* 5:956. John and Samuel Swann stood security for Rutherford.

By suspending the councilors, Dobbs created a stir among the colony's elite, many of whom believed the two men had been wrongly dismissed. Although he had spent the previous six months questioning Rutherford about his progress toward providing him with the arrears from the Johnston estate, James Abercromby wrote his friend, lower house speaker Samuel Swann, who was Rutherford's security for the position of receiver-general, that any charges of "fraude or Imbezzlement" against the receiver general were, as far as he knew, without basis. He correctly posited that the accusations, to the extent that he understood them, were perhaps traceable to the recent "Contests in Government" in the colony.⁵⁶

Rutherford sailed for London to press his case before the Board of Trade, but Murray chose to remain in the colony, perhaps partially for personal reasons. His wife and two of his daughters—a premature infant and a young child named Jeany all died in the span of a month and a half, from February to March of 1758—just two months after his dismissal from the council. Their loss, Murray wrote to his oldest daughter in Boston, sat "heavy on my Spirits" and his grief, combined with the reality that he was left alone to care for two more young daughters may have played a role in dissuading him from exerting himself in his own defense. Indeed, he downplayed his political struggles to his brother, claiming that they had diminished in importance since he was "untied from the World by the loss of the greatest Blessing, the greatest Comfort I had in it."⁵⁷ He contested the charges, but only through proxies, mostly family members and merchants based in London.

⁵⁶ Abercromby to Swann, March 4, 1758, *Abercromby Letter Book*, 226-227. Abercromby was not aware of the specific charges made against Rutherford when he wrote on March 4.

⁵⁷ Wood, *This Remote Part of the World*, 92-93; Murray to Jean and Anne Bennett, March 27, 2010, in *Murray, Loyalist*, 97; Murray to John Murray in *ibid*, 92.

The struggle over Murray and Rutherford marked the first skirmish in the larger political battle between Dobbs, seeking, with the general support of the Board of Trade, to expand the royal prerogative in North Carolina, and the lower house of the assembly, who hoped to situate political power in the hands of the colony's emerging elite. In this political climate, Dobbs's opponents in the colony interpreted the move as evidence of the governor's determination to, as Rutherford put it in a letter to Lord Granville, "elbow out anybody in Places of Trust" and award their places to "his Countrymen residing in the Province."⁵⁸ The governor's "countrymen" included the McCullohs, whose family interests, along with his own, he seemed determined to advance. Their rise, in the zero-sum game of provincial politics, would come at the expense of established colonial elites who could muster the influence to counter the governor's power.

Abercromby, frequently called upon by colonial politicians to press their interests in London, was particularly pointed in his criticism of the "connexions" between Dobbs, his family and the McCullohs:

My friend Mr Dobbs has contrived matter so, as to give himself full Employment abroad, and his friends may have their share at home to support his measures abroad. While he makes the measures of Government subservient to his personal attachments & national connexions, it is almost impossible that an Administration on such falacious and narrow principles can be attended with harmony so as to promote the public good.

These "personal attachments", Abercromby thus complained, had effects that went far beyond the frustration of worthy office seekers. They corrupted government by orienting its aims toward the satisfaction of private interests rather than the "public good", and from Abercromby's metropolitan perspective, the effects were manifest:

⁵⁸ John Rutherford to John Carteret, Earl Granville, May 22, 1758, *NCCR* 5:958.

From such partial military promotions of Officers, I understand proceeds the dispeccable appearance of your Provincials in the field, and from the same principles, the most advantageous & Constituti[o]nal Offices of Government become prostituted in the hands of Weak and Wicked men and Boys and Such I see you have in Offices by Mr Dobbs's nomination.

“Believe me,” the frustrated Abercromby assured Dobbs's enemies in the colony, “I do not want full inclination to serve my friends in North Carolina.”⁵⁹

The Board of Trade rejected Rutherford's initial appeals. Citing a recent precedent in South Carolina, the Board recommended to the Privy Council that Rutherford's suspension be upheld, as governors would be powerless to advance the royal prerogative without the authority to remove adversaries from their councils.⁶⁰ The Board's ruling was narrow, however—the only type of behavior, they stipulated, that would justify such a suspension was the corrupt exercise of power. Specifically, the governor could only legally remove a councilor who made use of that influence “which he derives from his station to form Cabals and factious parties in the Council or the Assembly” for “self-interested or worse purposes”.⁶¹ After three years of delay, and a process which Murray sympathetically described as “very tedious and expensive”, the Privy Council finally ruled on the case, ordering that Rutherford be reinstated to the governor's council. Murray, having only pushed his case through representatives, was not reinstated to the Council until one year later, although he was already anticipating his return, and his potential accession to the position of

⁵⁹ Abercromby to Samuel Swann, in *Abercromby Letter Book*, 297-298.

⁶⁰ The case was that of William Wragg, who was removed by governor William Henry Lyttleton earlier in the 1750s. Ironically, Wragg had earned the governor's ire with his excessive zeal in asserting the royal prerogative, which alienated the lower house at the beginning of the French and Indian War. Like Murray and Rutherford, his dismissal was based on other offenses. Robert M. Weir, *Colonial South Carolina: A History* (Millwood, NY: KTO Press, 1983)266-267.

⁶¹ Board of Trade to the Privy Council, July 28, 1758, *NCCR* 5:960.

acting governor upon Dobbs's death, even before news arrived of Rutherford's reinstatement.⁶²

Dobbs's move against the two councilors, then, was ultimately a failure. Indeed, it had the effect, in conjunction with other events described below, of poisoning relations between the governor and a significant portion of the colonial political elite—those, who, in the governor's words, were "country born".⁶³ That many of Dobbs's adversaries, including Murray and Rutherford, were actually *not* born in the colony seems to have escaped the governor, a point which emphasizes his failure to grasp the cliquish nature of North Carolina politics. At least one historian has noted that Murray and Rutherford themselves owed their positions on the council to their "national connexions," as Abercromby put it. Both men received their appointments from their countryman and patron, Gabriel Johnston—and they were not chosen for their standing among provincial elites, but because Johnston believed he could count on their support.⁶⁴

What really troubled North Carolina elites, in addition to the apparently arbitrary removal of two prominent officials from public office, was that the governor seemed intent on filling the provincial government with men from outside their fairly self-contained, if recently developed, networks of interest in the colony. In a series of resolutions against the governor in the spring of 1760, the lower house pointed out, for example, that the governor had, in addition to removing "Gentlemen of unexceptionable characters and distinguished

⁶² "Order of the Privy Council concerning John Rutherford...", April 30, 1761, *NCCR* 6:558; Council Minutes, December 31, 1762, *NCCR* 6: 799; Murray to John Murray of Philiphaugh, July 18th, 1761, James Murray Papers, NCA. William Tryon's appointment as lieutenant governor shortly thereafter installed him as Dobbs's successor before Murray had the opportunity to fill the role.

⁶³ Dobbs to Board of Trade, 1760.

⁶⁴ Wood, *This Remote Part of the World*, 156.

worth” from office, given military appointments to “persons of little weight and interest in the Province.”⁶⁵ Some observers ascribed this behavior to cronyism on the part of the governor. James Moir, an Anglican minister in Northampton County who thoroughly detested Dobbs, thought that he simply had a “natural Antipathy to everyone that acts uprightly in a publick Office.”⁶⁶

But Dobbs’s opponents in the assembly detected a more sinister motive. These “Pimps and Hangers on the Governor”, as opposition politician Thomas Child called Dobbs’s supporters in the Council, were part of a design to expand executive power at the expense of the liberties of British subjects in North Carolina.⁶⁷ These concerns can be seen clearly in Abercromby’s letter to Swann as well as a memorial from the lower house to the Board of Trade, in which Dobbs’s actions regarding appointments were designed to enhance his own position in the colony and “gratify Partial Views and Private Interest,” a condition that would lead to “nothing less than...impending ruin and disolation.”⁶⁸

These observations, which would have hardly seemed out of place in the *Craftsman* circa 1730, evoked well-worn discourses of corruption and degradation of government, and they are laced with exaggerations. Yet they were based, like much of the rhetoric surrounding the allegedly corrupt dispensation of patronage, on a shrewd understanding of the interlocking personal relationships that characterized colonial government. Murray and Rutherford, as longtime residents in the colony, were intimately connected with other

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ James Moir to Secretary, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, March 30, 1762, *NCCR* (Second Series) 11:347. Moir, who lived in Northampton County, had been accused of negligence by Dobbs several times during the governor’s tenure. He also seems to have been involved in a serious dispute with Alexander McCulloh, who was perhaps the most powerful man in the Roanoke Valley.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Dobbs to Board of Trade, *NCCR* 6:247.

⁶⁸ “The Humble Address of the Assembly of North Carolina”, May 23, 1760, *NCCR* 6:416.

prominent members of North Carolina political society. To repeat one prominent example cited above, Rutherford's friend Samuel Swann, speaker of the lower house, stood security for his performance as receiver-general, an arrangement that legally and financially conjoined the reputations of the two men. Murray's central role in the rise of Wilmington, as well as his prominence as a merchant, and the multiple local offices he held, bound him in a complex network of financial and political relationships with prominent North Carolina planters. These men were inextricably bound through "chains of interest" to other prominent figures in the colony, and because relationships based on "interest" were inherently reciprocal, they were men who could be (to some extent, at least) relied upon.⁶⁹ Dobbs's family, on the other hand, newly arrived in the colony, owed their stations and influence not to a network of carefully cultivated friendships, but to the governor only. The assembly leaders feared their lack of "weight and interest in the colony" because it meant that only Dobbs could count on their loyalty. By reserving places of influence for his closest friends and family, the governor was not simply caring for his intimates. He was altering the configuration of political power in the colony.

The removal of men like Murray and Rutherford from positions of authority, and the elevation of Dobbs's friends and family in government could thus be represented as not only bad government, but as a plot against the liberties of North Carolinians. If Dobbs, as will be shown in the next chapter, could construct a corrupt narrative in which he was beset by cabals and Juntos, seeking to foist a "Republican" government on the colony, then his adversaries, who owed their influence and power to personal connections, could just as easily

⁶⁹Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 60.

frame his actions as a deliberate series of machinations intended to arrogate power to a corrupt executive. Yet the governor, while flatly stating his plan for his family to attain the “best rank and Fortune in the Province,” could also point to the corruption of local grandees like Rutherford and Murray as evidence of the need for reform in colonial government—reform that could only be achieved by removing those who abused public positions and replacing them with allegedly trustworthy figures.

Dobbs explicitly made this point when he defended the appointment of Hugh Waddell to a militia officership, pointing to the behavior of Caleb Grainger, the unscrupulous Cape Fear politician and militia captain (and friend of James Murray) who “discharged the best men for money” before resigning his commission. Dobbs hoped that Grainger’s appointment would placate Cape Fear politicians who feared the influence of those “come lately from Ireland,” but Grainger’s schemes, he claimed, were “no encouragement for me to employ the Country born of interest in this Province to make fortunes at the Publick expense.” Much earlier, he claimed that no suitable candidates for customs positions could be found among the colonial elite, who were “desirous of running goods and to enjoy an illicit trade.”⁷⁰ He argued, in other words, that his appointments did not constitute corrupt use of patronage, but rather a means to combat corruption in the colonial militia.

The controversies surrounding the Rutherford-Murray affair illustrate the importance of the networks of influence and patronage that characterized eighteenth century North Carolina politics. Patronage was a means of securing alliances with (or alienating) powerful men, and the webs of authority and dependence that characterized a political society driven by patronage were as apparent, if perhaps less complex, in colonial North Carolina as

⁷⁰Dobbs to Board of Trade, August 3, 1760, *NCCR* 6:283; Ibid, December 27, 1757, *NCCR* 5:950.

anywhere else in the British Atlantic world. Dobbs and his opponents shared many of the assumptions that undergirded this society—many of the governor’s opponents were simply angry because they had been passed over, and their complaints never took the form of a larger critique of patronage itself. But precisely because patronage was such an integral aspect of colonial government, it was the most effective means—indeed sometimes the only means short of brute force—by which power could be exercised and efficient government could be run.⁷¹ In this society where political alliances took the form of personal friendships, Dobbs’s removal of two “men of interest” and his apparently flagrant nepotism were cause for alarm, as they pointed the way to further usurpations of power.

⁷¹By “colonial government,” I mean the entire government apparatus, from the Privy Council and Board of Trade, to justices of the peace and sheriffs, responsible for governing the colonies.

CHAPTER 3

Public Money, Private Interests, and Personal Politics

The Murray-Rutherford affair marked the first major rupture between the governor and the lower house, and it revealed the extent to which personal connections and patronage defined the contours of colonial North Carolina politics. The governor's dismissal of Murray, in particular, while ultimately overturned by the Board of Trade, demonstrated that the governor was beginning to appreciate the ability of powerful colonial politicians to mobilize political factions against his rule. At the same time, the incident also aroused anxieties among the colony's elite about the governor's ability to not only fill the provincial government with his friends, but to purge it of his perceived enemies in an effort to expand his powers. Thus it seriously dampened what had been cordial relations between the governor and the lower house. As Rutherford and Murray appealed their suspensions to the Board, and their allies in the Assembly continued to grumble about the governor's maneuvers, a new political squabble emerged, this time over a grant from Parliament to reimburse the colony for its contributions to the war against France. The struggle pitted two competing political ideologies in a serious debate over the structure of North Carolina's government—Dobbs's commitment to the royal prerogative on the one hand and the Assembly's determination to control the purse strings of the colony on the other.

Yet Dobbs framed the contest as a personal crusade against an adversary who was, in his mind, profoundly corrupt and politically radical—colonial treasurer and assemblyman John Starkey. This chapter will expand on the theme of corrupt discourse by examining the manner in which Dobbs demonized Starkey, his most powerful adversary, exposing a powerful link between political principle and personal animosity that went beyond the

governor's well-earned reputation as "something of a splutterer."¹ While the Assembly's rhetoric was perhaps less strident, at least at first, its leaders also claimed that Dobbs and his factors were not to be trusted with control of the colony's money—they intensified constitutional concerns by inflecting them with accusations of malfeasance. It will also explore the systemic corruption, particularly embezzlement, that clearly prevailed in the handling of public funds in the colony, and suggest ways in which this corruption was related to larger colonial political issues. Remaining foremost among these issues was the importance of various forms of corruption in constructing or strengthening political coalitions. Because the imbroglio over the parliamentary grant involved colonial agent James Abercromby, this chapter will also explore his crucial role in North Carolina politics on both sides of the Atlantic, beyond his involvement, described in the preceding chapter, in securing positions of profit for his friends in the colony.

