

# *Ten Men of High Office in Revolutionary North Carolina, 1777-1783.*

## *A Test of the Martin Thesis in Men in Rebellion*

by Karl RODABAUGH\*

### I

Not long after the events at Lexington and Concord, writers began presenting different explanations of the outbreak of the American Revolution and of the changes it wrought in American life. This trend has been continued by modern historians who have long debated the causes and consequences of the Revolution. In the twentieth century, the debate has mostly been between historians of two main schools: the "Progressives" and the "Counter-Progressives" (also known as the "Consensus" historians).

The "Progressives" — foremost among them being J. Franklin Jameson and Merrill Jensen — have contended that the Revolution, although growing out of the American elite's determination to preserve its political rights within the British system, resulted in many significant social and economic changes in American life. At first the controversy centred on the American elite's protests against the changing nature of British imperial government, but a democratic upsurge in America soon forced the battle for home rule to divide time with a new struggle between the American elite and the American common people over who would rule at home. Radicals and conservatives soon confronted each other, joining with men of like political persuasion to fight for control of the new American governments. In 1789 the conservatives won a temporary victory by securing ratification of the United States Constitution — a basically conservative document.<sup>1</sup>

Although Jameson and Jensen have treated broad national themes, other historians have applied the "Progressive" interpretation to developments in the individual states. Professor Elisha P. Douglass has perhaps best expressed the "Progressive" interpretation of events in revolutionary

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<sup>1</sup> Besides JAMESON's *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* (Princeton, 1926) and JENSEN's *The Articles of Confederation: An Interpretation of the Social-Constitutional History of the American Revolution, 1774-1781* (Madison, 1940), important "Progressive" works include: Carl Lotus BECKER, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1776* (Madison, 1909); Vernon L. PARRINGTON, *Main Currents in American Thought* (2 vols., New York, 1927), vol. I, *The Colonial Mind, 1620-1800*; and Charles A. BEARD, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York, 1913).

North Carolina. In his *Rebels and Democrats*, though Douglass deals with events in several states, he devotes several chapters to the revolutionary era in North Carolina. He depicts a struggle in that state between radicals and conservatives that reached a climax in the debates over just how democratic to make the North Carolina Constitution of 1776.<sup>2</sup>

Opposite the "Progressives" stand the "Counter-Progressive" historians, including Robert E. Brown and Edmund S. Morgan. This group contends that because "middle-class democracy" was the norm in pre-revolutionary America, the Revolution was simply a concerted effort to preserve the high degree of democracy that already existed in the colonies and had long found expression there in the lower houses of assembly. When after 1763 the new British imperial policy encroached upon the powers and privileges of the lower houses, Americans were finally driven to armed rebellion to preserve their democratic political system. But what effect did the Revolution have on Americans? "The most radical change produced in Americans," says Edmund Morgan, "was not a division at all but the union of three million cantankerous colonists into a new nation".<sup>3</sup>

## II

In recent years, the "Counter-Progressive" historians enjoyed far greater acceptance than when Robert Brown's *Middle-Class Democracy and the Revolution in Massachusetts* first came into print. In some circles they even gained the ascendancy, at least in part because the "Progressives" neglected to produce an all-encompassing restatement of their views that took into account the most significant recent works on the American Revolution. But James Kirby Martin's *Men in Rebellion: Higher Governmental Leaders and the Coming of the American Revolution* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1973) has in many respects revitalized the "Progressive" interpretation.

Martin contributes a great deal to the debate over the Revolution. He uses the latest findings in such related fields as political science to challenge the "Counter-Progressive" historians' contention that American political life was democratic on the eve of the Revolution. He takes advantage of sophisticated social science methodology to demonstrate that the American Revolution "resulted from a structural crisis in power and political placement among leaders in the colonies making up the late pro-

<sup>2</sup> See his *Rebels and Democrats: The Struggle for Equal Rights and Majority Rule during the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1955), especially chapters 6, 7, and 8.

