

State Library of North Carolina

North Carolina Encyclopedia



 Historical Highlights of North Carolina

Early History / Colonial Period / The Halifax Resolves /
Revolutionary War to Civil War / Twentieth Century

Early History

At the time of the first European contact, North Carolina was inhabited by a number of native tribes sharing some cultural traits, but also distinguished by regional and linguistic variations. Three major language families were represented in North Carolina: Iroquoian, Siouan, and Algonquian. The Iroquoian tribes--the Cherokee, Tuscarora, Meherrin, Coree, and Neuse River (which may have been Iroquoian or Algonquian)--were related linguistically and culturally to the Iroquois tribes to the north. The Cherokee were located in the mountains on the western boundaries of the state and the Tuscarora, Meherrin, Coree, and Neuse River were located in the coastal plains. Located primarily in the piedmont area, or central portion, of the state were the Siouan tribes: the Cape Fear, Catawba, Cheraw, Eno, Keyauwee, Occaneechi, Saponi, Shakori, Sissipahaw, Sugaree, Tutelo, Waccamaw, Wateree, Waxhaw, and Woccon. The Algonquian-speaking tribes represented the southernmost extension of predominantly Northeastern Woodlands tribes and were located entirely in the tidewater area of the state. These were the Bear River, Chowan, Hatteras, Nachapunga, Moratok, Pamlico, Secotan, and Weapomeoc.

Since most historical accounts of travelers and settlers dealt with either the Cherokee or the Algonquian, little is known about the Siouan peoples and their pre-contact cultures. The descriptions which follow will deal with the Cherokee as representative of the Iroquoian, with the Catawba as representative of the Siouan-speakers and the piedmont tribes, and the coastal Algonquian.

Coastal Algonquian

At the time of the first contact of Europeans with the Indians, the Algonquian tribes occupied the tidewater areas of the Atlantic Coast extending from Canada to as far south as the Neuse River in North Carolina. In 1584, the estimated 7,000 Algonquians living in North Carolina were relative newcomers to the Southeast, having come in a series of migrations. To some extent, they retained cultural elements from their Northeastern Algonquian traditions, but there was also a great deal of cultural borrowing from their southern neighbors as they adapted to the geographical and climatic conditions of the area, in that they were more water-oriented and placed more emphasis upon hunting, fishing, and gathering than did most of their neighbors.

Catawba

Update 5/5/78

BER-0074

The Catawba was one of the Siouan-speaking tribes of the piedmont area of the Carolinas at the time of the first European contact. Little is known of their culture and life style at that time, since contact was few and sporadic and little was documented of their culture. What is known, is based largely on the writings of John Lawson, who explored the piedmont territory and visited the Catawba in 1701.

Not only is little known about the Catawba culture, there is also confusion as to exactly who the Catawba were. The Catawba Nation was actually a military alliance of several Siouan tribes and remnants of tribes or bands decimated by war and disease who joined the Catawba. In the historical records, they have been known by several different names: the Spanish referred to them as the Issa, the Ysa, or the Usi and the 17th century Virginians called them the Usheree or Ushery. After the Yamasee War they became known as the Catawba, which means "cut off," apparently referring to their being cut off from other Siouan tribes. Their name for themselves was I Ye Ye, "people," or Nieye, "real people." At the time of contact, there were approximately 6,000 Catawbas, equal in size to the Tuscaroras. The only tribe larger than these two groups was the Cherokee.

Cherokee

At the time of their first contact with Europeans, in the mid-16th century, the Cherokee lived in the isolated hills and valleys of the highest portions of the Southern Appalachians. Related linguistically to the Iroquois to the north, some scholars believe that successive groups of Cherokee were driven southwards in pre-Columbian times until they settled in the Southern Appalachians.

By the beginning of the 18th century, the Cherokee territory had expanded to include Allegheny County in southwestern Virginia, western North Carolina, northwestern South Carolina, eastern Tennessee and northern Georgia and Alabama. Abundant in natural resources, this area provided over 800 species of plants used for food, medicines, and crafts. A wide variety of trees in the dense forests was available for fuel, weaving fibers, twine, medicinal barks and the framework and covering of dwellings, while plentiful animals provided food, clothing, shelter, and medicine.

The first known European exploration of North Carolina occurred during the summer of 1524. A Florentine navigator named Giovanni da Verrazano, in the service of France, explored the coastal area of North Carolina between the Cape Fear River area and Kitty Hawk. A report of his findings was sent to Francis I and published in Richard Hakluyt's *Divers Voyages Touching the Discoverie of America*. No attempt was made to colonize the area.

