

Smithfield's colonial beginnings: 1759-1779

The narrative that follows consists of excerpts from *Johnston County: 1746-1996, a history written by Thomas J. Lassiter and Wingate Lassiter.*

Copies of the complete book are on sale at the Johnston County Heritage Center in Downtown Smithfield.

In 1607 the most famous John Smith in early American history commanded the colony that established, in a wilderness called Virginia, the first permanent English settlement in America.... More than a century and a half later, at a place scarcely 150 miles southwest of Jamestown, another John Smith achieved regional fame as the founder of a riverside settlement in North Carolina that developed as a chartered town named Smithfield.

This also was an English settlement. And it prospered as Johnston County's enduring county seat. The John Smith who founded Smithfield was, precisely, John Smith Jr., the son of yet another John Smith, a pioneering father who fulfilled an important preliminary role in the creation of Smithfield.

John Smith Sr., a native of Virginia, moved with his family to North Carolina when the territory that became Johnston County was still a part of Craven County. John Smith Jr., born in 1736 according to his father's family Bible, was hardly out of infancy when the family migrated to the upper Neuse River region in 1740. The younger Smith was 26 years old when he acquired the land on which Smithfield would be established in 1777.

When John Smith Sr. arrived in the upper Neuse valley, he was eager to acquire land adjacent to the river, and to engage in other monetary ventures. He owned a North Carolina plantation before Hinton's Quarter ceased in 1771 to be Johnston's seat of government. After gaining possession of extensive tracts on both sides of the Neuse, John Smith Sr. was known as a landowner who was virtually a lord over a broad segment of the county. One of his land investments would have a significant bearing upon the founding of Smithfield.

In 1743 a South Carolina native named Charles Gavin obtained a patent for 600 acres lying on both sides of the Neuse River. The meandering Neuse flowed from north to south as it cut through this particular acreage. On the eastern side of the stream the Gavin grant apparently began at a red oak "near a branch and near the river." Researcher James P. Smith concluded that this oak tree stood in the southwest corner of what is now Smithfield's Riverside Cemetery. During the late 1740s Gavin, then a resident of Duplin County in southeastern North Carolina, sold his grant along the Neuse to John Smith Sr. And in 1762 the younger John Smith took a giant step toward establishing the town of Smithfield when he purchased from his father 288 acres of the Gavin grant, for which he paid 40 pounds. In October that same year he married Mary Exum, and in due time he would build for her and himself a home on a knoll rising from the east bank of the Neuse, a home mentioned in deed books as "The Hall"....

In 1759 the county court sitting at Hinton's Quarter had approved a petition from John Smith Sr. asking permission to keep a ferry at his plantation on the "great road" leading from New Bern to Johnston Courthouse. The river crossing at the Smith plantation became known as "Smith's Ferry," the earliest name of the place that formed the roots of Smithfield. In 1762, when John Smith Sr.

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sold to his son those 288 acres along the Neuse, the transaction included transfer of all properties involved in the operation of Smith's Ferry. The younger Smith's home, built in the early 1760s, overlooked the ferry. And it provided overnight lodging for travelers. Records reveal that in 1765 John Smith Jr. was licensed to keep a "public house." We do not know what he charged for lodging, but if he continued the ferry tolls charged by his father he received four shillings for conveying a wagon and a team of horses across the river. A man on horse or foot paid four pence for a crossing.

The importance of Smith's Ferry in Johnston County history does not rest merely on its accommodation of travelers. In 1770, when John Smith Jr. was a member of North Carolina's colonial legislature, that body passed an act providing for the reception, inspection, and safe storage of tobacco at the ferry on his Neuse River land. This legislation empowered Johnston County authorities to erect a warehouse there, but did not specify its exact location. C. Stanton Coats, whose prodigious research has shed light on many aspects of Johnston's history, suspected that this early tobacco warehouse was actually erected on the west side of the river. He based his conjecture on county court minutes recorded in 1787, a decade after the creation of Smithfield. These minutes recorded the appointment of **JOHN BRYAN** and John Robertson as tobacco inspectors "at Springfield."

In 1787, Springfield Plantation was owned by **JOHN BRYAN**. It lay along Swift Creek, across the Neuse west of Smithfield. **JOHN BRYAN** had inherited this property from his father, **WILLIAM BRYAN**, a leading citizen of the county at the outbreak of the American Revolution. The elder **BRYAN** was known as Colonel **BRYAN**. His wife, a sister of John Smith Jr., was **ELIZABETH SMITH BRYAN**. The **BRYAN** ancestral home stood scarcely a mile west of Smithfield, near the intersection of today's highways to Raleigh and Angier.