The outbreak of the French and Indian War led to repeated imperial demands for contributions to the cause from the various colonies. While Dobbs was initially successful in forging regional colonial unity by invoking the threat posed by the French, by 1757 he began to experience increasing difficulty in reaching agreements with the Assembly on a number of matters, particularly monetary support for the war effort. Much of the Assembly's reticence may have resulted from the colony's relative removal from direct threat of military invasion, but simmering jealousies on the part of many colonial elites over favoritism in militia and civil appointments, as seen in the previous chapter, may have played a role as well. These concerns merged with perhaps the most important factor—the dearth of specie in the

¹ A.J. Morrison, "Arthur Dobbs of Castle Dobbs and Carolina," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (January 1917), 30.

colony—to contribute to an increased spirit of “parsimony”, as Dobbs put it, on the part of the lower house. Yet even as the provincial assembly chafed against the expectations of its royal governor, political developments in the metropole ensured that if anything, these demands would only increase in frequency. William Pitt’s appointment as secretary of state to the southern colonies in late 1756, and the rise of the Pitt-Newcastle ministry less than two years later were due in no small part to Pitt’s expressed desire to take new and more aggressive steps to winning the war, especially in the colonies.²

Adopting a cooperative approach to dealing with the colonies, Pitt repeatedly encouraged the royal governors of Virginia and the Carolinas to “press [the colonial assemblies] in the strongest Manner to raise with the utmost Expedition as large a Number of Provincial Forces as may be for the Service” of a campaign against the French.” Rather than simply appealing to patriotism or the royal prerogative, however, the pragmatic Pitt offered compensation in the form of Parliamentary grants for the colonies’ financial exertions in support of the war effort. Wielding the promise of reimbursement in hard currency, Dobbs accordingly issued requests for more men, materiel and money at virtually every Assembly session, but by the spring session of 1758, he could only chastise them for their “ill-judged Parsimony,” warning that they could have “little hopes of Safety” if the British forces “fail now by your Neglect”. The lower house leaders responded, repeating a common theme, that “the Inhabitants of this Government are so impoverished by the frequent Aids Granted to his Majesty during the present War...that it is impossible for us to give such demonstrative Proofs of our Zeal and Ardour as we could wish!” While they never rejected the governor’s requests for funds and men outright, they also generally failed to meet the terms of those

² Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 115-116; Maass, “All This Poor Province Could Do,” 50-51.

requests, approving sums far lower than what British officials, especially Pitt, expected from the province.³ Dobbs attributed the Assembly's intransigence on the issue to the emergence of a "republican Party" determined to "lessen his Majesty's Prerogative and add to the Power of the Assembly."⁴

"A very knotty bone of contention"

Dobbs, James Abercromby and others worried that North Carolina's reluctance to contribute funds and men to the war effort might jeopardize their opportunity to receive the much-needed grant from Parliament. Nevertheless, in 1758 Parliament granted £50,000 to the southern colonies (Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia) for their military expenditures prior to 1757. The actual amount to be disbursed to each colony would be proportional to their total contribution to the war effort, which would be determined by British authorities based on claims submitted by royal governors and the testimony of British officers in the field. No colonial politician knew how much their colony would receive, though both governor and assemblymen anticipated a sum of £15000 for North Carolina. Given the increasingly acrimonious relationship between Dobbs and the Assembly, and the intense opportunism of many of North Carolina's political leaders, it seemed likely that control of the grant, whatever amount it turned out to be, would quickly become the subject of another major political squabble. "Who shall have the fingering of it," the newly suspended James Murray wryly predicted of the fund, would become "a very knotty bone of

³ "Circular Letter From William Pitt, Earl of Chatham, to the American Governors of the Southern Colonies", February 4, 1757, *NCCR* 5:744; Maass, "All This Poor Province Could Do", 51-52; Dobbs, Address to Lower House, April 28, 1758, Lower House Minutes, *NCCR* 5:999; Lower House, Address to Dobbs, *ibid*, 1001.

⁴ Dobbs to Board of Trade, December 27, 1757, *NCCR* 5:947.

contention.”⁵ As Murray’s language suggests, the dispute, while rooted in very serious and fundamental constitutional disagreements about the powers of various colonial officials, would be contested in the language of personal corruption, with accusations of self-interest, embezzlement, and influence-peddling leveled by all parties concerned. In the process, the already strained relationship between Dobbs and the lower house, already strained by the debates described in the previous chapter, deteriorated even further, to the point of total dysfunction by the end of 1759.

At the center of negotiations for the funds, both personally in London and by proxy in North Carolina, was colonial agent James Abercromby. Abercromby suggested that the colony use whatever money they received from the grant to sink the colony’s depreciating paper money supply or at least a portion of it. He also hoped to secure a portion of the funds to pay the salary owed for his services as colonial agent, several years in arrears, on top of a healthy commission. After proposing both ideas to House Speaker and close friend Samuel Swann, he floated them to Dobbs, all the while complaining that, because the colony had yet to stake its claim to a percentage of the funds, the money (and his salary arrears) remained in the Treasury. Complicating matters was the fact that in the midst of negotiations for the fund, Abercromby’s commission expired, and the Assembly, according to Dobbs, had been so “crusty in granting any money for public services” that they had refused to retain his services for another two-year term.⁶ But Abercromby blamed the governor for his dismissal, characterizing his decision as “laconick” and lacking an understanding of the importance of his work. Later he would claim to a sympathetic Samuel Swann that Dobbs had “finess’d”

⁵ James Murray to John Rutherford, January 23, 1759, quoted in Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 123.

⁶ Dobbs to Abercromby, December 28, 1757, *NCCR* 5:788-789.

him from the office. “I have not,” the colonial agent complained to Dobbs, “been treated as I might have expected from your Government.”⁷

Abercromby officially acknowledged his dismissal in a letter to the Board of Trade of April 13, beseeching the Board to encourage his proposal for the funds and warning them, as he had both assembly and Dobbs, that “great attention is to be had to the manner of remitting and applying this money”:

otherwise the person or persons into whose hands such money shall come may pocket one half of the whole by purchasing the paper money at its depreciated value and so reissue the same as a Tender in Law in discharge of the public Creditors according to its nominal value by Law to the manifest prejudice of Public and private credit.

The deflated value of the colonial currency, Abercromby charged, created an opportunity for a corrupt politician to profit from the grant at the expense of the colony, and, he might have added, his salary. He therefore recommended that until the North Carolina Assembly passed an act that specifically put the grant money to use in retiring the colony’s paper currency, the money should remain in the Treasury.⁸

The issue remained unresolved despite Abercromby’s frequent warnings. When Dobbs informed the Assembly of his plans for the grant in his address opening their second session of 1758 in November, he failed to stipulate precisely how the grant money would be handled, only assuring the legislators that the remainder of the money “shall be laid out in the

⁷ Abercromby to Dobbs, March 4th, 1758, *Abercromby Letter Book*, 229. In the same letter, Abercromby assured the governor that he would not involve himself in the matter of John Rutherford’s suspension, a promise that, despite his growing frustration with the influence of Dobbs and Henry McCulloh, described in the preceding chapter, he seems to have kept. Abercromby’s patience was clearly further tested by Rutherford’s inability to remit the salary arrears due him from the estate of former governor Gabriel Johnston, whom he served as personal agent. Rutherford had married Johnston’s widow, and quickly discovered that Johnston’s own salary, to which he was entitled, was in arrears, as it was to be taken from quitrent money.

⁸ Abercromby to Samuel Swann, April 19, 1758, *Abercromby Letter Book*, 254; Abercromby to Swann, July 20, 1759, *ibid*, 310; Abercromby to Secretary, Board of Trade of Great Britain, April 13, 1758, *NCCR* 5:929.

most usefull manner for the benefit of this Province.”⁹ While seeking to avoid direct debate on the issue, Dobbs clearly expected to control the use of the funds himself—he had even ordered brigadier general John Forbes, commanding North Carolina militia in the campaign against Fort Duquesne on the Ohio River, to advance the North Carolina troops their pay with the promise of compensation from North Carolina’s portion of the grant.¹⁰ That the amount of the grant remained undecided seems not to have concerned the governor, who was slow, much to Abercromby’s frustration, in staking North Carolina’s claim to the funds. Eventually the colonial agent, fearing that the money, along with his salary, might be “appropriated to other and more pressing purposes of Gover’t in America”, took matters into his own hands, lobbying for North Carolina despite the fact that he no longer officially represented the colony.¹¹

Despite their unwillingness to renew Abercromby’s commission less than one year earlier, the leaders of the lower house, especially Samuel Swann, a close friend of the agent, decided to employ their contact in London to procure the money for their use. On December 20, they drafted a plan to appoint Abercromby agent for the province, answering to a Committee of Correspondence selected by the assembly from the members of the lower

⁹ Ibid; Lower House Journals, November 23, 1758, *NCCR* 5:1014.

¹⁰ Dobbs to Board of Trade, April 30, 1758, *NCCR* 5:933. Pitt’s request for more troops for the Ohio River campaign occasioned a tense exchange between Dobbs and the Assembly. Dobbs chastised the lower house for their “ill-judged parsimony” in neglecting to grant sufficient funds to raise the requested number of militia, and the house responded that the colony was already “impoverished by the frequent Aids Granted...to assist in the defence of Virginia, New York, and South Carolina,” the total amount of which exceeded the amount of currency currently in the colony. Nevertheless, the House authorized the raising of three hundred more men and granted an aid of £7000. The grant would be financed by further currency emissions and an increased poll tax, as well as a tax on wine and liquor. Lower House Journals, April 28, 1758 and April 29, 1758, *NCCR* 5:999-1003. While unsatisfied with the amount granted, Dobbs acknowledged to Pitt that the Assembly had “done all this poor province could do”. Hence, he pointed out, his promise to Forbes for compensation from North Carolina’s portion of the grant. Dobbs to Pitt, May 7, 1758, *NCCR* 5:934. See also Maass, “All This Poor Province Could Do,” 58.

¹¹ Abercromby to Dobbs, March 4, 1758, *Abercromby Letter Book*, 229.

house. The members included several of Dobbs's opponents, including Samuel Swann, Thomas Barker and John Starkey. Barker and Starkey were Northern and Southern district treasurers, respectively.¹² After Abercromby had satisfied his arrears, and taken a commission on the grant, the funds themselves were to be brought to North Carolina in specie, and placed in the treasurers' hands, to be disbursed by the Assembly. Out of concern that some of the money from Parliament would be drawn by Forbes, they offered to grant "other Sums" so "that we may receive the Money granted to the Parliament in Specie, and therewith sink an equal Sum in our Bill Money".¹³ Expecting opposition from the governor, the assembly leaders added the official proposal as a rider to a military aid bill, precisely the bill that Dobbs had exhorted the Assembly to pass at the beginning of the session. To further force the governor's hand, the plan's supporters in the Assembly, led by Starkey, promised to support a bill for locating the colonial capital on the Neuse River, a plan advocated by Dobbs, who owned a plantation near the planned site.¹⁴

The governor immediately saw the plan as a serious threat, and he fairly typically ascribed its origins to a corrupt conspiracy within the Assembly. Believing that "a Junto of 2 or 3 leading Members and the 2 Treasurers" had met at the Supreme Court in Enfield on the way to the Assembly to develop a "fine spun scheme" Dobbs ordered his supporters in the Council to wait until the final reading of the two bills to lodge their opposition to the grant bill. He thus secured passage of the capital bill while rejecting the House's appointment of Abercromby and their plan for the parliamentary funds. He then rejected the military aid bill,

¹² Lower House Journals, December 20, 1758, *NCCR* 5:1087.

¹³ *Ibid*, November 24, 1758, *NCCR* 5:1041.

¹⁴ *Abercromby Letter Book*, xxix.

an uncomfortable development that he felt the need to explain to the Board of Trade.¹⁵ The lower house, incensed by the governor's decision, unilaterally named Abercromby as provincial agent, while Dobbs and the Council appointed Samuel Smith, a close associate of the governor, to serve in the same capacity. The dispute continued for several years, even after the Board of Trade, influenced by Abercromby, ruled in favor of the assembly in 1759. Eventually, the situation was largely resolved with the appointment of London placeman Couchet Jouvenal in 1762. Under this compromise appointment, the agent would answer to a committee of correspondence, but, per the Board of Trade's recommendation, the committee included members of the Council as well as the lower house.¹⁶

To Dobbs, placing the colonial agent under the control of the lower house was a development of “an extraordinary nature”, but it was only part of the problem. He certainly must have realized, correctly, that Abercromby was no ally. There was also reason to suspect the colonial agent's integrity, if not his industry—the Virginia Committee of Correspondence questioned whether he had engaged in “overrating his commission and many other articles of disbursement” while he served as agent to that colony. While he had steadfastly supported Virginia governor Robert Dinwiddie in the pistole fee controversy earlier in the decade, in North Carolina, his interests clearly lay with his friends in the Assembly, some of whom, especially John and Samuel Swann, he had probably known since his days as an assemblyman in South Carolina.¹⁷ Moreover, Abercromby was exasperated by the influence

¹⁵ Dobbs to Board of Trade, January 22, 1759, *NCCR* 6:2.

¹⁶ Greene, *Quest for Power*, 272-277.

¹⁷ Dobbs to Board of Trade, January 22, 1759, *NCCR* 6:3; “Proceedings of the Virginia Committee of Correspondence”, *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 12, no. 2 (October, 1904): 24; Greene, *Quest for Power*, 280-281.

exerted in London by Dobbs and especially Henry McCulloh, which repeatedly complicated efforts to secure appointments for Abercromby's friends in North Carolina. The governor and his allies, however, saw a larger threat much closer to home, in the form of the "Junto" led by assemblyman and treasurer John Starkey. In theory, Dobbs believed, vesting the power of treasurer in the hands of two assemblymen—Thomas Barker, the northern district treasurer, was also a member of the lower house—presented a major obstacle to enforcing the royal prerogative in the colony. In practice, he argued, the character of Starkey, a man whom the governor seems to have viewed as a sort of republican Mephistopheles, made concessions to the Assembly's proposal unthinkable, and showed that more, not less, executive oversight of the office of treasurer was needed.

"Cabals," "Juntos" and "Designing Men"

The issue was not a new one. Legislative control over the office of treasurer had long been a source of anxiety for many colonial governors, including North Carolina's. Starkey's appointment to the post under Gabriel Johnston in 1750 had involved much political wrangling, as the lower house successfully wrested their right of nomination for the important position from the council.¹⁸ It was a major victory for the lower house. But however vexing for royal governors, the practice of naming colonial treasurers from the assembly was an established practice throughout the colonies by the middle of the eighteenth century. In many cases, Virginia from 1699 to 1766 to cite one example, the speaker of the House of Burgesses held the position.¹⁹ That this created potential conflicts of interest—in both the modern and eighteenth-century sense of the word—was demonstrated by the case of

¹⁸ Ibid, 238.

¹⁹ Labaree, *Royal Government in America*, 301

speaker and treasurer John Robinson in Virginia, a man described by one historian as the “most powerful man in Virginia, royal governors not excluded.” Instead of destroying the thousands of pounds of Virginia paper currency mandated for retirement each year by the legislature, one of the major duties of his position, Robinson disbursed large sums to influential planters (and fellow assemblymen) who had fallen on hard times—an act of largesse and interest that ultimately led to an astonishing £100,000 shortfall in the treasury’s accounts when they were audited in 1766.²⁰

The most obvious objection to vesting the power of treasurer in an official appointed by the assembly, or in the case of North Carolina’s treasurers, an assembly member was, as one historian of political institutions in colonial America observes, “that a treasurer appointed by the assembly would be more likely to take orders from that body than from the governor and council”.²¹ But Dobbs, facing opposition from “Juntos” and “cabals” comprised of very influential men, saw a different problem. He claimed that if the office of treasurer was held by an assembly leader like Starkey, the treasurer might use the power of the purse to influence the assembly rather than the other way around. Of particular concern, Dobbs warned the Board, was Starkey’s control over his colleagues in the House, who, because he controlled the stipends they received for attending the assembly sessions, would “follow him like Chickens”. In this way, the governor claimed, Starkey cultivated political

²⁰ T.H. Breen, *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Tidewater Planters on the Eve of Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 103-105. Understandably, the practice of vesting the treasurer’s responsibilities with the Speaker ended with Robinson.