<sup>3</sup> See BROWN's *Middle-Class Democracy and the Revolution in Massachusetts, 1691-1780* (Ithaca, 1955); Edmund S. and Helen M. MORGAN, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1953); and Edmund MORGAN's *The Birth of the Republic, 1763-1789* (Chicago, 1956). The quotation is from MORGAN, *Birth of the Republic*, p. 100. For an excellent argument against the existence of a sharp radical-conservative dichotomy in North Carolina's elections of 1776, see Robert L. GAYNARD, "Radicals and Conservatives in Revolutionary North Carolina: A Point at Issue, the October Election, 1776," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Sers., XXIV (1967): 568-587.

vincial political elite". Simultaneously with the Americans' efforts to protect and preserve their political system against serious British encroachment, Martin concludes, there occurred a successful rebellion of "outs" against "ins". Lesser provincial officials — whose political mobility was checked by plural office-holding, unlimited tenure in office, the frequent appointment to office of British "placemen", and a limited number of political offices in a growing society — first challenged the higher provincial officials, and then after 1775 generally replaced them in office.

Not only does Martin offer an explanation for why the Revolution took place and why a prominent group of men took part in it, he also sees important changes in American life that were ushered in by the events of the revolutionary era. The fall of the British colonial governments created a power vacuum allowing lesser provincial officials to move up to higher governmental positions, thereby producing transformation in the American political leadership. Soon the new leaders wrote state constitutions — based on the ideal of popular sovereignty — that granted the common people the right to participate in the choice of their governmental leaders. As the common people generally deferred in politics to men of high community socio-economic status, the new leaders of course possessing all the requisite qualities naturally expected to be selected to fill the most important positions in the new governments. Since their expectations generally were realized (at least initially), the new state constitutions "became the vehicles through which political immobility ceased to be an irritating phenomenon for those not favored by Crown procedures of advancement before the Revolution." Since the new constitutions were based on popular sovereignty and political democracy, the new documents contributed heavily to the eventual decline of deferential politics. Before that happened, however, many members of the new American political elite had already helped construct a strong defence against the nascent American democratic movement by securing the ratification of the United States Constitution — a sort of Thermidorean document.<sup>4</sup>

How did Martin conduct his study? After compiling a mountain of information on 621 men who held high offices in the thirteen colonies and the thirteen states between 1765 and 1781, he used the computer to help in ascertaining significant similarities and differences between three distinct groups that emerged: (1) 231 late-colonial executives (only 52 of whom held some significant office after 1775); (2) 134 loyalist executives ("those who most adamantly opposed revolutionary activity"); (3) 256 revolutionary executives (new higher officials). Martin generally limited his data to the following critical factors: occupation, levels of personal and family wealth, social origins and kinship ties, education, religious affiliation, age, and place of birth. The knowledge he gained about the three groups of higher officials enabled Martin to develop not only his conclusions about those men's actions with regard to the coming of the Revolution but also his thoughts on the revolutionary era in general.

<sup>4</sup> MARTIN, *Men in Rebellion*, *passim*, and quoting from pp. 174-175.

Martin's conclusions about higher governmental leaders certainly merit the close attention of every serious student of the American Revolution. One striking difference that he points out between the revolutionary executives and the other two groups is the far greater number of significant appointments received under the Crown by the late colonial and loyalist executives. These men of course needed wealth and position to develop the associations which helped them secure the most important offices. They certainly enjoyed wealth and position: 65 percent of the former and 78 percent of the latter were wealthy men, but only 37 percent of the revolutionary executives fell into the wealthy category. Although Martin insists that the Revolution and the concomitant transformation of the American political elite produced no significant occupational changes, lawyers and planters not only dominated the upper-hierarchy of offices held in the South by late colonial and loyalist executives but also later by revolutionary executives. About one-half of the late colonial and loyalist executives had served in the colonial assemblies, but their overall interests and associations placed them squarely on the imperial side of the community-imperial continuum. Many factors besides business interests could have contributed to the development of such an imperial outlook, namely Anglicanism, family status and kinship ties, or birth outside America. Since Martin dismissed the first factor as of no real significance in the South, only the latter two factors he studied could possibly have contributed to an imperial outlook among North Carolina's late colonial and loyalist executives.<sup>5</sup>

