

Atkins, Robert ^[1]

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by Charles R. Holloman, 1979

ca. 1695–1731

Robert Atkins, adventurer, trader, and land developer, of unknown origin, arrived in Bath County in 1715, just after the close of the Tuscarora Indian War ^[2], which had reduced Bath County's powerful Tuscarora ^[3] tribes to insignificance. Most of their remnants had fled to New York, leaving the vast and virtually uninhabited Neuse River ^[4] basin, their former domain, open to explorers, prospectors, adventurers, and eventually settlers.

Atkins soon became engaged in the small craft commerce conducted by boats in the coastal sounds and rivers too shallow, too sparsely settled, or too uncharted to be served by ships. He acquired an interest in trading posts at Bath, New Bern, and Core Sound (later Beaufort).

In 1718, Atkins moved to his trading post at New Bern. The following year, he began a major new venture by entering a tract of 609 acres up the Neuse River, some 40 miles farther west than the closest settlers on the river above New Bern. His plan was to prove the superiority for cultivation of the lands far inland, to acquire large grants of choice lands for himself, and to establish a river transportation service that would develop with the influx of new settlers moving into the abandoned back country.

During the period 1719 to 1722, Atkins steadily built his reputation as a businessman and planter and developed improvements of his upstream plantation, which prospered and became known as Atkins's Bank. He was contemplating marriage and was well received among the leading families of New Bern and Craven Precinct. Then, rather suddenly, his situation was changed. Some said that misfortune struck him, and others, that his sins had found him out; these paraphrased the dying declaration of a murdered missionary, according to gossip darkly whispered door to door at New Bern.

The Reverend Ebenezer Taylor ^[5], an aging, dedicated, moderately wealthy Anglican missionary, had come to serve in Bath County, declaring to the tithe-resenting populace that he would accept no support other than voluntary contributions. The Reverend Mr. Taylor found it convenient to travel by Atkins's boat lines on his circuit through the Neuse River and Core Sound settlements. In February 1720, "while in the course of his Mission traveling by Water from Bath Towne to Core Sound he fell sick and Dyed and not without Suspicion of some foule Practices of one Daniel McDaniel and others who transported him. . . ." "Most responsible among the others was Robert Atkins. They left their passenger, a person of advanced years and rather delicate health, to maintain camp for himself for ten days in an open boat on the beach of Harbor Island in the mouth of Neuse River, while the crew hunted wild hogs. After Taylor died of exposure, a chest belonging to him was broken open and the contents appropriated. A witness claimed that the dying man had raised a trembling hand, pointed a quivering finger, and cried out, in agony, "Be sure your Sins will find you out!" Investigation tended to show criminal negligence and robbery. The accusing finger pointed at Atkins. He was arrested and bound over to court on a felony charge. However, he and McDaniel jumped bail and left the province for two years. Atkins returned in 1724 and contemptuously resisted arrest. Though eventually arrested, he was convicted only of contempt. Nevertheless, his reputation was ruined. His fortunes declined, and so did his character and health.

Before he died in 1731, most of his estate had been dissipated. On 16 December 1729, he was at long last issued royal grants for the two partly cleared tracts of land at Atkins's Bank. The two adjoining tracts each comprised 640 acres and covered in shape and area a square mile. These lands he soon assigned as part payment to his lawyer, William Heritage, whose political star and prestige at the bar were then ascending.

Atkins died young, quite unexpectedly and without a will. In fact, he appears to have been killed. His last attorney, Martin Franck ^[6]—a German Palatine and noted leader of the deGraffenried ^[7] colonists at New Bern—took his corpse to Atkins's Bank for burial and administered his estate. The Neuse River settlement and development plans of Atkins were adopted and carried out with great success by William Heritage. During the eight-year period from 1731 to 1739, settlers spread up the Neuse basin to the borders of present Wake County ^[8].

References:

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Talmage C. Johnson and Charles R. Holloman, *The Story of Kinston and Lenoir County* (1954).

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