Between 1540 and 1570 several Spanish explorers from the Florida Gulf region explored portions of North Carolina, but again no permanent settlements were established.

Coastal North Carolina was the scene of the first attempt to colonize America by English-speaking people. Two colonies were begun in the 1580's under a charter granted by Queen Elizabeth to Sir Walter Raleigh. The first colony, established in 1585 under the leadership of Ralph Lane, ended in failure.

A second expedition under the leadership of John White began in the spring of 1587 when 110 settlers, including seventeen women and nine children, set sail for the new world. The White Colony arrived near Hatteras in June, 1587, and went on to Roanoke Island, where they found the houses built by Ralph Lane's expedition still standing. Two significant events occurred shortly after the colonist's arrival: two "friendly" Indians were baptized and a child was born. Virginia Dare, as the baby was named, became the first child born to English-speaking parents in the new world.

The colonists faced many problems. As supplies ran short White was pressured to return to England for

provisions. Once in England; White was unable to immediately return to Roanoke because of an impending attack by the Spanish Armada. When he was finally able to return in 1590, he found only the remnants of what was once a settlement. There were no signs of life, only the word "CROATAN" carved on a nearby tree. Much speculation has been made about the fate of the "Lost Colony," but no one has successfully explained the disappearance of the colony and its settlers.

Colonial Period

The first permanent English settlers in North Carolina were immigrants from the tidewater area of southeastern Virginia. These first of these "overflow" settlers moved into the Albemarle area of northeast North Carolina around 1650.

In 1663, Charles II granted a charter to eight English gentlemen who had helped him regain the throne of England. The charter document contains the following description of the territory which the eight Lords Proprietors were granted title to:

All that Territory or tract of ground, situate, lying, and being within our Dominions in America, extending from the North end of the Island called Luck Island, which lies in the Southern Virginia Seas and within six and Thirty degrees of the Northern Latitude, and to the West as far as the South Seas; and so Southerly as far as the River Saint Mathias, which borders upon the Coast of Florida, and within one and Thirty degrees of Northern Latitude, and West in a direct Line as far as the South Seas aforesaid; Together with all and singular Ports, Harbours, Bays, Rivers, Isles, and Islets belonging unto the Country aforesaid; And also, all the Soil, Lands, Fields, Woods, Mountains, Farms, Lakes, Rivers, Bays, and Islets situate or being within the Bounds or Limits aforesaid; with the Fishing of all sorts of Fish, Whales, Sturgeons, and all other Royal Fishes in the Sea, Bays, Islets, and Rivers within the premises, and the Fish therein taken; And moreover, all Veins, Mines, and Quarries, as well discovered as not discovered, of Gold, Silver, Gems, and precious Stones, and all other, whatsoever be it, of Stones, Metals, or any other thing whatsoever found or to be found within the Country, Isles, and Limits"

The territory was called Carolina in honor of Charles the First ("Carolus" is the Latin form of "Charles"). In 1665, a second charter was granted to clarify territorial questions not answered in the first charter. This charter extended the boundary lines of Carolina to include

All that Province, Territory, or Tract of ground, situate, lying, and being within our Dominions of America aforesaid, extending North and Eastward as far as the North end of Carahutke River or Gullet; upon a straight Westerly line to Wyonoake Creek, which lies within or about the degrees of thirty six and thirty Minutes, Northern latitude, and so West in a direct line as far as the South Seas; and South and Westward as far as the degrees of twenty nine, inclusive, northern latitude; and so West in a direct

line as far as the South Seas.

Between 1663 and 1729, North Carolina was under the control of the Lords Proprietors and their descendants, who commissioned colonial officials and authorized the governor and his council to grant lands in the name of the Lords Proprietors. In 1669, John Locke wrote the Fundamental Constitutions as a model for the government of Carolina. Albemarle County was divided into local governmental units called precincts. Initially there were three precincts--Berkley, Carteret, and Shaftesbury--but as the colony expanded to the south and west new precincts were created. By 1729, there were a total of eleven precincts: six in Albemarle County and five in Bath County, which had been created in 1696.

Although the Albemarle Region was the first permanent settlement in the Carolina area, another region was developed around present-day Charleston, South Carolina. Because of the natural harbor and easier access to trade with the West Indies, more attention was given to developing the Charleston area than her northern counterparts. For a twenty-year period, 1692-1712, the colonies of North and South Carolina existed as one unit of government. Although North Carolina still had her own assembly and council, the governor of Carolina resided in Charleston and a deputy governor appointed for North Carolina.