Revolutionary executives, contends Martin, displayed less imperial orientation and greater American community orientation than each of the other two groups. Coming more often from families of more nearly average means, the revolutionary executives comprised a more upwardly mobile group. Martin reveals that 49 percent of the late colonial executives came from Class I families (those with more than a local reputation), whereas 34 percent came from Class II families (those locally prominent), but only 17 percent had Class III backgrounds (families comprising the backbone of the local community, including those of artisans and freeholders). The social origins of revolutionary executives show a marked difference: 31 percent Class I, 39 percent Class II, and 30 percent Class III. While only 59 percent of the late colonial executives came from at least third generation American families, 73 percent of the revolutionary executives had such origins. Finally, a larger majority of revolutionary executives (88 percent) were born in America than in the case of late colonial executives (73 percent).<sup>6</sup>

What does Martin say about factors of education and age? Late colonial officials generally could boast of only slightly better educational achievements than revolutionary executives (38 percent of the former group and 28 percent of the latter had attended college). Therefore the revolutionary executives — when comparing relative levels of education

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36, 77, 66-67, 139. Martin required that a man be worth £5,000 to be classified as "wealthy". Men worth £2,000-£5,000 he counted as "well-to-do".

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, see chapters 3, 4, and 6.

— certainly found no legitimate reason for the late colonial executives' getting so many more of the high offices. Higher education, by preparing men for the top rôles in society, might even have caused some men who became revolutionary executives to expect to enter the inner circles of government — by Crown appointment or perhaps even as a result of a revolution. As the average age of late colonial executives (52 years) differed only slightly from that of revolutionary executives (48 years), Martin points out that Crown appointments generally could not have been justified by any age differential. He therefore suggests that advancing age might even have influenced some men to support the Revolution as their last chance to gain high office.<sup>7</sup>

Martin admits that each man's decision for or against the Revolution rested on a different set of individual reasons, but from his data he extracts a definite pattern. Greater imperial interests and associations certainly pushed a man toward loyalism. "But if the individual was a local leader, a man who had gone far beyond humble origins in socioeconomic accomplishments,... a man who had been well-educated at Harvard or Yale, but a man who was middle-aged, the predictable likelihood would be that such a man would encourage insurgency and rebellion." Such a man, who was probably frustrated by the political order of his times, more than likely would take the lead in opposing British imperial policies. He would shout about how British appointees in America were really agents of a ministerial conspiracy to destroy American liberties. He would take the lead in those protests which developed into the armed rebellions that finally toppled the royal governments in America. Then he would fill the power vacuum created by the collapse of the royal governments by becoming one of the new revolutionary executives.<sup>8</sup>

### III

Certainly it is appropriate to test Martin's findings to determine the extent of their applicability to those men who served as North Carolina's Governors, Speakers of the Senate, and/or Speakers of the House of Commons during the American Revolution. Only ten men make up the list of those who filled at least one of the above offices, 1777-1783: Samuel Ashe (New Hanover County), Thomas Benbury (Chowan County), Thomas Burke (Orange County), Richard Caswell (Dobbs County), Whitmel Hill (Martin County), Allen Jones (Northampton County), Alexander Martin (Guilford County), Abner Nash (Craven County), Edward Starkey (Onslow County), and John Williams (Granville County).<sup>9</sup> As the list is

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, see chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>9</sup> Following are the high offices they held between 1777 and 1783 and the dates: Ashe, Speaker of the Senate, 1777; Benbury, Speaker of Commons, 1778-1782; Burke, Governor, 1781-1782; Caswell, Speaker of the Senate, 1782-1783, Governor, 1777-1780; Hill, Speaker of the Senate, 1778-1779; Jones, Speaker of the Senate, 1779; Martin, Speaker of the Senate, 1780-1782, Governor, 1782-1783; Nash, Speaker of Commons, 1777, Speaker of



relatively short, and because in most cases pretty complete information exists on those traits which Martin considered, more can be said of the above men than Martin could even attempt in *Men in Rebellion*. Therefore it is possible to answer this question: how well do Martin's conclusions hold true for the foremost men of high office in revolutionary North Carolina between 1777 and 1783?