²¹ Labaree, *Royal Government in America*, 301.

friendships and cemented loyalties, “sway[ing] the House against the most sensible Members in it.”²²

The accusation that fortuitously placed officials might use corrupt methods to influence voting in assemblies was a common fear in eighteenth-century discourse, echoed many times in the *Craftsman*, *Cato’s Letters*, and other publications. It was precisely this anxiety that lay behind the conviction, shared by many contemporary political thinkers, that government should be filled with men of sufficient wealth to render them independent of the temptations offered by “designing” men like Starkey. “Lay not out your money,” warned Thomas Gordon in *Cato’s Letters*, “with those who for money sell your liberties, which is the only source of your money, and of all the happiness which you enjoy.”²³ In this context, Dobbs’s characterization of Starkey’s followers in the lower house as “chickens” may have been intended to conjure more than just a ridiculous image—the governor claimed that these were not the sorts of men who, by station or inclination, could resist the influence of men like Starkey.

Like most of his powerful colleagues, Starkey had been very successful in cultivating enormous influence among not only fellow politicians, but also the population of Onslow County, where he had at one time or another held the posts of justice of the peace, county treasurer, coroner, and militia officer. An established “planter, accountant and attorney” in the region, he became an assemblyman, a position he would hold for the rest of his life, shortly after his arrival in the colony from England.²⁴ While few details survive about his

²² Dobbs to Board of Trade, December 27, 1757 *NCCR* 5:946.

²³ Thomas Gordon, *Cato’s Letters*, No. 70, March 17, 1721 (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1995), 508.

²⁴ Tucker Reed Littleton, “John Starkey” in *NCDB* vol. 5 P-S (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 428-429.

life, he appears to have maintained an image as a sort of populist hero. Dobbs's letters to the Board of Trade, however, characterized Starkey as a quintessentially corrupt provincial politician. Mocking Starkey's plebeian affectations, Dobbs claimed that the treasurer's "seeming humility by wearing shoe strings a plain coat and having a bald head" convinced some that he was "self denied". In such ways, he cultivated the trust of Onslow County planters, dozens of whom made him executor to their estates. According to Dobbs, the governor would then take "10 per cent to himself upon all the Testators effects and upon publick sale of their Effects busy up all the slaves going at and under value, by which he has great profit." The treasurer, Dobbs concluded, was "the most designing man in the province"—not the sort of man to whom the parliamentary grant could be entrusted. That he also happened to be, according to Dobbs, "a professed violent Republican in every instance taking from his Majesty's prerogative," who had "made himself popular by opposing all taxes that do not turn out to his profit" made it all the more urgent that he not get his hands on the money from Britain.²⁵ The governor's distrust for Starkey intensified in 1758, when the assembly accounts committee headed by the treasurer rejected a claim for reimbursement made by colonial secretary Richard Speight, the governor's nephew, for minor expenses incurred in transmitting military correspondence. Dobbs responded angrily in an address to the lower house that he took it "to be an Affront against me" in which he was "treated with the greatest indignity". Moreover, he laid the blame for the insult squarely at the feet of Starkey, chairman of the accounts committee, "who by aiming at a false Popularity, pretends

²⁵ Dobbs to the Board of Trade, December 27, 1757 *NCCR* 5:946. In context, Dobbs's reference to Starkey's "bald head" likely refers to his refusal to wear a wig.

not only to lead the Committee, but to govern the House.” Dobbs concluded his address with a personal warning to Starkey, combined with an accusation of personal malfeasance:

I must let the Treasurer know, that he must Answer my Orders when he has Money in his hands; and if I order it illegally, let him impeach me upon the Order; for I find, by his Accounts, that he can advance Money to his Favourites when he has no Money in his Hands; witness the printing Fund, which he has over paid, to oblige his Friends.

With their response, the House demonstrated that they correctly read Dobbs’s address as an attack on Starkey himself. Whatever influence the treasurer had, they claimed, was the result of “his long Experience in Business, and his diligent attention to the Public Concerns”, and indeed he was a man who “merited the Esteem of all who wish well to this Province”. They also characterized the governor’s suggestion that he could force the treasurer to show his accounts as “a concession...subversive of all Government.”²⁶ The governor, still determined to rein in the influence of the treasurer, who he was convinced was a serious threat to his authority, stripped him of the two local positions he held, Onslow County justice of the peace and militia colonel.²⁷

The forthcoming grant from Parliament raised the stakes of the governor’s rivalry with Starkey. Dobbs charged, in a letter to the Board of Trade on the matter, that if the money came into the hands of his rivals, they would retire only a small portion of the colony’s paper money supply, and “the surplus would sink into their pockets and their friends in the Committee of Correspondence.” The governor thus framed the entire matter as part of a scheme on the part of the lower house to usurp the royal prerogative not simply out of political conviction but rather naked self-interest. It was up to the Board of Trade, he

²⁶ Lower House Journals, December 22, 1758, *NCCR* 5:1096, 1099

²⁷ Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 121.

asserted, to decide whether to allow the money to pass through the hands of the Governor and the Council, with the accounts “audited by the Auditor and transmitted to Britain according to my Instructions,”

or to give up all accounts of money to the Assembly who will neither pay nor allow the Auditor to audit the accounts and keep the Vouchers, by which means they endeavour to engross all power, as they endeavour from time to time to increase it, now is the time... to stop their schemes of their power, as very little money will be raised upon the Province but for their own benefit.²⁸

The issue of auditing public money, raised repeatedly by the governor, was part of another basic disagreement with the Assembly, but one which he had refrained from raising until the grant controversy. It was one of the most important facets of the expanding struggle for power in the colony, and the rhetoric used should be read in that context. But the debate over the issue also involved serious concerns over a corrupt political culture that allowed officials to accumulate wealth and influence through the embezzlement of public funds.

“A considerable Weight of Interest”

Dobbs arrived in the colony with instructions from the Board of Trade to ensure that “fair books of accounts of all receipts and payments of all public money” be kept and submitted to the deputy auditor for the colony, but this task proved more difficult than the Board may have imagined. A little over a year after taking office, he reported to a friend that “the people here are much against the Auditors being concerned in following their Accounts.”²⁹ Indeed, the deputy auditor for the colony, Alexander McCulloch, informed Dobbs late in 1754 that no “Books were ever kept and no Accounts of publick Money have ever been produced to me to be Audited,” all accounts other than quitrent receipts “having

²⁸ Dobbs to Board of Trade, January 22, 1759 *NCCR* 6:4.

²⁹ Instructions to Arthur Dobbs, June 17, 1754, *NCCR* 5:1116; Dobbs to Alex McAulay, March 17, 1755, Dobbs Papers, Colonial Governors’ Papers, NCA.

been passed in the Assembly without ever being audited by me.”³⁰ North Carolina’s treasurers, like those in some other colonies, were only accountable to a committee always comprised by a majority of lower house members, a condition that was partially responsible for what one historian of colonial North Carolina has called the “shocking inefficiency and corruption that typified the handling of public monies.”³¹

In 1767, two years after Dobbs’s (and Starkey’s) death, governor William Tryon estimated that the sheriffs’ accounts to the colony were more than £40000 sterling in arrears, a state of affairs which he attributed to the “ill-judged lenity” of the colonial treasurers, particularly Starkey, who had held that position since 1750. The “treasurers’ lenity,” Tryon concluded, was “founded on a principle of caution, for by not suing the sheriffs in arrear they obtain a considerable weight of Interest among the connections of these delinquent sheriffs and which generally secures them a re-election.” The sheriffs were responsible for presiding over elections, an arrangement that guaranteed an enormous amount of influence at the county and colony level, for reasons that will be elaborated below. A series of reports conducted over the next three years by Council secretary John Burgwyn showed that Tryon had actually underestimated the arrearage. According to Burgwyn, whose findings have not since been refuted, North Carolina sheriffs were £64,013 in arrears in poll tax payments, with only £56,616 actually accounted for by the colony’s treasurers over a somewhat longer

³⁰ Alexander McCulloch to Dobbs, December 24, 1754, *NCCR* 5:160-161.

³¹ Marvin L. Michael Kay, “The Payment of Provincial and Local Taxes in North Carolina, 1748-1771, *William and Mary Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (April 1969), 224.

period.³² In short, the findings indicated that the sheriffs had embezzled, misplaced, or illegally disbursed more poll tax revenue than they had actually collected.

Given the colony's perennial lack of funds for wartime expenses and other urgent needs, there is perhaps no more glaring example of the negative effects of political corruption on the general welfare of the colony. And aside from the numerous frauds perpetrated by land agents, there was no more conspicuous form of corruption. Certainly the behavior of local officers, including sheriffs, was a frequent theme of corrupt discourse. Regulator petitions, which had actually prompted Tryon's accusations, were full of these accounts of the corruption of these local officials. To cite just one form of malfeasance at the county level, the practice by sheriffs of collecting and pocketing money from taxables who did not appear on the tax lists compiled by the county court was so widespread that an act was passed in 1755 to address it. But this act stipulated that the sheriff should account with his district treasurer, who alone had the power to bring suit against the sheriffs for missing funds.³³

Sheriffs were by law entitled to significant commissions on county, parish, and provincial taxes, and they also received a fee for distresses made on delinquent taxpayers. Moreover, most sheriffs were quitrent collectors, both in the counties in the Granville District and royal lands.³⁴ With all of these funds passing through their hands, and record-keeping

³² Marvin L. Michael Kay, *Provincial Taxes in North Carolina During the Administrations of Dobbs and Tryon*, *NCHR* 42, 4 (1965): 440-444; William Tryon to Earl of Shelburne, July 4, 1767, *NCCR* 7:497; John Burgwyn, "Account of outstanding debts due to the North Carolina government from 1754 to 1770", *NCCR* 8:278-281. See also Boyd, *Some 18th Century Tracts Concerning North Carolina* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards and Broughton Co., 1927), 415-416.

³³ Julian P. Boyd, *The Sheriff in Colonial North Carolina*, 165; Marvin M. Michael Kay, "Provincial Taxes in North Carolina", 443.

³⁴ *Ibid.* Sheriffs accounted for the quitrents to either Granville's land office in the Granville District or to the receiver general in the southern counties.

sporadic at best, embezzlement could be so easy and lucrative that “the Sheriff who was in poor circumstances before, would become possessed of Negroes and a trading man,” observed one travelling Anglican missionary in Rowan County.³⁵ Because sheriffs were very often chosen by their fellow justices of the peace, who were in turn almost invariably well-represented in the assembly, they formed the crucial link in what one historian of the Regulation has termed an “interlocking system of power”. That sheriffs counted votes in elections, which were held *viva voce* in most North Carolina counties in the mid-eighteenth century, added to their considerable influence.³⁶ Moreover, their close relations with the county, and often district courts meant that sheriffs were often able to pocket public funds with relative impunity. James Moir, a minister in Northampton County, wrote his superiors in London that “I have told two Chief Justices to their Faces how grossly they misbehav’d in Suits for the Recovery of Parish Taxes from Sheriffs who had squander’d them away.”³⁷

“Particular Persons under particular Influence”

These constitutional struggles, then, were not simply contested over abstract notions of sovereignty—they, like the jealousies aroused in the Rutherford-Murray imbroglio, were related to concrete concerns about corruption and power and, perhaps more importantly, those who wielded it in North Carolina. If the parliamentary grant was lodged with the treasurers, Dobbs asserted, it would surely be used to further consolidate these networks of patronage and power through which, in his view, unscrupulous men preyed on the interests of

³⁵ Theodorus Swaine Drage to Benjamin Franklin, March 2, 1771, quoted in *Ekirch, Poor Carolina*, 171.

³⁶ Kars, *Breaking Loose Together*, 69-70. Aside from collecting taxes, accounting to the treasurer, and conducting elections, sheriffs also served as peace officers, jailers, executioners, executors for the courts, and jury selectors. *Ibid*, 69 and Boyd, “Sheriff in Colonial North Carolina”, 151-152. Boyd’s contention that sheriffs were almost universally chosen from among county justices of the peace is disputed by Alan Watson, who still allows that about 60 percent of the sheriffs were justices. Watson, “The Appointment of Sheriffs in Colonial North Carolina: A Reexamination”, *NCHR* 53, no. 4 (October 1976): 385-398.

³⁷ James Moir to Secretary, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, April 6, 1763, *NCCR* 2nd series, 348

the colony and eroded the foundations of royal power. As seen above, the governor was not unjustified in his fear that other colonial politicians, if unchecked, would put the grant to ill use. Particularly alarming to Dobbs, however, was that Starkey openly “act[ed] not as His Majesty's Treasurer for his service, but call[ed] himself Treasurer for the Public not accountable to the Crown.”³⁸ In the political milieu of colonial North Carolina, like that of many other colonies, to be a “Treasurer for the Public” meant placing public funds outside of executive control, a situation that could only be prejudicial to royal authority.

Here Dobbs’s accusations dovetailed with those of the Regulators a decade later in an interesting way. The Regulator petitions depicted (quite accurately, it seems) a vertical chain of corruption beginning with the sheriff and county justices and reaching into the highest levels of colonial government and society, where “Rulers” sought “to make a Prey of these poor People.”³⁹ Dobbs was concerned with the horizontal nature of political corruption in North Carolina—the ways in which a powerful politician might marshal the wills of other powerful politicians by using corrupt means to appeal to their interests. Although he occasionally voiced his sympathy for the individual victims of various frauds, he typically assessed corrupt behavior in terms of the danger it posed to royal government in the colony.

Yet the lower house could also point to Dobbs’s plans, outlined in a letter to the Board of Trade, to spend much of the money on projects that the assembly had refused to fund. By keeping the money out of the hands of contentious politicians like John Starkey, Dobbs could more easily fund the construction of two forts on the Cape Fear River, as well

³⁸ Dobbs to Board of Trade, December 27, 1757 and January 22, 1759, *NCCR* 6:6. Dobbs repeated these allegations more than once in his letters to the Board of Trade, especially the charge that Starkey was a “republican”.

³⁹ Hermon Husband, “An Impartial Relation of the First Rise and Cause of the Recent Differences in Publick Affairs in the Province of North Carolina” (New Bern, NC: 1770), 77.

as another on Portsmouth Island, both of which had been cut off from funding by the “crusty” lower house. Of far greater concern, the governor proposed to garrison regular soldiers in the forts at British expense. Their presence, Dobbs told the Board of Trade, would discourage smuggling, especially at Portsmouth Island, a major point of entry for illicit trade. But a strong British military presence would also, the governor claimed in words that would have gravely concerned his rivals in the Assembly, “keep the Province more dependant.”⁴⁰ Regardless of what Dobbs planned to do with the money, the leaders of the lower house could argue that by keeping their leaders from disbursing the money, he was violating the principle of separation of powers, by the 1750s a cardinal principle in British political thought, as well as established practice in North Carolina. But the Assembly leaders also had reason to claim that removing the funds from their purview would result in their embezzlement, or at least their use for personal advancement.

Tryon’s 1767 inquest showed conclusively that the treasurers did not safeguard their accounts from the executive officials for simply political reasons—they had, in short, much to hide. But the dispute ran deeper—it was directly related to the opposing networks of influence described in the previous chapter. The deputy auditor in North Carolina, the man who would be vested with the power of auditing the accounts of Starkey and Barker, was Alexander McCulloch, nephew of Henry McCulloh, the land baron who many in the colony believed to have a controlling interest over Dobbs, a partner in his massive land investment schemes in the colony. Abercromby had the McCullohs and their factors in mind when he assured his friends that he would “use my endeavours to prevent the Money being issu’d to

⁴⁰ Dobbs to Board of Trade, January 22, 1759, *NCCR* 6:4.

the disposal of particular Persons under particular Influence.” Given Abercromby’s frustrations in lobbying against the McCulloh family for positions of influence in the colony, his concerns, and those of his allies in North Carolina, were understandable.⁴¹ At best Alexander McCulloch was a less than impartial auditor. At worst he was a “creature” of Dobbs and his uncle, men who strongly distrusted the “republican” faction in the Assembly, and who would certainly relish the opportunity to strike at its leaders for political gain if questions emerged concerning their accounts.