In 1729, seven of the Lords Proprietors sold their interests in North Carolina to the Crown and North Carolina became a royal colony. The eighth proprietor, Lord Granville, retained economic interest and continued granting land in the northern half of North Carolina. All political functions were under the supervision of the Crown until 1775.

Colonial government in North Carolina was essentially the same during both the proprietary and royal periods. The only major difference was who appointed colonial officials. There were two primary units of government: one consisted of the governor and his council and the other consisted of a colonial assembly of persons elected by the qualified voters of the county. There were also colonial courts; however, unlike today's courts, they were rarely involved in formulating policy. All colonial officials were appointed by either the Lords Proprietors prior to 1729 or the Crown afterwards. Members of the colonial assembly were elected from the various precincts (counties) and from certain towns which had been granted representation. The term "precinct" as a geographical unit ceased to exist after 1735. These areas became known as "counties," and about the same time "Albemarle County" and "Bath County" ceased to exist as governmental units.

The governor was an appointed official, as were the colonial secretary, attorney general, surveyor general, and the receiver general. All officials served at the pleasure of the Lords Proprietors or the Crown. During the proprietary period, the council was comprised of appointed persons who were to look after the proprietors' interests in the new world. The council served as an advisory group to the governor during the proprietary and royal periods, as well as serving as the upper house of the legislature when the assembly was in session. When vacancies occurred in colonial offices or on the council, the governor was authorized to carry out all mandates of the proprietors, and could make a temporary appointment until the vacancy was filled by proprietary or royal commission. One member of the council was chosen as president of the group, and many council members were also colonial officials. If a governor or deputy governor was unable to carry on as chief executive because of illness, death, resignation, or absence from the colony, the president of the council became the chief executive and exercised all powers of the governor until the governor returned or a new governor was commissioned.

The colonial assembly was made up of men elected from each precinct and town where representation had been granted. Not all counties were entitled to the same number of representatives. Many of the older counties had five representatives each while those newer ones formed after 1696 were each allowed only two. Each town granted representation was allowed one representative. The presiding

officer of the colonial assembly was called the speaker and was elected from the entire membership of the house. When a vacancy occurred, a new election was ordered by the speaker to fill it. On the final day of each session, the bills passed by the legislature were signed by both the speaker and the president of the council. The colonial assembly could not meet arbitrarily, but rather convened only when called into session by the governor.

Being the only body authorized to grant a salary to the governor or to be responsible for spending tax monies, the legislature met on a regular basis until just before the Revolutionary War; however, there was a constant battle for authority between the governor and his council on the one hand and the general assembly on the other. Two of the most explosive issues were the power of the purse and the electing of the treasurer, both privileges of the assembly. Another issue of contention was who had the authority to create new counties. On more than one occasion, elected representatives from counties created by the governor and council, without consultation and proper legislative action by the lower house, were refused seats until the matter was resolved. These conflicts between the executive and legislative bodies were to have a profound effect on the organization of state government after independence.

The Halifax Resolves

North Carolina, on April 12, 1776, authorized her delegates to the Continental Congress to vote for independence. This was the first official action by a colony calling for independence. The 83 delegates present in Halifax at the Fourth Provincial Congress unanimously adopted the Halifax Resolves, which read as follows:

The Select Committee taking into Consideration the usurpations and violences attempted and committed by the King and Parliament of Britain against America, and the further Measures to be taken for frustrating the same, and for the better defence of this province reported as follows, to wit,

It appears to your Committee that pursuant to the Plan concerted by the British Ministry for subjugating America, the King and Parliament of Great Britain have usurped a Power over the Persons and Properties of the People unlimited and uncontrouled and disregarding their humble Petitions for Peace, Liberty and safety, have made divers Legislative Acts, denouncing War Famine and every Species of Calamity daily employed in destroying the People and committing the most horrid devastations on the Country. That Governors in different Colonies have declared Protection to Slaves who should imbrue their Hands in the Blood of their Masters. That the Ships belonging to America are declared prizes of War and many of them have been violently seized and confiscated in consequence of which multitudes of the people have been destroyed or from easy Circumstances reduced to the most Lamentable distress.

And whereas the moderation hitherto manifested by the United Colonies and their sincere desire to be reconciled to the mother Country on Constitutional Principles, have procured no mitigation of the aforesaid Wrongs and usurpations and no hopes remain of obtaining redress by those Means alone which have been hitherto

tried, Your Committee are of Opinion that the house should enter into the following Resolve, to wit

Resolved that the delegates for this Colony in the Continental Congress be empowered to concur with the other delegates of the other Colonies in declaring Independency, and forming foreign Alliances, resolving to this Colony the Sole, and Exclusive right of forming a Constitution and Laws for this Colony, and of appointing delegates from time to time (under the direction of a general Representation thereof to meet the delegates of the other Colonies for such purposes as shall be hereafter pointed out.