The ten men who became North Carolina's top revolutionary executives had held almost no significant offices under the Crown. Only Richard Caswell, who in 1773 secured the appointment as North Carolina's Southern District Treasurer, had been the recipient of important royal patronage.<sup>10</sup> But the others' failure was not for lack of the wealth and position needed to place them among the leaders of provincial society. All ten certainly considered themselves to be planters, while at least seven counted as lawyers.<sup>11</sup> Apparently all can be classified as wealthy men: indeed at least three — Allen Jones, Abner Nash, and Whitmel Hill possessed great fortunes; and, at one time or another, Samuel Ashe, Edward Starkey, Richard Caswell, Alexander Martin, Thomas Burke, John Williams, and Thomas Benbury all held large amounts of valuable property in land and/or slaves.<sup>12</sup> During the revolutionary era, however, Benbury (then owning property valued at £4,039) had holdings valued below the £5,000 figure that Martin used to set apart the "wealthy" from the "well-to-do"; yet even Benbury soon amassed a sizeable fortune in land and slaves.<sup>13</sup>

the Senate, 1779, Governor, 1780-1781; Starkey, Speaker of Commons, 1783; Williams, Speaker of Commons, 1778-1779.

<sup>10</sup> R. D. W. CONNOR, *A Manual of North Carolina* (Raleigh, 1913), p. 332. For Caswell's career, see Clayton Brown ALEXANDER, "The Training of Richard Caswell", *North Carolina Historical Review*, XXIII (1946): 13-31; "Richard Caswell: Versatile Leader of the Revolution", *ibid.*, pp. 119-141; "Richard Caswell's Military and Later Public Services", *ibid.*, pp. 287-312.

<sup>11</sup> Ashe, Burke, Caswell, Jones, Martin, Nash, and Williams practiced law at one time or another.

<sup>12</sup> Information on wealth for Jones, Nash, and Hill was gleaned from the following sources: "Taxable Property for the Year 1780," [Northampton County], Legislative Papers, North Carolina Department of Archives and History, Raleigh [cited hereinafter as NCAR]; U.S., Bureau of the Census, Department of Commerce and Labor, *Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1790: North Carolina* (Washington, 1908), p. 76; "Return of the Amount of Taxable Property, Jones County, 1779," County Records, NCAR; "The Assessment of the County of Martin, 1779," Legislative Papers, NCAR; Alvaretta Kenan Register, comp., *State Census of North Carolina, 1784-1787* (2nd. revised edition, Baltimore, 1973), p. 93; 1790 Census, *Heads of Families: N.C.*, p. 68. For the other men, information on wealth was taken from the following sources: (Burke) — Orange County Tax List, 1779, Legislative Papers, NCAR; (Caswell) — Will of Richard Caswell, 1787, in J. Bryan Grimes, comp., *North Carolina Wills and Inventories* (Raleigh, 1912), pp. 118-121; and ALEXANDER, "Caswell," pp. 22-24, 42-43, 242; (Ashe) — New Hanover County Tax List, 1762, County Records, NCAR; and 1790 Census, *Heads of Families: N.C.*, p. 194; (Starkey) — Onslow County Tax List, 1778, County Records, NCAR; and an undated portion of an Onslow County tax list [1774-1790?], signed by John Starkey, County Records, NCAR; (Martin) — 1790 Census, *Heads of Families: N.C.*, p. 169; and Elizabeth Winston YATES, "The Public Career of Alexander Martin," (M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina, 1943), pp. 3, 62; (Williams) — Register, *N.C. Census*, p. 55; "Book of Taxables in Granville County, 1797," County Records, NCAR; (Benbury) — Chowan County Tax List, 1779-1784, County Records, NCAR.

<sup>13</sup> Chowan County Tax List, 1779-1784, County Records, NCAR; 1790 Census, *Heads of Families: N.C.*, p. 3.