Like Dobbs, then, the Assembly added the weight of personal impropriety to their accusations that the governor had exceeded his legal authority. He had, they claimed in 1760, “Procured a Payment of One Thousand pounds Sterling (out of the Parliamentary grant) which has never been Accounted for or any Intimation given to the Assembly that it has been applied for his Majesty’s Service or the benefit of this Country, or to whom the said Money was paid”. In the same document, the Assembly, in another example of the close-knit character of provincial politics, chastised the governor for refusing to “Cause an Account of the Money’s that have been paid to his Orders” except by a “Mr. Wallace, a Gentleman unknown to the Assembly and in whom they never reposed any trust.” The disaffected members of the lower house also charged vaguely that under Dobbs, “Moneys have been Enacted on the Subject for the use of the Governor and Secretary (Richard Spaight) expressly against Law.”⁴² Indeed, money that had been voted by the Assembly had often been put, “by the Governor’s directions...to the enriching of his particular friends and Favourites.”⁴³

⁴¹ Abercromby to NC Committee of Correspondence, April 12, 1760, *Abercromby Letter Book*, 344.

⁴² Lower House Minutes, Friday May 23, 1760, *NCCR* 6:410-411. The assembly leaders may have been referring to Dobbs’s payment to John Forbes in this resolve, and if so, the accusation that they were unaware “to

These allegations of corruption may have seemed vague and perhaps unsubstantiated to the Board of Trade, who eventually rejected them, but Dobbs's accusers, themselves adept at constructing factions through the use of "interest," understood better than anyone the ways in which he could use the money to benefit his favorites, solidify political alliances, and subvert the power of the elites that controlled the lower house. While the accusations of opposition leaders were founded on the same fears of influence-peddling expressed by Dobbs, they continued, in the wake of the Murray-Rutherford scandal, to frame the contours of corruption in the colony as traceable along familial lines. Abercromby, in particular, tended to view politics in the colony in these terms—even though as colonial agent in Britain he was farthest removed from the interpersonal relations of the colony, he could witness the formidable influence of Henry McCulloh firsthand.

These debates also revealed another, more ideological dimension of corrupt discourse—the tendency by politicians to conflate political conviction with personal corruption. It was so important, Dobbs argued, to audit the treasurers' accounts not simply because the system encouraged corrupt practices, but because the office of treasurer was in the hands of John Starkey. The governor seems to have conflated the notion that Starkey was a "violent Republican" with the conviction that he was personally corrupt—for an imperialist like Dobbs, that was the only reason one could conceivably espouse political ideas like those he attributed to the treasurer. Here again, the form, if not the substance, of Dobbs's accusations would be echoed by the Regulator petitions, which often pressed their grievances by demonizing corrupt officials like Edmund Fanning. This aspect of corrupt rhetoric, highly

whom the money was paid" is a bit disingenuous, as they had specifically referred to the payment in November of 1758.

⁴³Ibid, *NCCR* 6:415.

valuable for propaganda purposes, contributed to the tendency of each party to exaggerate the potential consequences of the other's actions.

The dispute over the auditing of public accounts continued into 1762, but despite Dobbs's frequent exhortations, the Board of Trade refused to take action to substantially change the structure of North Carolina's fiscal system.⁴⁴ Perhaps because of the colony's inability to settle on a means for receiving the money, North Carolina only received £7789 of the expected £15000 from Parliament. Abercromby and Smith, co-agents, each received from the Treasury half of the total. Abercromby, however, received the entire commission for the money, and also withheld his salary and expenses, plus an advance on his salary—not approved by Dobbs—into 1761. Smith wound up with nothing, the lower house having blocked the Council's attempt made by the Council to give him a salary. Only part of the sum was apparently used for sinking the colony's paper currency, which remained severely depreciated to the outbreak of the Revolution.⁴⁵

The Assembly correctly assessed Dobbs's view of the struggle control over the parliamentary grant. For the governor, it was clearly a test case for a larger constitutional question within the province—the ability of the executive to audit the accounts of public officials, and ultimately to restore control of the colony's finances to the hands of royal authorities, many of whose loyalties were ensured by familial and other personal connections. His instructions specifically mandated as much, stipulating that he was not “to suffer any public money whatsoever to be issued or disposed of otherwise than by Warrant

⁴⁴Greene, *Quest for Power*, 76-79. The Board did instruct William Tryon, who became lieutenant governor in 1764, to undertake an examination of the colony's finances. His efforts culminated in the Burgwyn reports cited above, which were undertaken while Tryon was governor.

⁴⁵*Abercromby Letter Book*, xxx.

under your hand by and with the advice and consent of Our Council.”⁴⁶ The assembly understood the issue in the same way—allowing the governor to name an agent and disburse funds granted by parliament would constitute a major alteration to the balance of power within North Carolina’s government.

The stakes of these debates were the “fingering” not just of British sterling, but of political power in the colony, and the rhetoric, rooted in concerns over the ability of rival politicians to use corrupt means to gain influence over provincial politics, grew increasingly bitter as Dobbs and the Assembly lurched toward a full-blown political impasse. “All in a flame” at the governor’s refusal to pass the parliamentary grant bill, threatened by his attempts to seize control of public funds, and threatened by the perceived influence of his family and the McCullohs, they began to view compromise as increasingly unpalatable. In 1759, events in the tiny courthouse seat of Enfield, located in the newly chartered county of Halifax in the Granville District, would expose a pattern of corruption in the proprietary land office and lay bare the enmities between two rival landowners in the colony. These disputes ultimately culminated in a concerted effort to secure the governor’s dismissal.

⁴⁶Instructions to Arthur Dobbs, June 17, 1754, *NCCR* 5:1115.

CHAPTER FOUR “Riots, Routs, and Traiterous Conspiracies”

By 1759, the political landscape of North Carolina had become increasingly divided into two factions, each coalesced around a handful of prominent men and held together by mutual interest and personal connections. Assembly leaders, particularly Southern District treasurer John Starkey and house speaker Samuel Swann, led a burgeoning opposition that also included attorney general Robert Jones and suspended councilors James Murray and John Rutherford, who continued to correspond with assembly leaders even before their reinstatement in the early 1760s. Dobbs, on the other hand, could turn to his immediate family—his son Edward Brice Dobbs and nephew Richard Spaight—as dependable allies on the Council, and had, as seen in the preceding chapters, longstanding connections to land speculator and colonial official Henry McCulloh and his family, especially his nephew, deputy auditor Alexander McCulloch.¹

The governor’s connections rankled many of North Carolina’s political elite, who had long been suspicious of the elder McCulloh and frustrated by his machinations in support of his family in the colony, particularly in the pursuit of places in colonial government. Furthermore, as “the colony’s consummate land speculator,” McCulloh’s interests naturally clashed with those of the largest landowner in the colony, John Carteret, Lord Granville, whose holdings, granted in 1744, included the entire northern half of the colony. Granville, who spent most of his life at the center of British politics, never pursued his interests in the colony as vigorously as McCulloh, indeed, he never actually visited his lands. Instead, he appointed agents to manage his affairs, especially the surveying and patenting of land, which

¹ Edward Brice Dobbs left the colony for a commission in the British Army in the spring of 1759. “Edward Brice Dobbs” in *DNCB* vol. 2, 87

he hoped would quickly generate a sizeable quitrent revenue. The most prominent of these agents were Francis Corbin, who served in Granville's land office and as a member of the Council for ten years beginning in 1749, and Thomas Child, who, after a brief spell in the colony as a land agent, went back to London to serve as Granville's attorney. By 1756, in particular, the aging Granville, although serving as Lord President of the Privy Council to George II, was gradually withdrawing from politics, even turning down an offer to head a newly organized ministry. His lands in North Carolina were becoming more of a nuisance than a boon in his later years.² After serving the powerful Granville in London for several years, Child returned to the colony to replace Corbin after the latter's removal in 1759, and by 1760, both men joined—or led, according to Dobbs—the lower house “Junto” in their attempt to unseat the governor.³ Their grievances with the governor stemmed from his response to civil disturbances in the Granville District in 1759, events that directly involved Corbin, whose administration of Granville's land office was viewed by many of the Earl's tenants as rife with corruption.

The most serious of these disturbances unfolded on the evening of January 25, 1759, when a group of some 25 planters from Halifax, Edgecombe, and Granville counties forcibly entered Corbin's Edenton home. Armed with “Swords, Staves and Daggers,” the group forced the agent, “frightn'd out of his Wits”, to accompany them back to Enfield, about 90 miles away, where they imprisoned him and his recently appointed co-agent Joshua Bodley

² Keith Laybourn, “John Carteret, Earl of Granville”, in Laybourn, ed. *British Political Leaders: A Biographical Dictionary* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2001)60-61. See also Basil Williams, *Carteret and Newcastle: A Contrast in Contemporaries* (Cambridge: University Press, 1943), 123-126.

³ Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 127-136.

for four days.⁴ During this period, the leaders of the crowd, which included some very influential politicians, extracted a series of promises from Corbin and Bodley to rectify “the Severall Complaints and Disputes” arising from the execution of Corbin’s duties as Granville’s agent.⁵ These events, known as the “Enfield Riots” to students of North Carolina colonial history, are significant not only as a punitive crowd action against a corrupt official, but also in the role they played in bringing the political squabbles of the previous three years to a crisis point. That they did so demonstrated that the origins of the unrest went far beyond the malfeasance of a handful of land agents. Also implicated were the competing interests of Henry McCulloh and Lord Granville, and the political factors who acted in their names, if not always in their interests.

“Great and Frequent Complaints”

As a proprietary grant, the Granville District was hardly an anomaly in the American colonies, but it did pose a unique set of problems and opportunities for North Carolina political leaders. The last remaining vestige of the proprietary era in colonial North Carolina, it was an enormous expanse of land, lying between 36°30’ and 35°34’ north latitude, from Hatteras Island in the East to the Pacific Ocean (the “South Seas”) in the west. Under terms negotiated with George II, Granville had to pay only a nominal feudal rent fee of one pound, thirteen shillings, and four pence annually, and he was entitled to collect quitrents from his tenants, potentially a massive source of wealth that he was never able to fully exploit.⁶ In return, Granville had renounced all governing authority in the district, but as one historian

⁴ Dobbs to Thomas Child, February 6, 1759, Granville District Papers, NCA; Statement of Charges, Colonial Court Records, Civil Papers, Supreme Court, 1759, 3, NCA.

⁵ “Enfield Riot Agreements,” January 26, 1759, Granville District Papers, 1744-63, NCA.

⁶ “Land Patent Granted by George II, King of Great Britain, to John Carteret, Lord Granville, September 17, 1744, NCCR 4:655-663.

has observed, “he was a virtual ruler of the people of his district in those things that touched them closest, property rights.”⁷ But Granville needed settlers to make his possessions profitable, and he granted his settlers quite liberal terms—grantees would hold the land in fee simple and pay the same annual quitrent as settlers on Crown lands. Granville opened an office in Edenton to handle the administrative affairs of the district, including land surveying and titles to the collection of quitrents, and to represent his interests, he appointed Francis Corbin and Thomas Child.

Corbin’s career in North Carolina politics was born of his connections to Granville. While the details of his early life are unknown, he was obviously successful in cultivating the interest of the enormously powerful Granville, who became president of the Privy Council in 1751. Corbin arrived in North Carolina from England in 1744 as Granville’s representative, and assisted in surveying the southern boundary of the Granville District.⁸ He was, along with Dobbs and Henry McCulloh, instrumental in opposing Gabriel Johnston in the regional representation controversy, and, after a brief return to England, he, along with Child, became Granville’s chief agent in 1749, a position he would hold for ten years. His role as proprietary agent instantly made him one of the most powerful men in the colony, and his machinations against Johnston while in England would have certainly helped his standing with the Albemarle elite.⁹ Like other prominent North Carolina politicians, he was a plural office holder, serving at various times on the governor’s council, as a colonel in the Chowan

⁷ E. Merton Coulter, “The Granville District,” in *The James Sprunt Historical Publications* 13, no. 1 (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1913): 39.

⁸ Evangeline Walker Andrews, ed. *Journal of a Lady of Quality; Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal, in the Years 1774 to 1776* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1921), 259.

⁹ Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 134. The controversy, which lasted until the end of Johnston’s administration, pitted the politicians of the northern counties (the Albemarle region) against those of the Cape Fear. Several issues were at stake, the most salient being the disproportionate representation of the northern counties. *Ibid.*, 87-89.

County militia, and in justiceships in the vice admiralty court, the North Carolina general courts, and the Chowan court of pleas and quarter sessions. Corbin gained even more power when Child returned to London in late 1750, leaving his co-agent with a series of successors that he seems to have been happy to keep marginalized.¹⁰ In order to handle the enormous task of surveying and patenting land in such an enormous tract, Corbin appointed subagents, who worked more or less independently, only occasionally visiting the land office and the court in Edenton to enter the lands they had surveyed and patented.

Complaints quickly arose from Granville's tenants regarding the behavior of both Corbin and his agents. Herman Husband, the Quaker land speculator and political gadfly who would later play a prominent role in the Regulation, wrote Granville himself from Orange County that "the Tennants here are much Disturb'd" at high taxes and fees charged by land agents, and Bishop August Gottlieb Spangenberg warned his fellow Moravians who settled on Granville's lands to "Insist on cancellations or receipts" for quitrents paid, lest they be defrauded by unscrupulous land agents.¹¹ One of the most egregious violators seems to have been Rowan County agent James Carter, who Husband charged with selling vacant land to new settlers on the pretense that it had already been granted to his friends, for whom he falsely claimed to act as agent. When the lands were discovered to be occupied, Carter kept the money from the sale. He also, Husband charged, failed to record any deeds in the Edenton land office except for those of his "particular favourites who elected him an

¹⁰ George Stevenson, "Francis Corbin" in *DNCB*, volume 1, A-C, 431-434.

assembly man.”¹² The Committee on Propositions and Grievances reported to the Assembly on January 9, 1755 that:

Lord Granvilles Agent by himself and his Substitutes inducing several persons to make Entries for the same piece of Land receiving a Fee from each and refusing to refund the same, Declaring the Grants made by Edward Mosely and Robert Halton Esqrs his Lordships former Agents void receiving Entries for the same Lands[,] granting them anew and Exacting Fees for so doing[,] remitting the Quit Rents due to his Lordship on those Lands to such as will accept new Grants on them[,] and his Exorbitant exacting Fees on all Grants for his Lordships Lands are great Grievances detrimental to his Lordships Interest and do greatly retard the Settlement of that part of the Government of which his Lordship is proprietor.¹³

The accusation that Corbin and his subagents sold multiple land patents for the same plot of land was commonplace among Granville’s tenants, and was not just aimed at such flagrantly dishonest agents as James Carter. If the accusations can be believed, the practice seems to have been widespread, as was simply overcharging patent applicants. While the committee’s report seems to partially implicate Corbin, historians have been divided over his role in the malfeasance that certainly took place in the Granville District—some have placed the blame at the feet of his agents, and held Corbin responsible only for negligence in allowing them to embezzle and extort funds from Granville’s tenants. Others, notably Ekirch, have more plausibly claimed that Corbin was “totally untrustworthy” and possessed a “total lack of scruples.”¹⁴ What seems clear is that Corbin presided over a network of agents and subagents in which a culture of corruption prevailed—he gained a fair amount of wealth and

¹²Quoted in Kars, *Breaking Loose Together*, 32-33.