The Halifax Resolves were important not only because they were the first official action calling for independence, but also because they were not unilateral recommendations. They were instead recommendations directed to all the colonies and their delegates assembled at the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. Virginia followed with her own recommendations soon after the adoption of the Halifax Resolution, and eventually on July 4, the final draft of the Declaration of Independence was signed. William Hooper, Joseph Hewes, and John Penn were the delegates from North Carolina who signed the Declaration of Independence.

Revolutionary War to Civil War

In early December, 1776, delegates to the Fifth Provincial Congress adopted the first constitution for North Carolina. On December 21, 1776, Richard Caswell became the first governor of North Carolina under the new constitution. In 1788, North Carolina rejected the United States Constitution because of the lack of necessary amendments to ensure freedom of the people; however, on November 21, 1789, the state adopted the constitution, becoming the twelfth state to enter the federal union.

A constitutional convention was held in 1835, and among several changes made in the constitution was the method of electing the governor. After this change, the governor was elected by the people for a term of two years, instead of being elected by the legislature for one year. Edward Bishop Dudley was the first governor elected by the people.

In 1868, a second constitution, which drastically altered North Carolina government, was adopted. For the first time, all major state officers were elected by the people. The governor and other executive officers were elected to four-year terms, while the justices of the supreme court and judges of the superior court were elected to eight-year terms. The members of the General Assembly continued to be elected for two-year terms. Between 1868 and 1970 numerous amendments were incorporated into the 1868 constitution, so that, in 1970, the people voted to adopt a completely new constitution. Since then, several amendments have been ratified, but one in particular is a break from the past. In 1977, the people voted to allow the governor and lieutenant governor to run for reelection successively for an additional term.

North Carolina has had two permanent capitals, New Bern and Raleigh, and there have been three capitol buildings. Tryon Palace in New Bern was constructed in the period 1767-1770, and the main building was destroyed by fire February 27, 1798. The first capitol in Raleigh was completed in 1794 and was destroyed by fire on June 21, 1831. The present capitol building was completed in 1840.

In 1790, North Carolina ceded her western lands which included Washington, Davidson, Hawkins, Greene, Sullivan, Sumner, and Tennessee counties, to the federal government. Between 1790 and 1796

the territory was known as Tennessee Territory, but in 1796 it became simply Tennessee, the sixteenth state in the Union.

During the years between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, North Carolina developed a system of state and local government to meet the needs of its people. During this same period, two North Carolina natives were elected to the presidency of the United States: Andrew Jackson, the seventh president (1829-1837), and James K. Polk, the eleventh president (1845-1849).

Although there was much division in the state concerning secession, North Carolina did secede on May 20, 1861. North Carolina was not considered a wealthy state, but during the Civil War North Carolina supplied more men and materials to the Confederate cause than any other state. The state also suffered the largest number of losses than any other Confederate state during the war. General Joseph Johnston surrendered the last major Confederate Army to General William Sherman near Durham on April 26, 1865.

North Carolina was readmitted to the Union in 1868. Serving as president during much of the difficult period of Reconstruction was Andrew Johnson, the seventeenth president (1865-1869), another North Carolina native. The years of reconstruction and the decades following were characterized by courageous readjustments.

The Twentieth Century

In 1901 Governor Charles B. Aycock introduced a far-reaching program of education throughout the state, an event which marked an important turning point in the history of North Carolina.

In 1903 the Wright Brothers made the first successful powered flight by man at Kill Devil Hill near Kitty Hawk. The Wright Memorial at Kitty Hawks now commemorates their achievement.

In the 1920's a pioneer road building program was instituted which ultimately caused the state to be known as the "Good Roads State."

In recent years the state has emphasized education, industry, and agricultural technology and in each area has achieved many notable successes. Established in 1959 to enhance North Carolina's economic growth, the Research Triangle Park is a unique complex for organizations engaged in institutional, governmental, and industrial research. Three major research universities--Duke University in Durham, North Carolina State University in Raleigh, and the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill--are both the base and the capstone of the Research Triangle Park.

[GO Home](#)[GO to Encyclopedia Home](#)[GO to top](#)

This page has been developed and is maintained by the State Library of North Carolina Webteam.
Questions or comments should be directed to the [Webmaster](#).

bc/gem Last updated May 5, 1998

URL: <http://statelibrary.dcr.state.nc.us/NC/HISTORY/HISTORY.HTM>