Only one of North Carolina's ten foremost revolutionary executives can conceivably be put on the imperial side of Martin's community-imperial continuum. Allen Jones studied at Eton College in England and during his stay came under the watchful eye of his father's friend, Lord Granville. On the basis of these facts, Martin certainly would stick Jones on the imperial side of the continuum. The truth is that Jones's experiences neither prevented him from developing a local orientation nor from devoting himself to the patriot cause.<sup>14</sup> Alongside Jones, Martin would probably place Samuel Ashe, Abner Nash, and Thomas Burke. Ashe's family connections included a long list of royal governors and other important provincial officials. Nash's marriage to the widow of Governor Arthur Dobbs linked Nash to a family that was prominent in England. Thomas Burke's Irish birth was in addition to his having many friends not only among higher provincial officials but also among merchants whose trade interests gave them an imperial orientation.<sup>15</sup> Yet no evidence exists that either Ashe, Nash, or Burke — or for that matter any other of North Carolina's top ten revolutionary executives — ever displayed any pertinent effects of such imperial connections, at least in the crucial years before the Revolution. On the contrary, most of the group had by then served in the North Carolina House of Commons and/or in some purely local capacity such as Justice of the Peace — experiences almost certain to have developed in them a local orientation.<sup>16</sup> Therefore Allen Jones and the rest of North Carolina's top ten revolutionary executives, including Ashe, Nash, and Burke, apparently belong on the local side of Martin's continuum.

Coming mostly from upwardly mobile families, each of North Carolina's ten foremost revolutionary executives either maintained his lineage's high status or kept up its vertical momentum. Though at the outbreak of the Revolution almost all of them represented families that had arrived,

<sup>14</sup> Blackwell Pierce ROBINSON, "Willie Jones of Halifax: Part I", *North Carolina Historical Review*, XVIII (1941), p. 3; Cadwallader JONES, *A Genealogical History* (Columbia, S.C., 1900), p. 5. Allen Jones's brother, Willie, who had similar intercolonial experiences, also became a leading patriot.

<sup>15</sup> *Cyclopedia of Eminent and Representative Men of the Carolinas of the Nineteenth Century* (2 vols., Madison, 1892), I, pp. 302-303, 306-307; CONNOR, *Manual of North Carolina*, pp. 327, 332; Samuel A. ASHE, et. al., eds., *Biographical History of North Carolina from Colonial Times to the Present* (8 vols., Greensboro, 1908-1925), p. 17; J. G. DE ROULHAC HAMILTON, "Life and Work of Abner Nash," *North Carolina Review* (supplement to the *Raleigh News and Observer*) (5 December 1909), p. 4; John Sayle WATTERSON, "Dr. Thomas Burke: A Revolutionary Career" (Ph. D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1971), pp. 7-8, 10-11, 15.

<sup>16</sup> HAMILTON, "Nash," p. 4; ASHE, ed., *Biographical History of North Carolina*, VIII, p. 18; "Taxables, Justices, Militia Officers, Part I, 1754-1764," Governor's Office Records, NCAR; CONNOR, *Manual of North Carolina*, pp. 372-373; "Onslow County Militia List" [1784-1798?], Governor's Office Records, NCAR; ASHE, ed., *Biographical History of North Carolina*, I, p. 154; "Taxables, Justices, Militia Officers, Part II, 1763-1768," Governor's Office Records, NCAR; Subpoena of James Daniel, et. al., by Richard Caswell, 10 August 1773, Dobbs County Miscellaneous Records, NCAR; William Lawrence SAUNDERS, ed., *Colonial Records of North Carolina* (10 vols., Raleigh, 1886-1890), VI, p. 1077, IX, pp. 448, 457, 476; Walter CLARK, ed., *The State Records of North Carolina* (16 vols., Winston, Goldsboro & Charlotte, 1895-1905), XXIII, p. 825.

when they were young men only Ashe, Caswell, Jones, and perhaps Starkey, could have boasted of a family rated higher than Class II. Yet all ten had received a good start in life: apparently not one had a Class III background. Though four of the ten came from at least third-generation American families (Ashe, Benbury, Jones, and Hill), five of the rest represented at least second-generation American households. Only Burke had immigrated to America.