The tobacco received at Smithfield during late colonial times, or rather at Springfield, was packed into hogsheads, loaded on flat boats, and sent down the river to New Bern, where cargoes were transferred to vessels that carried North Carolina products to England. North Carolina, then as now, was among principal tobacco regions of America. But any production of tobacco in Johnston County was slight in the 1700s, and it remained slight in the 1800s until after the Civil War. By the 1850s only six North Carolina counties, all lying in the Piedmont region just below the Virginia border, produced as much as 20 pounds per acre Nevertheless, when the place called Smith's Ferry became the site of a tobacco-receiving station, in 1770, it gave the place some distinction as a tobacco market, more than a century before Eastern North Carolina had any bright-leaf auction markets....

By 1771, a new courthouse location was necessary after Wake County was carved from western Johnston, and the place chosen for it lay along the Neuse River exactly where Smithfield rose as Johnston's enduring county seat. Construction of the new courthouse, the third erected across a span of 25 years following the county's birth, began in 1771. Apparently it was situated on an acre of earth provided by John Smith Jr. a hundred yards or so south of his riverside residence, near the northeastern corner of present-day Smithfield's Market and Front streets. If this courthouse were a reproduction of the abandoned courthouse at Hinton's Quarter, it was built of timber, and was 20 feet wide

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and 30 feet long. Upon its completion in 1772 the builder, John Pope, also constructed "gaol and stocks" nearby. He received 149 pounds and 14 shillings for his work - British money, of course.

Until the Town of Smithfield was chartered in 1777, its location was widely known in North Carolina as "Johnston County Courthouse." The rise of this immediate forerunner of Smithfield coincided with beginnings of the Revolutionary War, which ended British rule in Johnston County and all America. Indeed, the place identified as Johnston County Courthouse became the scene of significant events leading up to the Revolution

In 1772, by the time officials were performing duties at Johnston's new courthouse, Governor William Tryon had departed North Carolina to become Governor of New York. Although he had angered many North Carolinians, he left among them a reputation as an able leader. They soon found that his successor, Governor Josiah Martin, was more arrogant and intolerant than Governor Tryon. The spirit of independence was spreading through the colonies in the early 1770s, and Governor Martin's attitude and policies prompted more and more North Carolinians to protest British rule.

By 1774 Johnstonians were in a mood to give public expression to their growing spirit of independence. On August 12, almost two years before the colonies united to proclaim the Declaration of Independence that heralded establishment of a separate English-speaking nation in America, indignant Johnston County freeholders led by Samuel Smith Jr. (a first cousin of Smithfield's founder) assembled at the courthouse beside the river to recite their grievances. They adopted formal resolutions demanding trial by jury of all persons accused of treason and also denouncing "taxation without representation." But they stopped short of calling for separation of the colonies from Britain. These protesters not only expressed their grievances in writing, but also selected delegates to meet with residents of other counties to consider ways of resisting British arrogance....

By the end of the summer of 1775, provisional government in North Carolina was functioning with strong support from every county despite the prevalence of substantial loyalty to the Crown in some localities. The Provincial Congress, which held five sessions over a span of two and a half years, was the supreme power in North Carolina during the transition from colonial to state government. But it assigned executive and judicial power to a 13-member body called the Provincial Council. District and local "committees of safety" were clothed with authority subject to the council's will.

North Carolina's Provincial Council, authorized to hold meetings every other month, began its work at Johnston County Courthouse in a session that lasted from October 18 to October 22, 1775. Cornelius Harnett of New Hanover County was elected as its president. The council's second session was also held at Johnston County Courthouse, December 18-24, and its third session was originally scheduled to be held there in late February and early March of 1776, but a late change of plans shifted that session to New Bern. Still, it may be said that for several months, during a critical time in American history, the seat of administrative government in North Carolina was Johnston County's courthouse community that became Smithfield in 1777.

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The work of the Provincial Council at Johnston County Courthouse helped to determine the course of the American Revolution in North Carolina. State historians have noted that the council's primary achievement during its Johnston County sessions was organizing and equipping the military forces that defeated British loyalists at Moore's Creek Bridge north of Wilmington on February 27, 1776. The patriots' victory there thwarted a British plan to bring North Carolina back under rule of the Crown. It turned the war away from North Carolina soil for almost five years, and it solidified North Carolina sentiment for complete independence from Britain....

The first General Assembly of the independent State of North Carolina convened at New Bern on April 7, 1777. On April 23 a bill to establish the Town of Smithfield was introduced by Johnston County's Senator **NEEDHAM BRYAN**. It passed the Senate readily. By April 26, the bill also had won quick approval in the House, where it was endorsed by Johnston County's Representatives Henry Rains and Alexander Averitt. The Legislature's procedures delayed ratification of the bill until May 9, but it can be said the town really was born during the last week of April 1777.

