

## **Tar Heels: A Colonial American Courtney Family**

*by Chuck Courtney*

One of the last English colonies established in America, North Carolina was one of the most important settlements for the British nation from 1663 until the Revolutionary War and American Independence in 1783. King Charles II granted a charter to eight proprietors for all of the land south of the Virginia Colony to the northern border of what was then Spanish Florida. The Lords Protectors of the Carolina Colony, named for the King, divided the Colony on December 7, 1710, at Craven House in London into North and South Carolina. Sandwiched between the established and aristocratic Virginia and the more prosperous South Carolina with its deep water port of Charleston and wealthy plantation owners growing rice and indigo, North Carolina developed in a slower, more rural fashion.

So why was the Colony of North Carolina so important to the English people? It was because of natural products forested in the countryside – an important supply depot for the largest and strongest navy in the World – the British Navy. Southern longleaf pine forests covered the tidewater. While England itself produced the sturdy oak boughs for the framing and planking of its ships and tall, straight New England pine and fir made for excellent masts and spars, it was North Carolina that produced some of the most important assets needed for the wooden ships of its great navy...tar, pitch, rope, barrels, and turpentine. In 1705, Parliament passed a law requiring the British Navy to pay inflated prices for naval stores from its colonies. Another act of Parliament in 1720 specifically aided the tar and turpentine industries of North Carolina.

Tar was literally the glue that held the ships together. Hammered between the planks with tar and loosen old ropes, the substance was called oakum. During the hotter days, the tar from the oakum would ooze up between the planking of the ship's deck and the sailors would use "holystones," a soft, brittle sandstone, to scrub down the decks to remove the tar and also to brighten the wood. Tar was also used to protect the ship's hemp rigging and also to soak the sailors' clothing to ward off wet weather. More importantly, however, tar, pitch, and turpentine were the essential products to paint the bottoms of wooden ships to prevent against rot and to keep tropical worms at bay. Tar was such an important part of the ship that British sailors earned the nickname "tars." And, North Carolina in the 1700s provided the tar for the tars.

In producing barrels and barrels of pine tar, pitch, and turpentine for the British Navy, North Carolinians soon became to be known as "tar heels." Some thought it was a derisive name because of the poor backwoodsmen who boiled down the pine into pitch, tar, and turpentine. Later it became a badge of honor to be known as a "tar heel." Some attribute this turnaround to the Confederate General Robert E. Lee during the American Civil War who proclaimed during a battle that the North Carolinians were holding the line "like tar stuck to their feet."

One American pioneer family who participated in the lively naval supply industries in North Carolina was the Robert Courtney family who established a "plantation" along the New River. When one thinks of plantations in the American South, the first thoughts that come to

mind are cotton and slavery. But cotton was not an important crop in the Southern Colonies until after the invention of the cotton gin. And, this Courtney family through recorded history, at least as known by the researcher, never owned slaves. The meaning of the term “plantation” in this case is of a settlement in the wilderness growing subsistence crops, raising livestock, and harvesting trees. The Robert Courtney family were also excellent barrel makers, another necessity for the British Navy.

Most genealogists believe that this Robert Courtney family’s patriarch on American shores was Robert Courtney the Emigrant (born in England c. 1640 and dying in Virginia around 1680). Even the North Carolina Robert Courtney’s birth is in question. Some researchers believe that he was born in Virginia while others think the Delaware colony. Some give his date of birth as 1690 while others believe the year was 1693 or 1697. Still, the historical records (land, taxes, census, marriages, births, deaths, and even religion) tell us much about the life of Robert Courtney. He bought land and raised wheat and corn in Delaware, moved to Maryland to a plantation called Hammond’s Hope and probably grew tobacco, and then relocated his family to North Carolina in 1744. Robert married twice, had two adult children who died young, took in a bonded young boy who was most likely the son of his second wife, and his offspring were identified with the spread of the Baptist movement in America. He died in 1751. For descendants of this American family, it is Robert Courtney’s will that is perhaps the most well-known fact about this frontier family.

When the writer first came across his will several years ago, it spurred a great interest in discovering more about his family and the history of American colonial life. His will was fascinating. And when the inventory of the estate was discovered a couple of years later, it spoke the story of the life lived by this pioneer Courtney family.

