
Hillsboro, Colonial and Revolutionary

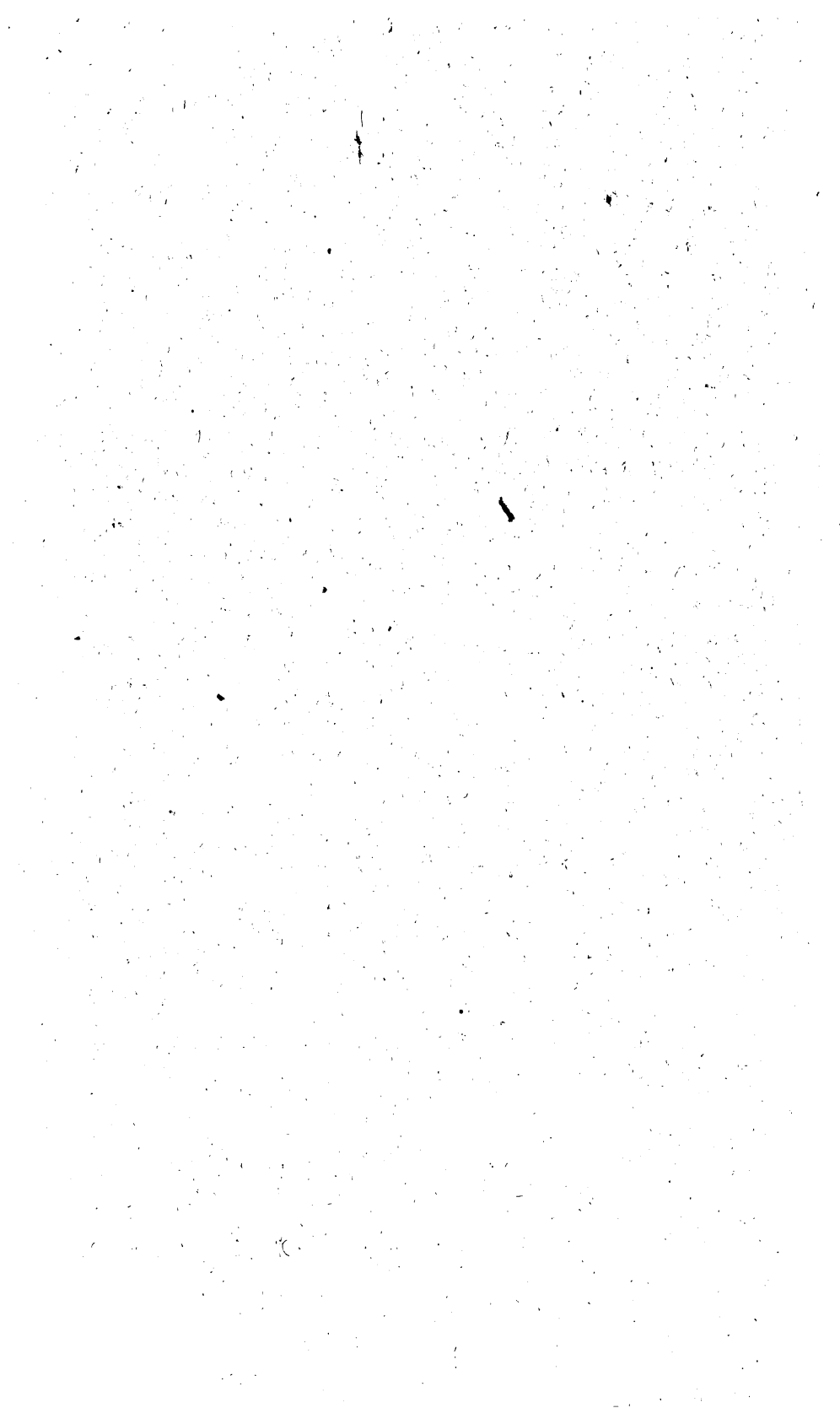
Nash Francis

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HILLSBORO

COLONIAL AND REVOLUTIONARY

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The State, its laws, its institutions, are the rights of the individuals belonging to it; are their eternal possession; and its soil, its mountains, air and waters, are their land, their fatherland; their deeds make the history of this State; that which their forefathers have done belongs to them and lives in their memory.—*Hegel.*

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PREFACE.