¹³ Lower House Minutes, *NCCR* 5:299-300.

¹⁴For the former opinion, see Stevenson, “Francis Corbin” and Coulter, “The Granville District”; for the opinion that Corbin was complicit in the corruption, see especially Ekirch, *Poor Carolina* and Saunders, Introduction to *NCCR*, Volume 5.

enormous political influence by presiding over an office where corrupt practices were commonplace.

Aiding Corbin and his agents was the unsettled and uncertain state of affairs in the District. In a study of political corruption in post-colonial Africa, political scientist Colin Leys observes that in new and emerging states corruption is far easier to carry out because “...people are generally not too clear about what the official rules are, or what (*really*) constitutes breaking them.”¹⁵ Observers of affairs in the Granville District were often commented on the general lack of institutional structure, most glaringly in the sale and surveying of land. Bishop August Spangenburg, travelling through the District in search of a suitable tract of land for his fellow Moravians, noted in his diary in 1752 that

Land matters...are also in unbelievable confusion, and I do not see how endless lawsuits are to be avoided...There is neither a general surveyor’s map of the Granville District nor of individual counties. Therefore we do not know which land is vacant, and can only take for granted the surveyor who says that such and such a piece of land has already been taken up. Mr. Francis Corbin himself says he does not know and is still ‘in the dark.’¹⁶

Spangenburg saw clearly that avaricious public officials might exploit this confused situation—hence his warning to settlers to secure receipts for land transactions. Clearly, matters of land policy, ranging from surveying to quitrent collection, remained “the knottiest problem encountered by British officials” in colonial North Carolina, and especially the Granville District.¹⁷ It is equally clear that Corbin and his agents had an interest in maintaining this state of confusion. While he claimed to be “in the dark,” he also did very

¹⁵ Colin Leys, “What is the Problem About Corruption?” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 3, no. 2 (August 1965), 225.

¹⁶ August Spangenburg, in Adelaide L. Fries, ed, *Records of the Moravians in North Carolina, vol. I* (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1968), 32-33.

¹⁷ Charles G. Sellers, Jr. “Private Profits and British Colonial Policy: The Speculations of Henry McCulloh” *William and Mary Quarterly* 8, No. 4 (October 1951), 537.

little to clear matters up in the District. Specifically, he did not compile a quitrent roll, which would have clearly shown which lands had been patented, and to whom. He never established a permanent office for housing records, and he did not establish a table of fees, which allowed surveyors and agents to charge exorbitant rates. These were basic duties for a land agent, and each of these measures had been specifically prescribed by Granville. Indeed, if anyone associated with the Granville District had been kept “in the dark,” it seems to have been the proprietary owner himself. Most troubling of all for Granville, Corbin repeatedly neglected to forward the full quitrent revenues to which his patron was entitled, and in fact sent none at all after 1756.¹⁸ Angry at Corbin’s refusal to follow his instructions, annoyed by the frequent complaints made by his tenants, and perhaps suspecting that he was being fleeced by his agent, Granville wrote to Corbin and co-agent Benjamin Wheatley in 1756:

Great and Frequent Complaints are Made to Me of the Persons you Employ to receive Entries and make Surveys in the back Countries. It is their Extorsions, and not the regular fees of Office (wholly in my Will to fix) which is the Cause of Clamour from my Tenants. Insinuations are made too, as if those Extortions were connived at by the Agents; for otherwise, it is said, They could not be Committed so repeatedly and barefacedly...I must tell my agents plainly, that I will have them and any others employed in my Office, not only endeavour, but actually execute all my Instructions.¹⁹

Another of Corbin’s practices that troubled Granville was his persistence in granting lands that lay within the tracts owned by Henry McCulloh. As will be shown below, much circumstantial evidence exists to suggest that McCulloh’s anger at this practice was a major factor in encouraging the Enfield rioters. Granville, seeking to avoid conflict with McCulloh, was embarrassed and angered by Corbin’s behavior—he issued a formal proclamation in

¹⁸ Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 135.

¹⁹ Granville to Corbin and Wheatley, April 18, 1756, Granville District Papers, NCA.

1757 distancing himself from his protégé and expressing his “utter disapprobation” at Corbin’s actions.²⁰

Whether or not Corbin was directly involved in dishonest practices, what is most significant here is his skill in using his position to add to his own influence within the colony. By charging exorbitant fees, his agents could become quite wealthy, and they frequently, as Husband observed, were often chosen as assemblymen and local justices. In addition to James Carter, who served in the lower house until he was expelled for embezzling funds intended for local militia in 1757, many other prominent members of the Assembly were Corbin’s subagents.²¹ William Churton, for example, was register of deeds and an assemblyman from Orange County, Benjamin Wynns of Bertie and John Edwards of Northampton both served as county clerks as well as assemblymen, and future state governor Richard Caswell represented Johnston County while working for Corbin. Caswell, a young and ambitious politician, was a particularly strong opponent of Dobbs in the Assembly, joining the opposition to the governor on the handling of the Parliamentary grant and the auditing of the treasurers’ accounts.²² Future Attorney General Robert Jones served for a time as Granville’s collector general of quitrents. Perhaps the most powerful of these subagents, other than Jones, was a man singled out by Dobbs as Corbin’s “favorite,” John Haywood of Edgecombe County, whose corpse would play a prominent role in the Enfield Riots.²³ While not all of these men can be shown to have been corrupt in carrying out their duties, they clearly owed much of their political prominence, as well as their material

²⁰ “Declaration by John Carteret, Lord Granville, concerning Henry McCulloh’s land grants in North Carolina,” *NCCR* 5:778-779.

²¹ Kars, *Breaking Loose Together*, 35.

²² C.B. Alexander, “The Training of Richard Caswell”, *NCHR* 23, 1 (January 1946): 24-25.

²³ Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 140.

success, to Francis Corbin. In a society where one's social and political standing was to a large extent determined by their ability to dispense patronage, Corbin wielded a tremendous amount of influence.²⁴

Corbin himself joined the Governor's Council in 1753, a position from which he, along with James Murray in the Cape Fear region, would become a leader in the legislative opposition to Dobbs.²⁵ Corbin first ran afoul of the governor when he claimed in 1758 that Dobbs was patenting lands inside the Granville District, a similar charge to that had leveled against him.²⁶ As punishment, and to remove a powerful adversary from a position of influence, Dobbs stripped him of his positions as associate justice in Edenton and militia colonel. This result, followed by his swift election to the lower house, strengthened his position among the leaders of a growing anti-Dobbs faction that sought to circumscribe the governor's power in the colony. But if Corbin's practices were bringing him to the forefront of North Carolina politics, they also angered another very powerful faction—that of Henry McCulloh.

McCulloh, who began his career as a London merchant with interests in North Carolina, quickly maneuvered his way into a massive land grant of 54,000 acres along the lower Cape Fear River. He augmented this sizeable tract with grants of 60,000 and 72,000 acres along the upper Cape Fear and the Haw River valley, respectively. Finally, with the assistance of royal governor Gabriel Johnston and Dobbs, who wished to add North Carolina

²⁴ Ibid, 118-119.

²⁵ Council Minutes, March 28, 1753, *NCCR* 5:30-31.

²⁶ Council Minutes, December 8-23, 1758, *NCCR* 5:996-998. Corbin denied having accused Dobbs of this. Interestingly, Corbin's co-agent Joshua Bodley, the other man captured in the Enfield Riots, swore before the Council that he had personally heard "Mr. Corbin Declared that his Excellency Governor Dobbs had Granted part of Lord Granvilles Lands knowing [it] to be such and that he could and would prove it."

lands to his land ventures in Ireland, McCulloh secured a massive 1,200,000 acre tract at the headwaters of the Yadkin, Cape Fear and Neuse Rivers in 1737.²⁷ With this grant, McCulloh became the largest landowner in North Carolina—the Granville grant was not yet approved—and he and his allies, including Dobbs, pressed their interests in the colony vigorously, often seeking to influence affairs to their benefit. When, for example, the Assembly passed a new quitrent law in 1739 that McCulloh deemed prejudicial to his interests because it recognized potentially competing land patents, he successfully prevailed on the Board of Trade to repeal it, with disastrous results for quitrent revenues in the colony. He then secured an appointment as the representative for the Albemarle counties in their regional dispute with the Cape Fear region in 1741 partly in the hopes of securing support for a new, more favorable quitrent bill.²⁸ Partly out of anger over Johnston’s extension of the Granville District line to the west, a decision that put almost a half million acres of McCulloh’s land within the District, he joined with Albemarle politicians and other interested parties, including Dobbs and Corbin, in an unsuccessful effort to secure the governor’s removal in 1746.²⁹

²⁷Sellers, “Private Profits and British Colonial Policy,” 535-540. McCulloh should not be confused with relentless placeseecker Henry McCulloch, who served as secretary for North Carolina from 1755-1756, and with his son, Henry Eustace McCulloh, who came to the colony as a young man and pressed his father’s interests there until the Revolution. John Cannon, “Henry McCulloch and Henry McCulloh,” *WMQ* 3d Ser., 15, 1 (Jan. 1958), 71-73.

²⁸ Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 85, 95-96. Many years earlier, prominent Cape Fear politicians had secured “blank patents,” documents that entitled them to potentially very large tracts of land upriver, from the proprietary governor George Burrington. Gabriel Johnston had fought against recognizing these blank patents for much of his early tenure as governor, but agreed to honor some of them in 1739 in the interest of securing support for a quitrent act. The lands encompassed by these blank patents could have fallen within McCulloh’s grants, however, and he turned on his old ally Johnston by persuading the Board of Trade to repeal the quitrent bill, which also doomed the blank patent-holders’ hopes of making large land claims. The colony was thus left for a time with little infrastructure for collecting quitrents, a major problem made worse by the fact that most colonial officers, including the governor, were paid out of quitrent revenues. Sellers, “Private Profits and British Colonial Policy,” 537-543.

²⁹ Mattie U. Russell, “Henry McCulloh,” in *DNCB*, vol. 4, 133.

In many ways, then, McCulloh's efforts in North Carolina were archetypical of eighteenth-century corruption—he used his influence with the Board of Trade in London to sway colonial policy to his benefit, in the process often running roughshod over the will of Gabriel Johnston and other parties, and destabilizing provincial politics in the process. While McCulloh could, perhaps correctly, claim that his speculations were helping to settle the backcountry and increase quitrent revenue, his opponents saw his actions in a different light. ‘The Grant of this excessive quantity of Land,’ Johnston charged, had been secured by McCulloh through a series of secret machinations, despite the fact that “he can’t pretend to any Estate sufficient to make a tolerable settlement on it.” McCulloh’s behavior was, according to Johnston, “a great Impediment to the peopling of this country”, and he was quite unpopular among many powerful colonial politicians, especially those in the Cape Fear region.³⁰ When Dobbs came into office, he actually strengthened McCulloh’s influence in the colony, appointing the land magnate’s friends and family, including nephew Alexander McCulloch and son Henry Eustace McCulloh to lucrative positions in the colonial bureaucracy.

“Things are now brought to a crisis”

As more settlers moved into the Granville District, complaints about the behavior of Granville’s agents increased in frequency and intensity. Events in the Granville District reached a crisis point in late 1758, when a group of planters requested that Attorney General and assemblyman Robert Jones, a resident of Northampton County, bring charges against Corbin for corruption. Jones, himself a former land agent, declined, encouraging the group

³⁰ “Memorial of Gabriel Johnston concerning land grants in North Carolina,” June 27, 1750, *NCCR* 4:1085-1086.

to petition the Assembly or Granville himself for redress.³¹ The petition, signed by some five hundred Granville District planters, was presented to the lower house on November 28, 1758. While the petition itself is lost, Dobbs described “the chief bent” of its contents in a letter to Thomas Child dated 5-6 February 1759. The petitioners, he claimed, protested against “Mr Corbin and his underagents,” especially Mr (John) Haywood, “his favourite.” The Granville District planters, Dobbs reported, claimed to have been charged excessive fees for land entries, and even after paying the fees, they were often “defrauded of the whole by the villainy of the underagents,” who, it was claimed, often granted the same land to more than one settler, or simply refused to register the land entry at all. Appeals to Corbin, Dobbs said, had gone unanswered, and sometimes the agent would portray himself as Granville’s son, to “impress an Opinion among the people that they could expect no Redress against him in case they applied to Lord Granville against him.” It is, of course, impossible to know exactly what the contents of the petition were. Dobbs certainly had an interest in portraying Corbin in the worst possible light. Indeed, much of the rest of the letter bristles with other allegations made by Dobbs himself. The letter itself is somewhat odd—less than one year later, Dobbs was characterized Child, to whom he was writing, as the ringleader of a conspiracy against him.³² But the petitioners’ allegations as reported by Dobbs are strikingly similar to those brought before the Assembly committee in 1755 and, indeed, those referenced by Granville himself in his letter to Corbin.

³¹ “Memorandum from Arthur Dobbs to the Board of Trade of Great Britain,” *NCCR* 6:294; James P. Beckwith, Jr., “Robert (Robin) Jones, Jr.,” in *DNCB*, vol. 3 (H-K): 326-327.

³² Dobbs to Child, February 5-6, 1759, Granville District Papers, NCA. Examining the findings of the committee, which are fairly specific, are another way to surmise the contents of the petition, although there is no way to know whether the committee was addressing specific concerns raised in the petition or specific cases that emerged from their investigation of more general issues. Many of the accusations leveled by Dobbs do not appear in the committee’s findings.

In any case, the petition was sent to a committee for investigation upon its presentation by Williams. The committee’s deliberations on the petition appear to have been stormy—house member Francis Brown of Currituck County was expelled after Bodley accused him of “forswearing Himself before the committee” by claiming that Corbin had knowingly allowed his agents to issue multiple patents on the same parcel of land. Corbin’s testimony seems to have been the deciding factor in removing Brown.³³ When the committee issued their findings, they agreed with the petitioners that Corbin and his agents were guilty of malfeasance—indeed, they cited twenty-one specific cases of fraudulent behavior—but they declined to recommend punishment for Corbin or to push the matter forward, finding that, despite the many examples of dishonesty, Corbin and his agents had generally conducted business according to their instructions from Granville.³⁴ The Assembly accordingly let the matter drop, suggesting that in their eyes, at least, Corbin’s behavior fell short of what might be construed as corrupt behavior—Corbin’s failure to refund a land entry fee or John Haywood’s charging six additional shillings over Granville’s prescribed fee hardly seemed a threat to good government. According to Dobbs, the whole affair was a sham—the committee found it “more for their Interest to make up matters with Corbyn...changed sides for a valuable consideration.”³⁵ The same assemblymen, Dobbs claimed, who followed Starkey like “chickens” would do the same for Corbin.

The residents of the Granville District—and, it seems, Henry McCulloh himself, seem to have agreed with this very specific charge of corruption. McCulloh had already granted

³³ Lower House Minutes, December 1, 1758, *NCCR* 5:1050- 1058. Specifically, the committee concluded that Brown, through “Precipitation and Heat,” had falsely testified against Corbin.

³⁴ Lower House Minutes, December 22, 1758, *NCCR* 5:1088-1094.