The will contained several interesting items. For starters, Robert only left “*one Shilling, Sterling money of Great Britain*” to each his oldest son John and to his daughter Phoebe. The only conclusion is that, while he loved both children, both were married and well-established. John had already been given part of Hammond’s Hope in Maryland from his father while his daughter was already married to the now grown Richard Curtis who was bonded to him as a young man. Richard had become an integral part of the Courtney family. Richard was also named as the arbitrator, “*in case any Difference Should arise in Shareing of my Estate.*” To Hannah, his second wife, he left furniture, household goods, some livestock, and the right to live on the main plantation located on Half Moon Creek on the Northwest Branch of the New River which flowed into a bay of the Atlantic Ocean (now Onslow County, North Carolina). To his other three sons, he divided his plantation, livestock, rifles, and other goods.

Of particular interest to the writer was the portion he left to his direct ancestor, Jonathan Courtney (yes, two Johns in the same family – it made for some interesting genealogical research!). To Jonathan (who also went by John sometimes and by Jonathan at other times!), he left the following:

*“Item. I give and bequeath Unto my well beloved Son, Jonathan Courtney, the plantation I now Live on, (One Hundred Acres at the Lowere End Excepted) a Quantity of feathers, one horse for the use of the plantation, one Mare Sadle and bridle, one Gun, and Equal Share of what*

*houshold Goods, Implements of Husbandry, young Cattle, and what Cows and Calves, shall be to be Devided between him and my Son Robert, after my wifes and my Son Rowlands Shall be taken out, as Likewise one half of my petyauqua, to him and his heirs for Ever.”*

Most of the plantation...interesting. A quantity of feathers...uhmmmm...must be a nice collection for a fine feather bed...division of livestock and household goods and implements – makes sense....but, what in the world is a “petyauqua?” And to his brother Robert he left the other half.

For several years, the writer search for the meaning of the word “petyauqua.” Was it some kind of fancy clothing? It was perplexing and frustrating.

Then, when reading about colonial American shipping, it dawned on me. The clerk was trying to spell the word “periauger.” What’s a “periauger” one might ask? It is a shallow draft, flat bottom boat with two masts and no bowsprit that was used on the coastal waterways of colonial America. Englishman John Lawson in his travels to the Carolinas in 1701 described the vessel as follows:

*“The next day we entered Santee river's mouth, . . . As we row'd up the river, we found the land towards the mouth, and for about sixteen miles up it, scarce any thing but swamp and percoarson, affording vast ciprus-trees, of which the French make canoes, that will carry fifty or sixty barrels. After the tree is moulded and dug, they saw them in two pieces and so put a plank between, and even a small Keel, to preserve them from the Oyster-Banks, which are innumerable in the Creeks and Bays betwixt the French settlement and Charles-Town.*

*They carry two masts and Bermudas sails, which makes them very handy and fit for their purpose; . . . . Of these great trees the pereaugers and canoes are scoop'd and made; which sort of vessels are chiefly to pass over the rivers, creeks, and bays; and to transport goods and lumber from one river to another. Some are so large as to carry thirty barrels, tho' of one entire piece of timber. Others that are split down the bottom, and a piece added thereto, will carry eighty, or an hundred. Several have gone out our inlets on the ocean to Virginia, laden with pork, and other produce of the country. Of these trees curious boats for pleasure may be made, and other necessary craft.... This wood is very lasting, and free from the rot. A canoe of it will outlast four boats, and seldom wants repair.”*

Mystery solved! Robert had left his two sons equal ownership of a boat. This means of transportation carried goods (tar, turpentine, hemp for rope, beef, pork, and lumber) downriver to the British ships waiting for supplies. How does one make such an assumption? It was based upon the inventory of Robert Courtney’s estate filed with the court by his executor, my direct ancestor Jonathon Courtney (who crossed out his signature of “John” and wrote “Jonathan” – my first indication of the interchangeable “Johns”). The inventory listed saws and axes, tools to make barrels, rope, pots, thirty-four head of cattle, “14 head of Hoogs,” and a looking glass.

While Robert Courtney was certainly not a wealthy “plantation” owner, he was a man of some means. Listed in the inventory were silverware, plates, feather beds, and nineteen pounds British sterling to go along with the 2 pounds and 370 acres of land in his will.

It is interesting how much one might learn about a man in death and about how he had lived his life. While my Courtney family moved on to South Carolina then to the frontiers of western Virginia and eastern Tennessee, to the prairies of Missouri, and finally to the plains of Texas, my ancestors from 1744 until the 1760s were “tar heels.” From time to time, I still look down at the bottom of my feet. I’m proud to be part “tar heel.”