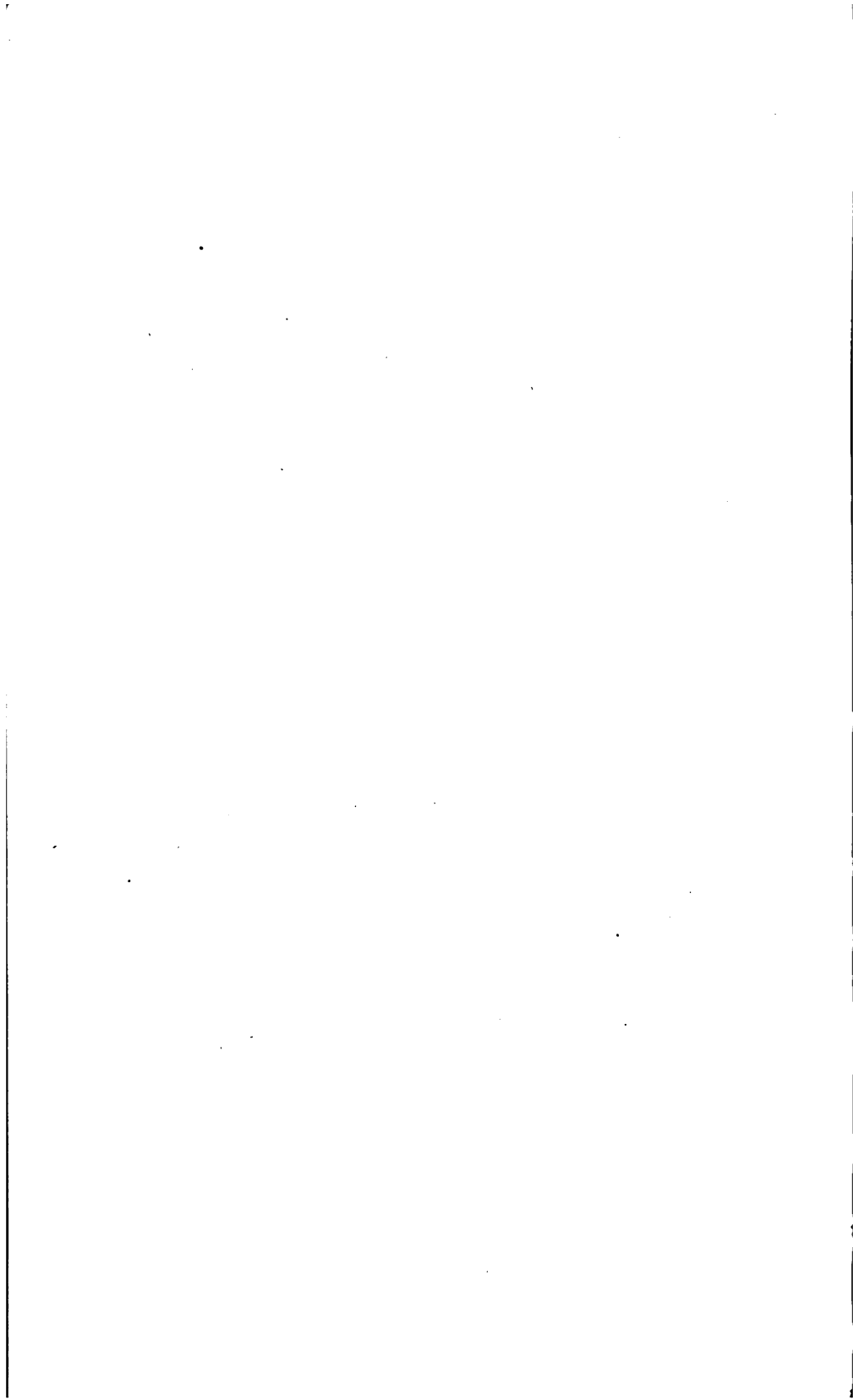
Much the larger part of this pamphlet was published in a series of articles in the Charlotte, N. C., *Observer*, during the years 1901 and 1902. The value of the material, laboriously collected from many scattered sources and put in consecutive order, justifies its preservation in this more permanent form.

The sources from which data was obtained were the public records in the court house here, the Colonial and State Records, Wheeler's books, Caruther's three books, Jones' Defence, and McRee's Life of Iredell. The latter work was found especially valuable. The Colonial and State Records, and the county records, were, however, in all instances the basis of what is here written, especially in regard to dates. By pursuing this course, I have been enabled to correct many errors found in some of these books.

As the pamphlet is published for popular reading, I have purposely refrained from burdening it with notes and citations of authority. Suffice it to say, that I have made no statement herein that is not, in my opinion, supported by adequate, if not controlling, authority. Some citations may be found in the appendices.