³⁵ Dobbs to Board of Trade, 1760, *NCCR* 6:294.

power of attorney to his nephew Alexander and to John Campbell in 1757, so that they could sue Corbin for up to eight thousand pounds, the sum McCulloh claimed Granville's agent had cost him through his "sordid Wicked and Avaricious" schemes. In fact, two of the committee's more damning findings suggested that Corbin had publicly refused to acknowledge McCulloh's ownership of several tracts of land within the Granville District, despite a 1755 legally binding settlement between the two land speculators.³⁶ By late 1758, McCulloh warned Granville, "I can no means tamely submit to the Injury's I daily receive from those who have the conduct of your Lordship's Affairs," and that "Things are now brought to a Crisis."³⁷ Dobbs then relieved Corbin of his posts as judge and militia colonel. He also appointed Bodley, who he described as a "man of probity," to the associate judgeship, either out of a desire not to offend Granville or, possibly as a reward for testifying against his co-agent before the Council.³⁸

In the wake of the petition, there were signs that trouble was brewing in the Granville District. Upon hearing the news that John Haywood, Corbin's land agent, had died, an Edgecombe County mob exhumed the corpse, apparently to ensure that he had not attempted to escape prosecution by faking his own death.³⁹ Finally, on January 25, a group of angry planters detained Bodley, in Enfield on business, at the local jail, and made their way to Edenton, where they took Corbin prisoner. Only eight of the approximately twenty-five men

³⁶ Power of Attorney for Alexander McCulloch and John Campbell to act for Henry McCulloh, *NCCR* 5:779:782; Lower House Minutes, December 22, 1758, *NCCR* 5:1092-1094.

³⁷ Quoted in Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 138.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 139; Dobbs to Child, February 5-6, Granville District Papers; *NCCR* 5:996.

³⁹ "Memorandum from Arthur Dobbs to the Board of Trade," *NCCR* 6:294; As Wayne Lee has observed, the timing of this incident, of which much was later made, is unclear. If it happened before the Committee's findings, and the Assembly's failure to act on them, became known, then, as Lee suggests, it would reflect an expectation on the part of the rioters that the petition would have the desired result. If it was after news of the Assembly proceedings reached Edgecombe, then it seems more likely to have been a simple case of grave desecration, which Dobbs specifically denied. Lee, *Crowds and Soldiers*, 232n.

directly involved in Corbin's kidnapping are known by name. They were Alexander McCulloch, William Hurst, David Crawley, Joel Lane, David Lane, Barnaby Lane, David Cooper, and John Farrell. As Ekirch has observed, these men were not a "class-conscious mob of impoverished tenants." Indeed some of them were, perhaps, more than simply "middling planters." Most held at least one original grant from Granville, and McCulloch was one of the largest landholders in Edgecombe and Halifax counties. William Hurst was a Granville County justice of the peace, but the leader of the group was almost certainly McCulloch.⁴⁰ McCulloch, Henry's nephew, had served as deputy auditor for the colony since 1745, and had represented his uncle's interests in the colony officially since 1755, when he ironically argued for "Justice" against a mob of rioting squatters who had attacked Henry McCulloch's surveyors near the Yadkin River.⁴¹

Most troubling to the governor's opponents in the colony, McCulloch also was a personal favorite of Dobbs, who assured a mutual friend in Ireland that he would "do anything I can for Aleck McCulloch," despite his lack of qualifications for the job of auditor.⁴² Others noted his intense loyalty to his uncle—former governor Gabriel Johnston claimed that it was "well known here" that he "never took a step" without being directed by the land baron.⁴³ The station of Joel Lane, about nineteen years old at the time, is unknown, but he would later become one of North Carolina's most prominent Revolutionary leaders, attending the Provincial Congress at Halifax in April of 1776 and the state constitutional

⁴⁰ Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 141; Secretary of State Papers, Granville Proprietary Land Office Records, 1754-1760, NCA.

⁴¹ Council Minutes, *NCCR* 5:493.

⁴² Dobbs to Alexander McCauley, 15 March 1755, Arthur Dobbs Papers, Governor's Papers, NCA.

⁴³ "Memorial of Gabriel Johnston concerning land grants in North Carolina," *NCCR* 4:1088.

conventions of 1788 and 1789.⁴⁴ Like the rest of the rioters with the exception of McCulloch, if Lane had any motives for participating in the Enfield Riots beyond simply redressing grievances against Corbin, or possibly cultivating interest with McCulloch and Hurst, they remain unknown.⁴⁵ It is clear, however, that the young Lane, with the governor's approbation, quickly rose to local prominence following the riots.

The Enfield crowd detained Corbin and Bodley for four days before forcing them to sign a bond guaranteeing their appearance at the next court session at Enfield. They also signed, under duress, a set of articles that acknowledged past wrongdoings and promised substantive reform in the future. Ekirch argues that the rioters did not fault the "structural features of land tenure in the Granville District..." or "express the least dissatisfaction with proprietary land policy."⁴⁶ Yet from the perspective of individual planters, proprietary land policy was effectively dictated by Corbin and his agents, who decided which settlers received land patents and at what cost. The reforms signed by Corbin and Bodley would have, if actually implemented, essentially placed land policy in the hands of Granville District residents by bringing the agents under the control of county courts. Along with demanding that "one person of the best Character" be appointed to serve as agent for each county, and approved by the court, the articles stipulated that Corbin himself reimburse the victims of past fee-gouging, that any of his deputies be removed upon complaints by residents, and that all land agents should maintain current deed books that would be open to the public. If actually implemented, the articles would have stripped Corbin of the absolute power to

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Davis Reid, "Joel Lane", in *DNCB*, vol. 4, 12-13.

⁴⁵ While Lane would go on to be one of the colony's more influential Patriots, McCulloch, on the other hand, leaned toward the Loyalist cause initially, but eventually decided to sit the conflict out in Halifax County. His lands, unlike those of his cousin Henry Eustace, were not confiscated. *DNCB* vol. 3, 132.

⁴⁶ Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 141.

appoint his own agents, a development which would have severely limited his influence in the colony.

The two agents also signed a statement, attached to the articles, agreeing to “discharge & acquit” the rioters for any “violence used” to obtain their presence in Enfield.⁴⁷ The phrase “violence used” is intriguing, and may refer simply to the act of kidnapping, although the charges later brought by Robert Jones on Corbin’s behalf claimed that the rioters had “beat, wounded...and evilly treated him,” along with other “Enormities to the great Damage of said Francis Corbin.”⁴⁸ Yet these allegations of physical violence to Corbin were not expanded upon, and it seems that the rioters, as Wayne Lee contends, remained within the bounds of a “careful riot.” They could thus, within English tradition, claim a certain degree of legitimacy for their actions even beyond that afforded by the participation of powerful men like McCulloch and Hurst. On the other hand, English common law prohibited violence by three or more persons who carried out “an unlawful act of violence,” in Blackstone’s words, for the benefit of a private individual. Whether the rioters sought to remedy a series of ills that afflicted the Granville District or to press the interests of one powerful landholding faction against another was of course a highly subjective question that reached to the heart of contemporary definitions of corruption.⁴⁹

“Tumults,” “Injustices,” and “Oppressions”

English crowd behavior in the early modern period, including in the English colonies, has been the subject of a number of influential studies. The insight that crowds behaved

⁴⁷ “Articles made and agreed upon Between Francis Corbin and Joshua Bodley, Esquires...” January 26, 1759 Secretary of State Papers, 190 NCA

⁴⁸ Edenton Supreme Court Papers, October 1759, Colonial Court Records, NCA.

⁴⁹ Lee, *Crowds and Soldiers*, 23-28; Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, 19.

within a certain rational framework, most famously articulated by George Rudé and E.P. Thompson, has been greatly expanded upon by students of colonial American history. Alfred Young has shown that violent public rituals, employed for generations to enforce community standards in Britain, continued in one form or another as a means of public protest in the colonies, in particular Massachusetts.⁵⁰ Pauline Maier demonstrates the importance of crowd action in colonial American politics, while arguing that the uprisings, however rooted in British tradition, were “extra-institutional,” that is, they “served the community where no law existed, or intervened beyond what magistrates thought they could do officially to cope with a problem.”⁵¹ In Lee’s analysis, crowds in colonial North Carolina, including the Enfield Rioters, behaved according to certain norms expressed as rituals that were “well enough understood among all social classes.” Whether these riots were extralegal or legitimate forms of political expression, they were certainly understood as important elements in British politics. Indeed, while elites in Britain and the American colonies frequently expressed terror at the violent tendencies of the “mob,” there were also recognized by some politicians as symptoms of legitimate political problems. Earl Granville himself perhaps best articulated this view when, speaking in the opposition, he addressed the House of Lords on the “Turnpike Riots” that gripped the countryside outside of Bristol in 1736:

To me it is amazing to see that the civil Power, armed with such a severe Law, should not be able to Prevent, as well as to quell, any such Tumult, without the Assistance of the Gentlemen of our Army; and therefore I am apt to suspect those Tumults proceeded, not from any Want of Power in the Civil

⁵⁰ Alfred F. Young, “English Plebeian Culture and Eighteenth-Century American Radicalism”, in James and Margaret Jacob, eds., *The Origins of Anglo-American Radicalism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984) 185-212.

⁵¹ Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, 5.

Magistrate, but from some other Cause, perhaps, from some real injustice or Oppression brought upon poor People by means of those Turnpikes. The People seldom or never assemble in any riotous or tumultuous Manner, unless when they are oppressed, or at least imagine they are oppressed...until the Oppression is removed or alleviated, they will never be quiet, till the greatest Part of them is destroyed.

The fact that Granville (Carteret) was at the time a member of the opposition to the Walpole government is significant, as Rudé has observed. Whether the Earl would have viewed mobs protesting the policies of an administration he supported is another matter, although he does seem, as will be shown below, to have believed that the complaints of his tenants in the Granville District were in some sense legitimate. Moreover, he made no concerted attempt to bring the rioters to justice.⁵²

Adherence to what authorities and others would recognize as traditional forms of punishment conferred a legitimacy upon the proceedings beyond that that could be claimed by the presence of authority figures in the forms of McCulloh and Hurst. The rioters “carefully constructed” their actions, including having the agents sign, at the courthouse and in front of a justice of the peace, a seemingly legal bond for their release.⁵³ By combining the trappings of legal proceedings with the imagery of traditional community controls, the rioters sought to frame their actions as a legitimate response to corruption on the part of local and distant authorities. Indeed, forcing Corbin to travel in a procession from Edenton to Enfield, where boisterous, drunken crowds had already accosted his co-agent Bodley, could

⁵² “Lord Carteret’s Address to the House of Lords,” *Gentleman’s Magazine*, vol. 7 (10 February 1737), 374; George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England 1730-1848*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1964), 7n.

⁵³ Lee, *Crowds and Soldiers*, 22, 26-27.

summon images of a traditional “skimmington” for North Carolina colonists, many of whom were one generation or less removed from English town life.⁵⁴

For several months, neither Corbin nor Bodley, probably still fearing for their safety, sought to prosecute the rioters, and the incident went largely unnoticed until attorney general Robert Jones began to fear that he might be the next target of mob anger. The rioters seem to have become heroes of sorts to many Granville District residents, so much so that Jones had been threatened with being pulled “by the nose” if he prosecuted them.⁵⁵ Jones claimed a petition had been circulated to “silence” him, referring to a petition circulated in Granville County by local planter Reuben Searcy, which accused Jones of “wiles and false insinuations” and “art and chicanerie” in achieving his position in the colony. More specifically, the Searcy petition, dated March 23, 1759, accused the Attorney General of charging double the fees prescribed by the Assembly.⁵⁶ After Jones informed the Assembly of the events in Halifax County, they sent a resolution to the Governor, condemning the “Traitorous Conspiracies...Riots and Routs” and decrying the fact that

...no Measures hitherto have been taken or used to suppress the said Disorders or apprehend or punish the Authors thereof; and as this Assembly are truly sensible, that suffering such Outrages and Violations of the Laws to pass with Impunity, must tend to subvert all Rule, Order and Government...

The Assembly requested that Dobbs issue a proclamation demanding that the rioters be brought to justice, and, in a passage probably aimed at McCulloch, that any of the “said Offenders” who held public office should be “displaced.” Finally, they asked Dobbs to authorize the use of the militia to restore order in the Granville District and offered a £25

⁵⁴ Dobbs to Board of Trade, May 1760, *NCCR* 6:300.

⁵⁵ Council Minutes, May 14, 1759, *NCCR* 6:79-80.

⁵⁶ “The Petition of Reuben Searcy,” in William K. Boyd, ed., *Some Eighteenth Century Tracts Concerning North Carolina* (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton Company, 1927), 180-181.

reward for information leading to the arrest of any of the rioters.⁵⁷ Dobbs authorized the reward, and several of the rioters—the only eight known—were arrested, only to be immediately freed from jail by rioting mobs. It is certainly possible that Dobbs was unaware of the identity of the rioters when he authorized the reward—he never mentioned the rioters by name until 1760, when he defended the conduct of McCulloch in a letter to the Board of Trade. Indeed, his initial response to the riots was quite unsympathetic, even if he hardly approved of Corbin’s actions. In a postscript to his letter to Child, written the day he learned of the riots, he pointed to the unrest in the Granville District as evidence of “how difficult it will be to support the Civil Government without his Majesty’s maintaining an Independent Company” to “assist...and encourage the Magistrates to do their Duty in suppressing such Riots.”⁵⁸ The governor never pursued the matter further, however, perhaps perceiving that the riots could be used to strengthen his political position. Corbin himself briefly attempted to bring charges against the rioters, contrary to his promise in January, but abandoned the idea, Dobbs claimed, when he concluded that if “it came upon Tryal he would be the sufferer, as he had done things he could not justify, and the fault would be laid to the charge of his Office.”⁵⁹ Granville, exasperated, finally removed Corbin from office in the wake of the riots, and Dobbs quickly followed suit by dismissing him from the Council. Interestingly, Dobbs struck a conciliatory note in a letter to Granville dated 19 March 1759. The primary purpose of the letter was to introduce Dobbs’ son, who would be able to provide Lord

⁵⁷ Lower House Minutes, May 15, 1759, *NCCR* 6:106, 113.

⁵⁸ Dobbs to Child, February 5-6, 1759, Granville District Papers, NCA.

⁵⁹ Lee, *Crowds and Soldiers*, 26; *NCCR* 6:295. Dobbs certainly was not aware of the identity of the rioters when he first described the incident in the postscript to his letter to Child of February 6, and he made no explicit reference to their identities until 1760, when he attempted to downplay McCulloch’s role in the riots in a letter to the Board of Trade.

Granville with “fuller information of the affairs of this province.” The letter concluded with the governor’s wishes “still to preserve your [Granville’s] favour and friendship” in the midst of the burgeoning crisis, and perhaps indicates the governor’s fear that his enemies, especially Corbin and Thomas Child, would use Granville’s influence as leverage to secure Dobbs’s removal.⁶⁰

The perpetrators of the riots thus escaped punishment, a fact that Dobbs’s opponents, especially in the lower house quickly attempted to exploit. Led by Child, the English placeman and Granville protégé who replaced Corbin as proprietary agent, Robert Jones, and Corbin himself, they charged that Dobbs, by not pursuing the matter after the rioters were broken out of jail, seemed to approve of their actions.⁶¹ Even worse, Dobbs allowed McCulloch to remain as deputy auditor for the colony, and appointed him colonel of the Edgecombe County militia in 1760. The irony of the appointment—colonial militia were responsible for quelling riots—was not lost on the governor’s adversaries. Hurst also apparently remained as justice of the peace for Granville County, a position Joel Lane held in Halifax before Dobbs appointed him that county’s sheriff in 1761.⁶²

If Dobbs could point to the corruption of Granville’s agents, and decry their influence both on the Council and in the lower house, then his detractors could see in his seemingly indifferent response to the crisis an attempt to subvert or corrupt orderly government in the colony. James Moir, an itinerant minister who had a long simmering feud with the governor, wrote the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in 1760 that “There is Nothing Like the Administration of Justice among us.” Pointing out that the Assembly had been unable to

⁶⁰ Dobbs to Granville, 19 March 1759, Granville District Papers, NCA

⁶¹ Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 143-145.