The law named a board of "directors and trustees" to design a plan to divide the land provided by John Smith Jr. into lots. This board - composed of Benjamin Williams, **WILLIAM BRYAN**, Samuel Smith Jr., John Rand, John Smith Jr., John Stevens, and **LEWIS BRYAN** - was empowered to make arrangements for selling lots and to exercise other authority in developing the town. The act of the Legislature decreed that the name of the new town would be Smithfield. The original town extended along the east bank of the river from Hancock Street southward to Church Street. There were no streets east of Fourth Street.

A map or "plat" of Smithfield published in 1802 by Hodge and Boylan reveals the owners of more than 135 lots in the original town plan. Among the original owners of Smithfield lots was Richard Caswell, the first Governor of the independent State of North Carolina, who had represented Johnston County in the Colonial Assembly in the 1750s when his home in what became the Kinston area was within the borders of Johnston....

Among the notable events in Smithfield's early history was a meeting of the state's General Assembly, held in the Johnston County courthouse May 3-15, 1779. From 1777 to 1794, North Carolina's governors and other state officials administered public affairs from their homes, and the Legislature moved from town to town, "auctioning off sessions to the highest bidders," according to R.D.W. Connor. It was a smallpox outbreak at New Bern, however, that moved Governor Richard Caswell to shift the spring session 1779 from New Bern to Smithfield.

Smithfield was among seven places having the honor of hosting the state's legislators before 1794. Townspeople may have felt honored and Smithfield's merchants may have reaped some profits from the coming of the legislators, but the visiting dignitaries themselves were hardly elated over their stay in the town. Whitmell Hill, a North Carolinian who had been a delegate to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, visited the Legislature while it was in session in Smithfield. In a letter to a colleague, he called the town "a

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rascally hole for such a meeting." Smithfield was unable to provide the living comforts usually enjoyed by Hill, but Smithfield's inadequacies were hardly unique.

Indeed, none of the seven communities that lured the Legislature away from New Bern could offer desired comforts. Historian Connor cited the complaint of a visitor to Tarboro, who said the town, with its twenty families, had "inadequate" accommodations for the lawmakers, "some forty or fifty of them being crowded with other visitors in a tavern, others having to be cared for in private homes." Connor added: "The situation at Tarboro was no worse than at Halifax, or Hillsborough, or Smithfield, or Wake Courthouse."

Courthouses, usually small, were inconvenient places for legislative meetings; and it was difficult to haul records of the Legislature from town to town - "in a common cart," to quote Connor. The situation became so unbearable that the Legislature sought to establish a permanent state capital, but its members had difficulty reaching agreement on a location. In 1787 the Legislature referred the matter to a constitutional convention called to consider ratification of the proposed U. S. Constitution. The convention decided in the summer of 1788 that the capital should be near Isaac Hunter's plantation in Wake County. Ultimately, after a long dispute in the Legislature, a commission created by the lawmakers established the capital on the Joel Lane plantation near Wake County Courthouse. In 1792 the commission laid out a town called Raleigh, named in honor of England's Sir Walter Raleigh, who had sponsored efforts to establish a colony in what became North Carolina.

A legend insisting that Smithfield "missed being the capital" of North Carolina "by one vote" has been passed down from generation to generation. It is pure legend. But Smithfield did receive some consideration on more than one occasion prior to the choosing of a Wake County site that resulted in the creation of Raleigh.

When the Legislature met in Smithfield in 1779, it appointed a commission to examine sites for the "Seat of Government," directing it to look at land in Johnston, Wake, and Chatham counties. That legislative action settled nothing.... The issue came up repeatedly in sessions of the Legislature after 1779. In 1782 Hillsborough was selected, but a rescinding action the following year (pressed by Fayetteville) turned Hillsborough's victory into defeat. In 1784 the Legislature again tried to make a choice. On one ballot Smithfield received 18 of 141 votes, but Smithfield's advocates made no headway on subsequent ballots. The county seat of Johnston received 13 votes on a second ballot and 17 votes on a third. Leading contenders in 1784 were Tarboro and Hillsborough. Later Smithfield was nominated to become the state capital when the constitutional convention was held, but its nomination mustered little support.

Rejection of Smithfield's bid to become the seat of State Government foreshadowed Smithfield's failure to achieve significant growth until after the Civil War. Businessmen and other settlers who might have set Smithfield on the road to becoming a major North Carolina city were diverted to Raleigh near the end of the 18th Century. Moreover, Smithfield had the misfortune of being bypassed by railroad builders of the middle 19th Century, a setback that

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prevented the town from becoming more than a hamlet with fewer than 500 inhabitants through most of the 1800s.

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Brent R. Brian
Martha M. Brian
BrianMitchellGenealogy@gmail.com