The subject, though occasionally as broad as the State itself, many times, of course, narrows the scope of the history and confines the writer to topics that may appear trivial. This comes from the nature of the town, itself a country village, yet having residents who were taking an active, if not leading, part in the great affairs of State and nation. The history, then, of Colonial and Revolutionary Hillsboro must form an appreciable part of the history of Colonial and Revolutionary North Carolina. Being carefully prepared and written, I trust the completed work may prove of value to students, as well as to readers, of North Carolina history.

HILLSBORO, N. C., March 19. 1903.



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CHAPTER I.—1754-1770.

Travelers through those portions of Orange County watered by the Haw River and its tributaries, New Hope Creek and its tributaries, and Eno River and its tributaries, have, from Lawson's day to the present, admired the fertility of the soil, the beauty of the scenery, and the magnificence of the forests. Perhaps there was no spot along or near any of these rivers so pleasantly or so beautifully situated as that whereon William Churton, one of Earl Granville's surveyors, located and laid off a town in 1754. He laid off this town on four hundred acres of land on the north bank of the river Eno, some time between June 7 and September 1 of that year. It was first called Orange, but its name was changed to Corbinton in a very short time, for Francis Corbin, one of Earl Granville's agents. November 20, 1759, it was incorporated under the name of Childsburg for the then Attorney-General. By this act only 200 acres, the eastern half of the town, could be sold and built upon. The remainder was to be common. The town itself lay in a valley, surrounded by high hills, and its southern boundary extended along the Eno River. This river had a tortuous course, and its pellucid waters, unchecked by dams, and uncontaminated by sewage of town and cotton mill, flowed rapidly beneath the overhanging trees, then as beautiful a stream as could be found in the State, and even now, with its banks denuded of forest growth along much of its course, it has stretches that are surpassingly beautiful, overhung as they are by bluffs on the south side, densely covered by rhododendron and ivy, whose pink or white flowers and dark green leaves are, in season, mirrored

in the quieter pools of the river beneath, and on the north by thick foliaged boughs of birch or beech or oak. Then, too, the Occoneechee mountains extended beyond the western limits of the town, crowned with the glories of an untouched forest, and not, as now, with a degenerate and dwindling secondary growth; not, as now, scarred and marred by modern commercial energy that has invaded their sides and is tearing and rending them to extract from their bowels that which shall make one of its own agencies safe and secure. Then, too, the unbroken forest to whose magnificence the few relics of it that remain testify, stretched away on every side, over hill and dale, broken only here and there along the southern and eastern trails, or along the few cross-country paths, by settlements which the adventurous white man had made.

The most prominent of the original residents of the town were James Watson, William Reed, William Nunn and William Churton. James Watson was the second Clerk of the County Court, 1755-1763, Richard Caswell being the first, 1752-1755, and he was, in 1772, appointed Register of the county. William Reed came from Pennsylvania, and was Sheriff 1759, 1760, 1761 and 1762. William Nunn was Sheriff 1765. William Churton, a surveyor of Lord Granville, was Register of the county 1752-1762, and gave his own name to one of the principal streets of the town. The first lawyer to locate in the place was Daniel Weldon. He came about 1754, remained six years, and then disappeared from the public records. The County Court was first located here in 1754, and the Colonial Assembly made this location permanent in November, 1766. There were no Superior Courts held in Hillsboro until March, 1768, that place being first in the Halifax and later in the Salisbury District.

To this town, in 1762, came Edmund Fanning, lawyer, scholar, gentleman, and adventurer, but withal, overbearing, unscrupulous and a libertine.

In March, 1763, he qualified as Register of the county, and thereafter purchased several town lots, built himself a fine mansion on the site of the Masonic Lodge, and proceeded to make himself the unconscious provoker, if not maker, of much North Carolina history.

About the same time came Francis Nash, youngest son of a substantial Virginia planter, Col. John Nash, and qualified as County Court Clerk, March, 1763. He was another lawyer and gentleman adventurer, of handsome presence and fine address, afterwards one of Washington's most trusted brigadiers, killed too early in the war for him to have made a national reputation, though he has given his name to a county in this State, and the capital of an adjoining one.

Abner Nash, too, an older brother, afterwards a leading patriot, spent much of his time here at this period, practised in the courts and engaged in mercantile ventures. Clement Reed, likewise a Virginia lawyer, practised in the courts for two or three years, until 1763 or 1764. "In 1764," says William Few, *Autobiography* (*Magazine of American History*, November, 1881) "Hillsboro was the metropolis of the county, where the courts were held and all public business was done. It was a small village, which contained thirty or forty inhabitants, with two or three small stores and two or three taverns, but it was an improving village. Several Scotch merchants were soon after induced to establish stores that contained a good assortment of European merchandise, and a church, court house and jail were built."