⁶² William S. Price, “Alexander McCulloch” in *NCDB*, 132; Elizabeth Davis Reid, “Joel Lane” in *ibid*, 12.

pass a court bill, he added that in the wake of the Enfield Riots that “A silly Fellow that headed a Mob against the Earl of Granville his Land Office, is put into the Commission of the Peace.” Later in that year, at the height of the dispute between Dobbs and the Assembly, he informed the SPG secretary that after being “so sharply censur’d,” Dobbs showed such insolence as to “put into the Commission of the Peace for Edgecombe County, another ringleader of the Mob.”⁶³ Moir was almost certainly referring to Alexander McCulloch—Lane became justice of the peace in Halifax County—and McCulloch was considered the leader of the mob by Jones and other contemporaries.⁶⁴

Another major political dispute in the wake of the Enfield Riots made matters even more uncomfortable for Dobbs. In 1759, the Board of Trade disallowed a judiciary reform act for the colony, a decision that essentially left the colony with no legally sanctioned court except in Edenton, which was not covered in the legislation. The Assembly made two attempts at passing new court bills, but one died in the Council and the other was overturned by the governor, who objected to several provisions involving tenure and qualifications, both of which would have benefited many of Dobbs’s adversaries in the lower house. The colony was thus left without a court system for almost a year, a situation intolerable to the

⁶³ James Moir to Secretary, SPG in Robert J. Cain and Jan-Michael Poff, eds. *The Colonial Records of North Carolina, Second Series, The Church of England in North Carolina: Documents, 1742-1763*. (Raleigh, NC: Office of Archives and History, 2007), 228, 260. Dobbs, a fervent advocate for the spread of the Anglican faith in North Carolina, had criticized Moir more than once in correspondence with the SPG, claiming that he “entirely neglects his Duty, thinks chiefly of amassing Money,” and that his “continuance as a Missionary is a disservice to Religion.” *Ibid*, 196. The origins of the two men’s mutual dislike, if not an honest conviction of the corruption of the other, are unknown.

⁶⁴ Dobbs, as will be shown below, suggested that McCulloch was an innocent bystander in the riots. While there is no way to know for certain, both Moir and Jones, who lived in nearby Northampton County, were present in the area during the riots and their aftermath.

governor's rivals, who viewed the lack of a legal apparatus as prejudicial to their liberties—mobs in the Granville District could attack public officials with impunity.⁶⁵

“The Prospect of Total Ruin”

On May 23, the Assembly met in closed secret committee--“the grand inquisition for the Province,” in the words of one historian—and drafted a set of fourteen resolutions charging Dobbs with various forms of malfeasance, incompetence, and corruption of the constitution of the colony. The longest and most strident of these resolutions, which Dobbs enclosed with his lengthy responses to each of them in a letter to the Board of Trade, was the accusation that:

Tho' the Governor was addressed by the Assembly in June last to take necessary measures to suppress the several Mobbs & insurrections which for many months in open violation of all law have with impunity assembled in great numbers in different Counties, erected sham Jurisdictions and restrained men of their liberty, broke open Goals, released malefactors, dug up the dead from the Grave, and committed other Acts of Rapine and violence, no effectual steps have been taken to check the torrent of their licentious extravagancies notwithstanding their having repeated those outrages, but on the contrary some of their principal leaders and known Conductors have been preferred to the Magistracy, and honored with Commissions in the Militia, whilst on the other hand Gentlemen of unexceptionable characters and distinguished worth, who had filled those offices with credit, and whose conduct in the discharge of their respective functions had been justly rewarded by the approbation and applause of all who were witnesses of their publick deportment have from groundless prejudice and unreasonable caprice without Complaint or accusation against them have been abruptly displaced, whereby magistracy is fallen into disgrace, Courts have lost their influence & Government its dignity, and life, liberty and property is rendered precarious and without a speedy establishment of Courts of Justice on a respectable foundation, and appointment of Justices of the principal Courts on such terms as Gentlemen of suitable abilities may accept such appointments, without apprehension of being misplaced but for misconduct the Government will be in no less peril from its internal enemies than from the depredation of savages on the Frontier settlements.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 125-126.

⁶⁶ Memorandum from Dobbs to Board of Trade, *NCCR*, 6:292.

Wayne Lee has argued that the Assembly's resolves demonstrate the ways in which political actors could escalate the "rhetoric of violence" to further their political agenda—in this case a political attack on Dobbs. What were "Riots, Routs, Combinations, and Traterous Conspiracies" in their resolution to prosecute the rioters on May 18, 1759 were in the spring of 1760 termed "insurrections," which entailed "Rapine and violence", restraints on "Liberty", and even the violation of the dead. And Dobbs, the committee charged, was not only protecting these "Mobbs", but indeed was awarding them important positions in the "Magistracy" and the militia.⁶⁷

These were serious allegations. The lower house was accusing a royally-appointed governor of political corruption of the highest order—sanctioning "insurrections" in an attempt to weaken his political rivals. The resolves did not mention the initial causes of the riots—corruption in Granville's land office. Indeed, Corbin had become, in the words of Dobbs's biographer, "the gentle agent, the friend of law and order," and his mistreatment at the hands of the Enfield rioters created an opportunity for the Assembly to strike at the power of the governor.⁶⁸ That McCulloch, a friend of the governor's, was involved in the affair seemed to confirm what the opposition had claimed all along—that Dobbs's use of influence was inherently dangerous to constitutional government in the colony.

Thus in the political climate in which these charges were leveled, Dobbs's apparent support for the rioters was a major factor in uniting various factions in the Assembly in a manner unprecedented in North Carolina politics. Representatives of the Albemarle region,

⁶⁷ Lee, *Crowds and Soldiers in Revolutionary North Carolina*, 17.

⁶⁸ Desmond Clarke, *Arthur Dobbs, Esquire, 1689-1765* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1957)156.

including Corbin, Child, Jones, and Robert Barker, made common cause with Cape Fear and other southeastern politicians including John Starkey, Speaker of the House Samuel Swann, and colonial agent James Abercromby in an effort to seek Dobbs's ouster in the face of what Ekirch characterizes as the "threat of impending disorder". James Murray probably spoke for many in the opposition when he described the dispute as "a tryal of Strength between the Governor on one side and Mr. Child supported by the general voice of the people on the other." Many contemporaries, on the other hand, including the governor, saw Child, Corbin's replacement as Granville's agent, as the leader, a "Disigning and interested Person" who, upon his return to the colony in 1760, rallied the Assembly around "Severall most ridiculous Things," according to one Bertie County planter.⁶⁹

In many ways, the petitioners' position resembled that of the Enfield rioters themselves—like the Granville District planters they petitioned an established authority (Dobbs) against a perceived grievance, and when that authority failed to deal with the grievance in a manner they deemed appropriate, they charged that a corrupt conspiracy was at the heart of the problem, and resolved to take matters into their own hands. Where the Granville District planters (and, for that matter, Henry McCulloh), saw limited mob violence as perhaps the only legitimate means for obtaining redress, the anti-Dobbs faction in the Assembly could turn to the Board of Trade to protest what they saw as arbitrary rule and the most profound form of corruption, just as their predecessors had done with Johnston and George Burrington.

⁶⁹ Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 144-145; George Pollock to Corbyn Morris, August 1, 1761, Pollock Letter Book, NCA.

Dobbs delivered a itemized response to the Assembly resolutions to the Board of Trade on August 3, 1760. His strategy in approaching the “pompous Resolve” condemning his response to the Enfield Riots was simple—he would argue first that conditions in the Granville District to some extent justified the actions of the mob, and second that these actions had been grossly distorted by his enemies in an attempt to associate him with lawlessness and corruption of sound government. Finally—and this was the point of the response in its entirety—he would claim that events in the Granville District were part of a colony-wide conspiracy led by a corrupt “Junto” of assemblymen who aimed to usurp the royal prerogative for their own self-interested purposes.

Ironically, in his vindication of his own behavior, Dobbs rehashed many accusations he had made against Corbin in a letter to Child of February 5-6, 1759. But in 1760 he included Child, who had returned to resume his offices of Attorney General and Granville’s agent, in his accusations. While joint agents, Child and Corbin had “acted in concert to make the most of they could of the Fees and Perquisites in His Lordship’s Office for their own emolument at the expense of the people by which means they procured great sums to themselves but little for his Lordship.”⁷⁰ While the “Junto” in the Assembly could accuse Dobbs of corrupting the government by refusing to punish his favorites for obviously illegal acts, he could accuse their leaders of corrupting government in an equally dangerous manner—using a public office for private benefit. This was corruption as described in a number of eighteenth century sources—the cannibalization of the body politic by “rogues of prey” and “crocodiles” who “served a whole people as Satan served Job.”⁷¹ Not satisfied

⁷⁰ Dobbs to Board of Trade, *NCCR* 6:293.

⁷¹ Thomas Gordon, Number 3, *Cato’s Letters*, vol. 1, 45.

with leeching funds from the Granville District coffers, Child, according to Dobbs, instructed Corbin to “make a Party against the Governor’s Administration.” As a reward, Dobbs claimed, Corbin offered the promise of positions in a new government with Child as governor. Richard Spaight, the governor’s nephew and the target of several specific allegations, specifically alleged that his seat on the Council was promised to Robert Jones after the “Revolution’s taking place.”⁷²

As for the accusations related to the rioters, Dobbs seems to have recognized in the resolutions precisely those rhetorical ploys highlighted by Lee, and he sought to downplay the actions of the rioters. Implying that the mob had stayed within the bounds of acceptable violence, Dobbs pointed out that they had only acted after their petition had brought them no redress, and only sought refunds for “fees unjustly taken from them”. When Corbin signed the articles they had drawn up, they set him free without injury. Indeed, the whole affair had been so minor that no area magistrate had bothered to seek prosecution against the rioters, at least, Dobbs insinuated, until Corbin bribed the greedy Robert Jones to do so. Dobbs further claimed that he had done all he could by approving a proclamation offering a reward for the capture of the rioters. After a few of the rioters were arrested and subsequently broken out of jail by further crowd action, Corbin himself had given up on prosecuting them. “I cannot see,” Dobbs claimed,

how any fault can lay against the Governor & Council, when no complaint is made to them, so that if any neglect has been it must be imputed to Mr. Corbyn and Jones the Attorney General whose duty it was to prosecute, and not to the Governor & Council, as no other notice was given by affidavits or

⁷² Dobbs to Board of Trade, *NCCR* 6:294; Richard Spaight to Board of Trade, July 21, 1760, *NCCR* 6:268-272. Spaight, like his uncle, wrote an extensive and categorical denial of the allegations leveled by the petitioners. The “Revolution” of course, referred to Child and Corbin’s alleged *coup d’etat*.

any thing known of those riots but by flying reports of which the Government can take no notice.⁷³

As for the charge that he had removed “Gentlemen of unexceptionable characters and distinguished worth,” while appointing known rioters to positions of influence, Dobbs rehashed the claim that Corbin had in 1758 dishonestly accused him of patenting lands that belonged to Granville. Upon being pressed, Corbin had denied, even in the face of testimony to the contrary by his co-agent Bodley, ever making such an accusation to Granville. He consistently failed to produce evidence to the contrary, however, so Dobbs stripped him of his militia rank and his judgeship. Finally, he turned to perhaps the most damning accusation of all—that he had rewarded the lawless rioters with important offices. Dobbs never mentioned Lane, who became justice of the peace of Halifax County shortly after the riots, nor did he mention Hurst, who was a justice of the peace long before and after the event. Dobbs did allow that Alexander McCulloch was allowed to remain in his positions of authority, but he claimed, rather implausibly, that McCulloch had been an innocent bystander in the tumult, intervening, in fact, to secure the release of Bodley from a drunken Enfield mob. Dobbs sought to show that his adversaries sought to take advantage of a situation largely of their own making for their own political gain—Child, Corbin, and their allies, especially Starkey, exploited and encouraged “that Republican spirit which this Province is so notorious for” in an effort to force the governor to “be silent and let the heads of a Republican party engross the executive party of the Crown,” all in a conspiracy to “propose no Measures but what ultimately tended to their emolument.”⁷⁴

⁷³ Dobbs to Board of Trade, *NCCR* 6:295.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 309.

The Enfield Riots provided both the governor and his enemies with clear evidence of corruption. For Dobbs, the incident brought corruption within the Granville District into sharp focus—giving support to his frequent insistence that the “Republican parties,” “Juntos,” and “cabals” among the opposition were founded upon corrupt networks of influence. For his opponents, the governor’s tepid response showed that he was intent on using his favorites and family members to weaken the influence of his adversaries, even by violence. The rhetoric used by both parties, especially in the Assembly’s removal petition in May of 1760 and the governor’s subsequent response, was carefully calculated to evoke a visceral response to the corruption they sought to portray. The assembly charged that the “known Conductors” of violent “Mobbs and insurrections” had not only avoided punishment, but were rewarded by the governor for their actions. Dobbs claimed that Corbin, through his extensive and corrupt network of agents and bolstered by the arrival of Thomas Child, forged alliances with the colony’s elite—men like Samuel Swann and John Starkey—who pursued “their self interested projects under the mask of patriotism.”⁷⁵ The intensity of the rhetoric rose with the stakes of the conflict, and by 1760, with the assembly in open defiance of the governor, each party detected in the actions of the other an attempt to subvert the political institutions of the province to private ends. The mechanisms by which these schemes were carried out were the networks of interest, assembled, both parties alleged, through a litany of corrupt practices.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 300-308.

CHAPTER 5

“Every Artifice, every Fraud”

Ultimately, Dobbs’s response to the assembly’s removal bid in the spring of 1760 was successful—the crown refused to remove the governor despite the storm of protest from his provincial and metropolitan enemies. He continued to spar with the lower house until his death in 1765, but the rhetoric of these disputes never again reached the fever pitch of 1760. He even began to establish limited political alliances with Cape Fear politicians, including, remarkably, John Starkey, shortly before his death. This was partly due to the governor’s acceptance of the necessity of compromise, a realization that was admittedly forced on him by the Board of Trade’s refusal to explicitly support him in many of the disputes. In addition, many of his most strident adversaries, including Thomas Barker and Thomas Child, left the colony to pursue their careers in England shortly after their failure to secure the governor’s removal. Yet many of the core issues contested by Dobbs and the Assembly remained unresolved, and they emerged again in several different iterations both during the final years of Dobbs’s tenure and that of his successor William Tryon, who faced an even stormier governorship than his predecessor. The leaders of the Regulator movement, which took place during Tryon’s tenure, employed similar rhetoric as Dobbs and his adversaries in opposing corruption, by then even more rampant among local officials.¹

Like the Regulators a decade later, politicians of the late 1750s could point to corruption in virtually every part of colonial government. Yet in the minds of these politicians, corruption could assume different forms. While it is true that, as Ekirch has pointed out, that “in nearly every major issue of discord between himself and the assembly,

¹ Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 148-151. For the influence of Country ideology, particularly regarding corruption, on the Regulators, see *Ibid*, 161-211, and Kars, *Breaking Loose Together*, *passim*.