At least four of North Carolina's leading ten revolutionary executives had attended college (Ashe, Jones, Hill, and Martin). Ashe went to Harvard, Jones studied at Eton; Hill graduated from the University of Pennsylvania, and Martin earned his A.B. and A.M. degrees at the College of New Jersey (Princeton). Thomas Burke apparently did not attend college, but he counted as an intellectual.<sup>17</sup> Several of the others had at least read law. Apparently all ten received a good education by the standards of the day. As a group they fared better in this regard than did Martin's average revolutionary executive.

In age they differed considerably from the mean. On the eve of the Revolution, the ten averaged about 38 years of age; yet only three had reached 40 (Ashe, Caswell, and Williams) and not one had turned 50. Martin, Benbury, and Nash had only reached their late thirties, while Burke, Jones, and Hill still remained in their early thirties. These men certainly were not Martin's "Middle-Aged Men of the Revolution".

#### IV

How well then do Martin's conclusions about revolutionary executives hold up when tested against North Carolina's ten foremost men of high office? In most respects, Martin's findings are correct. The state's top ten revolutionary executives were planters and/or lawyers in just about the same ratios as Martin predicts. Their social origins and kinship ties, their place of birth, education, and political experience usually match up fairly closely with Martin's expectations. But on the other hand, more of the ten possessed significant amounts of wealth than did revolutionary executives in general, and most of them were far younger than the average.

The differences that have emerged require at least some modification and clarification of Martin's views and some comment on his methodology. One of his most important conclusions is that most revolutionary executives fell on the colonial side of the community-imperial continuum. After close scrutiny his assertion stands reaffirmed for the revolutionary executives under consideration, but its significance has become very clouded. If Martin would probably place four out of North Carolina's ten foremost revolutionary executives on the wrong side of his own continuum, can we assume that he knows enough about that continuum to hypothesize how location on it affected the actions of men long dead and mostly long buried

<sup>17</sup> See WATTERSON, "Burke", *passim*.



in obscurity?<sup>18</sup> If too little historical evidence exists even to begin to ascertain how transcolonial experiences touched the lives of most of North Carolina's top ten revolutionary executives, then on the basis of even less evidence is it not altogether impossible to treat the transcolonial experiences of any other eighteenth-century men as a variable affecting their behaviour (as does Martin) in the same manner as would a modern political scientist when conducting a study of contemporary voting patterns? No doubt Martin's continuum exists; perhaps it is even very important; but there is very little chance that he or anyone else will ever satisfactorily prove its significance for North Carolina's ten foremost revolutionary executives.

Finally, on the basis of Martin's study, should we not now be able to say whether North Carolina's top ten men of high office were so frustrated by the political order under the Crown that they rushed eagerly into rebellion? We should, but unfortunately we cannot; and neither Martin's conclusions nor his methodology will probably ever help us reach that state. Therefore, we are still faced with the question: why did those ten men join the Revolution? The present evidence is simply too skimpy to support an answer. However, fortunately one of the men left us a statement listing several factors which *did not* cause him to become a rebel. In a letter of 1779 to the North Carolina General Assembly, Samuel Ashe wrote:

No lucrative expectations nor hope of exalted honor under our present government could then have influenced me, nor did any particular resentment actuate me [to support the Revolution.] On the contrary, I had well-grounded expectations of holding under [the royal government] an office similar to my present, had that government been continued and courts been established.<sup>19</sup>

Does Ashe's statement apply to the other nine men? Unless new evidence comes to light, we can only guess. For the present, however, we are forced to continue the search for some common motive that compelled North Carolina's ten foremost revolutionary executives to support the Revolution. Perhaps we should first pause to consider whether such a common motive might even have existed?

<sup>18</sup> As Martin counts Richard Caswell among the late colonial executives, the above figure becomes four out of nine. See MARTIN, *Men in Rebellion*, pp. 216-217.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in ASHE, ed., *Biographical History of North Carolina*, VIII, p. 18.