Wm. Few, Sr., father of the autobiographer and of James Few, the Regulator, had moved his family to what is now the Kirkland place, in 1763, and there, a mile from town, was keeping a tavern, and lower down the Eno River running a mill. John Dowell was one of the smaller merchants alluded to by Wm. Few. He, too kept a tavern, but in the town.

Of the Scotch merchants, William Johnston was easily chief. He was the only son and heir of Robt. Johnston, of Hartwood, Lochmaben Parish, Annandale Shire, Scotland, and a near relative of Gov. Gabriel Johnston, and the North Carolina statesman, Samuel Johnston, and was himself afterwards a prominent patriot. He came to Hillsboro with abundant means late in 1767 or early 1768, and formed a co-partnership with James Thackston. The latter first appeared here about the time that Johnston came, and was afterwards a suc-

cessful soldier, attaining the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel in the Continental line. A little later came Ralph Macnairs, 1769-1770, another Scotch merchant, having large possessions, afterwards a proscribed Tory. About 1772 came Nathaniel Rochester, who, in 1783, removed to Maryland, and later to New York, where he gave his name to the present city of Rochester. Another resident of the town was Thomas Hart, a sturdy, honest, brave man, Sheriff of the county 1763, and grandfather of Thomas Hart Benton, who inherited much of his own sturdy character from him. In 1767 came the Rev. George Meiklejohn, as shepherd and pastor of this flock. He was one of the most picturesque parsons of this picturesque period. A Scotchman, though a Church of England divine, he was tall, dark, large-boned and gaunt, with harsh features and slow, deliberate manner in the pulpit and out. He had much of the Scotch shrewdness and cannyness, loved money and saved money. This and his love for ardent spirits (rum, I believe, was the tippie then), and his distrust of women were the three great weaknesses of his life. He had trusted and loved a woman once, and had made her his wife. She had fancied some gay deceiver, had eloped with him, carrying all her husband's accumulations. Ever afterwards during a long and, according to his lights, useful life, he had a most unaffected distrust of all women. When he was very old he was in the habit, when he left home of entrusting his money to the care of Mr. N., one of his parishioners. On one occasion he returned, went to Mr. N.'s house, and found him absent. He had, however, left the money in the care of his wife, with instructions to deliver it to the old gentleman when he called. Mr. Meiklejohn was horror stricken when she told him this, and in much excitement begged her to bring him the bag at once. This she did, and with trembling hands he counted and recounted its contents until he was satisfied that he had not been robbed. Then, springing from his chair, he grasped her hand and shouted, "Gie us your hand, woman, gie us your hand; you're an honest woman, you're an honest woman." It is related, however, that this was the last time he left his money with Mr. N. He sought out and found a de-

positary who had no such dangerous encumbrance as a woman. This, however, is mere tradition.

The only church in the town at this period stood on the site of the present Presbyterian church. It was erected by persons of the "Episcopal persuasion," and was, in 1784, then "far gone in decay," repaired and made a school and free meeting house, with the preference given to Episcopal ministers. It was afterwards made famous as the place at which the first State Convention to consider the proposed Federal Constitution met, July 21, 1788.

Col. Wm. Tryon, come over to supersede Gov. Arthur Dobbs, landed at Brunswick, October 10, 1764, but Governor Dobbs refused to surrender the reins of government until the coming spring. Colonel Tryon then had time on his hands which he determined to spend in acquiring a more intimate knowledge of the province and its inhabitants, so spent two months in a tour through the province, accompanied by Lord Adam Gordon. It is probable that he visited Childsburg on this tour; for afterwards he seemed much interested in its fortunes, and nearly all of its inhabitants were adherents of his throughout his administration. On November 3, 1766, its name was changed to Hillsboro, in compliment to the Earl of Hillsboro, and no doubt at Tryon's suggestion. He writes to the Colonial Secretary, January 31, 1767, in regard to this change of name: "This act will tend much towards the increase of the settlement of that part of the back country, as well as to civilize the inhabitants thereof. Its situation is upon a rich, red clay soil on the north bank of the river Eno. Though there is at present scarce twenty families inhabitant, I am of the opinion it will be, in the course of a few years, the most considerable of any inland town in this province." Governor Martin, his successor, writes from Hillsboro to the Earl of Hillsboro, July 8, 1772: "This little village, honored by your lordship's title, is situated in a high and apparently healthful and fertile country, but from the extreme badness of the roads, difficult of access and discouraging to exercise, to which, indeed, there is no invitation at present after fulfilling the calls of duty and satisfying that common curiosity to see