Dobbs discerned a mercenary motive in its behavior,” it is equally true that the assembly detected in his actions an attempt to subvert the colonial government to his own will, at the expense of the liberties of the colony’s political elite.² By 1759, this particularly potent discourse of political corruption seems to have been the preferred method of contesting major political issues in North Carolina. The reasons for this are varied—corruption was a standard trope in English political discourse, and it could be employed, as seen above, to describe a number of political behaviors. It was also a convenient *ad hominem* response to perceived insults and slights, as Dobbs demonstrated when the lower house denied a claim for reimbursement filed by his nephew Richard Spaight. And of course, as seen throughout the preceding chapters, accusations of corruption were often objectively correct—especially charges of embezzlement and fraud in the land offices. But North Carolina’s political leaders seldom left matters at that. They viewed, or at least portrayed incidents of corruption as part of a larger schemes and patterns of abuses.

It was natural for them to conceive of corruption in that way. North Carolina’s political struggles, although they often involved—indeed were frequently precipitated by—a transatlantic network of agents, factors, and ministers, were essentially provincial spats. And in the fairly enclosed political world of North Carolina, debates were not generally contested on the level of theoretical, constitutional, or legal principles. While these larger issues were often at stake, provincial elites understood their consequences in personal terms. Nothing is more revealing of the personal nature of political society in North Carolina than to examine the litany of accusations hurled in political debates—from the frequent anxiety that the governor’s “relations and countrymen” threatened to monopolize positions of profit in the

² Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 156.

colony, to Dobbs's sneering denunciations of Starkey's allegedly "republican" attire, the rhetoric used by North Carolina politicians often voiced a conviction, sincere or affected, that the character of one's opponent rendered him unfit for participation in politics. In this intimate environment, corruption was not only the creeping, corrosive force described by British political theorists—it had a human face, and not just a "symbolic" one, as Robert Walpole was to Bolingbroke and his sympathizers.³

But this tendency ran deeper. In the diminutive political spheres in which these men operated, personal ties counted for much—they were the ligaments that connected the colony's political figures. There was little distinction between personal "friendships" and political alliances—in the language of the day the two were often virtually synonymous, because both connoted a mutual arrangement that connoted what contemporaries called "influence." Nor, as one historian has observed in a British context, was this "an aberration of a corrupt polity." It was an unavoidable reality in this "face to face" society.⁴ But it also contributed to a political discourse whereby any action, whether inherently corrupt, like the embezzlement of tax revenue by sheriffs, or simply an accepted practice, like securing a position of influence for one's family member, could be viewed as part of a corrupt design to gain an undue amount of control over government. In this context, even relatively innocuous forms of corruption appeared sinister and threatening, in that it was corrupt behavior aimed at a larger, more ambitious end—the accumulation of power and influence. Some of the allegations hurled by both sides seem grossly exaggerated to modern readers, and we can correctly read them as calculated for political effect, especially the lower house resolves

³ Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 477.

⁴ Woodfine, "Tempters or Tempted?" 188.

against Dobbs in 1760. But many of these charges—Starkey’s alleged ability as treasurer to use stipend money to get lower house members to “follow him like chickens,” for example—would have resonated with eighteenth century politicians. They understood through experience the degree to which political power depended on the ability to cultivate influence through favors. The personal nature of politics and society in the colony thus strongly informed the rhetoric used in important political contests.

In this manner, I suggest, the rhetoric employed in the political debates of the eighteenth century was similar to the paranoid style attributed to colonial Americans by Gordon Wood. It was a “mode of causal attribution based on particular assumptions about the nature of social reality and the necessity of moral responsibility in human affairs.”⁵ While the colonists could (and did) draw on a massive corpus of Western political thought to support such a worldview, it was the reality of political life in the province that really brought these concerns to life. From a modern perspective it is easy to describe—as I have done in an earlier chapter—Dobbs’s dispensation of patronage as “clumsy,” because he failed to secure the loyalties of important men in the province. But as the governor and the lower house began to clash on other issues, and his understanding of the balance of political power in the colony became clear, his competence in appointing officials was not questioned by provincial elites, who saw his decisions as part of a corrupt design to expand, in Abercromby’s words, “the Authority of the Executive Part of Government.”⁶

This tendency was not unique to the politics of the Dobbs administration. Likewise, the accusations by Regulators, many of which first began to gain traction during the Dobbs

⁵ Gordon S. Wood, “Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century,” *WMQ* 39, 3 (July 1982): 409.

⁶ Abercromby to Samuel Swann, March 1 1760, *Abercromby Letter Book*, 341.

administration, tended to engage personally with their adversaries, who they portrayed as thoroughly corrupt. But while these petitions and pamphlets, especially those of Hermon Husband, often utilized many of the same rhetorical devices as Dobbs and his rivals, the comparisons between the two are complicated by several factors. The Regulators, while perhaps more conservative in their aims than many historians once realized, were still animated by concerns related to class. They complained, broadly, that certain members of the colonial elite—those in positions of authority—were “nefarious & designing men, who being put into Posts of Profit and Credit,.” used “every artifice, practice[ed] every Fraud..to squeeze and extort from the wretched Poor.”⁷ If the politicians of the 1750s addressed that issue at all, it was only to observe that an opponent lacked “substance”, i.e. the wealth to participate constructively in politics.

But what Dobbs and his adversaries especially lacked, and the Regulators would later have, was, in the words of one historian of the Regulation, a “strong moral position from which to attack corrupt officials.”⁸ Scholars have convincingly demonstrated the connections between religious conviction and many of Regulators’ critiques of corrupt officials, but it would be a stretch to do so for Dobbs and the leaders of the lower house. While Dobbs in particular was given to bemoaning the corrupted state of morality in the colony, he tended to blame this condition on “sectaries” and “Deists sprung up in this Province”, and generally did not make connections between religious mores and political behavior.⁹ The same was true for the moral assumptions that characterized Country ideology. Both Dobbs and his

⁷ “Regulators’ Advertisement No. 11,” May 21, 1768, in *NCCR* 7:767-768.

⁸ Andrew C. Denson, “Diversity, Religion, and the North Carolina Regulators”, *NCHR* 72, 1 (January 1995), 46.

⁹ Dobbs to Phillip Bearcroft, January 22, 1760, *NCCR* 6:221-224.

adversaries used Country rhetoric to paint each other as corrupt, self-interested, and “designing,” but—with John Starkey as a notable exception—there is little evidence that they wished to portray themselves as virtuous patriots. If anything, they prided themselves on their upward mobility, and openly flaunted their ambition. Among North Carolina’s elite, claimed Tryon’s successor Josiah Martin, “Interest that more or less biases all Mankind...governs more than principles of Justice.”¹⁰

The Regulators portrayed themselves quite differently, either as the “wretched Poor,” helpless against the depredations of “Monsters in iniquity,” or as stoic yeomen heroes: “*Free subjects by Birth*” ready to “*die* in defence of our Privileges.” This image proved compelling outside of North Carolina, where newspaper accounts sympathized with both the Regulators’ concerns and their treatment after their defeat at Alamance in 1771. In Connecticut, Ezra Stiles wrote: “What shall an...oppressed people do, when their Petitions, Remonstrances and Supplications are unheard and rejected, they insulted by the Crown Officers, and Oppression and Tyranny...continued with Rigour and Egyptian Austerity!”¹¹ The leaders of the opposition to Dobbs predicted “total Ruin” for the “his Majesty’s poor Subjects,” but this was the conventional language of dependence and deference employed by colonial elites seeking the interest of powerful men in England, not a claim of lower-class exploitation. Indeed, many of the leaders of the lower house revolt, in addition to some of Dobbs’s allies, took an active role in crushing the Regulation.

While a comprehensive analysis of the politics of the Regulator movement and the Revolution in North Carolina is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is worth noting that to a

¹⁰ Martin to Isaac Wilkinson, quoted in Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 200.

¹¹ “Regulators’ Advertisement No. 11”; Regulus (Hermon Husband,) “A Fan for Fanning and a Touchstone to Tryon,” (Boston: Daniel Kneeland?, 1771), 10-11; Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 201.

great extent, the issue of corruption in provincial government continued to shape the contours of politics in North Carolina at least until the outbreak of open rebellion in 1775. Governor Josiah Martin, who replaced Tryon shortly after Alamance, openly sympathized with the Regulators and broadly shared their contempt for the colony's elite, who he characterized as "as corrupt as ignorant", and, referring specifically to local magistrates, united by "reciprocal countenance of malversation."¹² Martin, like Dobbs, attempted to strike at the corruption he saw among provincial elites, and also like Dobbs, he found himself facing an intransigent lower house. When the Revolution broke out, he correctly perceived its origins among the same elites, and characterized Whig leaders as motivated by greed, "intent on...their own mistaken interests and aggrandizement." They preyed, the governor claimed, on honest Loyalists, threatening them with "seizing their Lands and Properties and making division thereof among [their] deluded Followers."¹³ Many of the Regulators remained disgusted with the corruption of the colony's governing class, and in the colony's first open battle at Moore's Creek, the defeated Loyalist force included hundreds of former Regulators and a large contingent of Highland Scots. The makeup of the two opposing forces in the battle says much about the enduring importance of personal influence in the colony: Josiah Martin deployed a force of former Regulators, who had for years felt disenfranchised and victimized by the colony's elite, and Highland Scots, many newly arrived and largely outside the colony's networks of influence. Opposing them was a local militia raised and commanded by

¹²Josiah Martin to Lord Hillsborough, January 30, 1772, *NCCR* 10:266.

¹³ Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 206; Martin, Proclamations of June 16 and August 15, 1775, *NCCR* 10:17, 147.

James Moore, a man whose influence in the region was so extensive that the creek where the battle was fought bore his family name.¹⁴

But the factors contributing to the development of revolutionary factions were as complicated as they were during the Dobbs governorship. James Murray, by then living in Boston, and John Rutherford were typical of merchants who perceived their interests as lying with the metropole. Both remained loyal to the Crown, as did the McCulloch family, with the exception of Alexander. The leader of the Enfield Riots, who served on Martin's council and apparently recommended harsh measures against Whigs early in the crisis, nevertheless retired to his Halifax County plantation, where he sat out the conflict. That he was able to do so in peace, despite his early tendency toward loyalism, was probably a result of his tremendous influence in the area, which was a hotbed of Whig sentiment.¹⁵ As another measure of the shifting contours of politics between the 1750s and the Revolution, the Fourth Provincial Congress, which openly moved the colony toward "declaring Independency" from Great Britain, included members of the opposition to Dobbs as well as his supporters.¹⁶

The factions and networks of influence that dominated politics in colonial North Carolina were highly mutable, and grew more so as the Revolution approached. Similarly, perceptions of the illegality or immorality of corrupt practices, often the lifeblood of these factions, changed with the political environment. Indeed, accusations of corruption, and our attempts to understand them, have always rested on notoriously slippery foundations, and the range of behaviors characterized by eighteenth-century politicians provide a clear example of

¹⁴ Lee, *Crowds and Soldiers*, 152.

¹⁵ "Alexander McCulloch," in *NCDB* vol. 4, 132-133. Interestingly, Willie Jones and John Baptista Ashe, both radical Whigs, were the executors of McCulloch's estate.

¹⁶ Fourth Provincial Congress Minutes, April 12, 1776, NCCR 10:499.

just how elusive definitions of corruption can be.¹⁷ Many of the practices that modern observers view as essentially corrupt—favoritism in political patronage and venality to name two examples, were not necessarily outside the pale of legitimacy in the eighteenth century mind. Additionally, Anglo-Americans also tended to view changes to established government, especially those that might increase the powers of the executive, or of an individual in the legislature, as corrupt, developments that could, as Robert Molesworth claimed in his *Account of Denmark*, eventually force the people to “give up at once their beloved power, and submit their necks to a heavy yoke” if they neglected to resist plots “against the public Liberty.”¹⁸

A close examination of North Carolina politics, especially the way that patronage operated, can reveal how these seemingly very different corrupt discourses could be merged. Dobbs, his critics charged, did not simply find positions of power and profit for his family and allies out of loyalty, (although concern for his family was certainly one motive) he did so to augment his own power in a way that was seen as inherently prejudicial to the liberties (or more precisely, the power) of North Carolina’s political elite. As James Murray put it in 1760, “our Friends...were the Fewer...that the old Gentleman our Governor might not be further exasperated.”¹⁹ Similarly, Dobbs could argue that Starkey’s opposition to his attempts to raise money, and especially to his assertion of the power to audit the colony’s accounts, were, while clearly important constitutional issues, also motivated by avarice. It is certainly accurate that Dobbs often framed his opponent’s actions as motivated by greed

¹⁷ See Maryvonne Genaux, “Early Modern Corruption in English and French Fields of Vision”, in Heidenheimer et al, eds., *Political Corruption: Concepts and Contexts*, 3rd ed., 107-121.

¹⁸ Robert Molesworth, *An Account of Denmark: As it Was in the Year 1692* (Glasgow: R.Urie, 1752), 43.

¹⁹ Murray to John Murray, August 6, 1760, *James Murray, Loyalist*, 93-94.

more than ideology or political principle. But it is also important to understand that, in every self-serving action on the part of the governor, his enemies saw an attempt to expand his powers at their expense.²⁰ Both points of view were not only probably grounded in some truth, they were well within the boundaries of eighteenth-century understandings of corruption.

It is tempting to conclude, then, that the discourse drove, or at least heavily inflected the trajectory of political events in mid-century North Carolina. Dobbs and his adversaries, it seems, were conditioned to construe political action not within their value systems as corrupt, and so they did, and North Carolina politics became all the more contentious as a result. The observation that “for that different, distant world the question asked of an event was not ‘how did it happen’, but ‘who did it’” seems especially applicable to the political world occupied and shaped by men like Arthur Dobbs and John Starkey. It does not diminish the importance of the actual practice of corruption by colonial politicians to suggest that their enemies may have been inclined to view, or portray, any of their actions in that light.²¹ It was also possible in eighteenth-century North Carolina, however, for men such as John Starkey and Arthur Dobbs to combine self-serving motives—even the desire for wealth—with political conviction. But they had little interest in voicing such a nuanced view of corruption even if they recognized it.

If, however, the rhetoric used by these men was inherently divisive, it was also clearly based on underlying realities in the colony. The actual practice of corruption, as understood by contemporaries, exacerbated the issue by enabling politicians to form cabals

²⁰ Ekirch, *Poor Carolina*, 156.

²¹ Wood, “Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style,” 411.

united by interest. Ultimately, what these men interpreted as corrupt—in the sense that it threatened to alter government—was the use of patronage, venality, even embezzlement, to assemble or dissolve these factions. These parties (in the loose, shifting eighteenth century sense of the term) contested a number of political points so fiercely as to prevent the passage of important legislation, including military aid bills, vital measures for dealing with currency, and even urgent judicial reform measures. Competing interests brought the government to a standstill by 1759. Yet their effects could be felt far beyond the tone of political discourse in the colony. The impact of fiscal corruption on the impoverished colony was profound, as the reports commissioned under Tryon demonstrated.

But corrupt discourse, whether expressed in the language of Country ideology or within another, organically native frame of reference, did provide eighteenth-century North Carolinians with a vocabulary for articulating opposition to local corruption in a way that could rally popular support. And the coalitions formed by “republicans” like Starkey did contest legitimate and enduring grievances in a way no individual politician could have done. The deep suspicions and anxieties imbedded in the rhetoric employed by these politicians were not always out of proportion with the gravity of the issues at hand. But, importantly, they were also products of the intimate political environment in which they were expressed, a milieu in which personal character and political conviction were two sides of the same coin, and “friendships” and “families” were as much a part of political struggles as imperial decrees and acts of Parliament.

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