

Porter, John ^[1]

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by Claiborne T. Smith, Jr., 1994

See also: [Cary Rebellion](#) ^[2]

1663–1712

John Porter, colonial official and ring-leader of [Cary's Rebellion](#) ^[2], was born in that part of Lower Norfolk County, Va., which after 1691 became the county of Princess Anne. He was the son of John Porter, who with an elder brother with the identical name, appeared in Virginia by 1642. The two brothers were differentiated in the records as Sr. and Jr., respectively. There is strong evidence that they were the sons of one Edmund Porter and of the family of Porter of Tapenhall, Parish of Claines, Worcestershire, England. The two brothers were early converts to [Quakerism](#) ^[3]. In 1663 the elder John, elected a member from Lower Norfolk, was dismissed from the House of Burgesses for being a Quaker. Colonel John Sidney, sheriff of Lower Norfolk, in December 1662 fined several persons, among them his own daughter, Mrs. John Porter, Jr., two hundred pounds of tobacco for holding a Quaker meeting. John Porter, Sr., died without issue in 1675.

John, the younger, and his son [John](#) ^[4], moved in 1691 to North Carolina, where the son, referred to in the records of the [Albemarle](#) ^[5] as John Porter, Jr., early assumed a prominent role as a merchant and political figure. He was appointed attorney general by [Governor John Harvey](#) ^[6] in 1694 to replace [William Wilkinson](#) ^[7] and qualified before the court. He seems to have served until Governor [Henderson Walker](#) ^[8] took office in 1695. Porter's father died in 1697, as thereafter the designation of junior was dropped. John Porter was a General Court justice and speaker of the Assembly in 1697 and was a member of the Court of the Admiralty in 1705.

In early North Carolina the Quakers and the [Dissenters](#) ^[9] had great influence. In 1704 there was much unrest when the Proprietary government decided to establish the [Church of England](#) ^[10] and to require all office-holders to take the oath of Supremacy to Queen Anne, passed by Parliament in 1702. John Porter does not seem to have been a Quaker and took the required oath. However, it is noteworthy that the Reverend John Urmstone, a contemporary Anglican missionary, described him as a "known villain, the son of a Quaker, and he one in disguise." Porter was at least sympathetic to the faith of his father and in 1706 was sent to England by the Quakers of the Albemarle to present their grievances to the [Lords Proprietors](#) ^[11].

Successful in his mission, John Porter returned to North Carolina in October 1707 with introductions that provided for the removal of the deputy governor [Thomas Cary](#) ^[12], then at odds with the Quakers. There was also the provision for the appointment of five new deputies or councillors and for the election by the new Council of a president to act as governor in the place of Cary. On his return, Porter found that Thomas Cary had left the colony and that [William Glover](#) ^[13] had already been elected president by the existing Council. Glover was thought to be amenable by the Quakers so John Porter called together the newly appointed Council and persuaded its members to reelect William Glover president. Although the instructions under which Porter acted required the presence of Thomas Cary and the former Council to make the election legal, he concealed this important fact. When John Porter found that he could not control Glover, who began to insist on oaths, he revealed the conditions listed in the instructions that he had kept secret and insisted that the election of William Glover had been illegal.

At this juncture the former governor, Thomas Cary, reappeared, joined forces with the Quakers, deposed Glover, and ruled the colony for two years, the period known in the history of North Carolina as [Cary's Rebellion](#) ^[2]. John Porter was a member of Cary's Council from 1708 to 1711. With the arrival of [Edward Hyde](#) ^[14], appointed governor by the [Proprietors](#) ^[11], Cary and the Quakers lost control, and Cary, John Porter, and others were declared traitors. Porter escaped capture and in the words of Hyde, "went in a great runne to England" where he died in exile shortly afterwards.

John Porter's role in Cary's Rebellion has been the subject of controversy. As early as 1879 the [Honorable George Davis](#) ^[15], a descendant, attempted to rehabilitate Porter's reputation in a speech before the Literary and Scientific Society of Wilmington. David felt that John Porter had been the victim of party rancor. The historian [Samuel A. Ashe](#) ^[16], also a descendant, tended to put Porter in a favorable light and argued that Porter, as the builder of the original St. Paul's Church in Chowan, the first such building in North Carolina, could hardly be against the Anglican establishment. A John Porter was a contractor for the building, but as there were at least three men by that name in North Carolina at the time, it is not certain which John Porter was involved.

John Porter resided at Bluff Point on Albemarle Sound, in what is now eastern [Chowan County](#) ^[17]. The will of John Porter, merchant of the county of Albemarle, was probated by John Thomas, mayor of Bridgwater in Somerset, England, on 7 Aug. 1712. The surname of his wife Mary is not known. She continued to live in Chowan until her death late in 1717. Her will lists many pages of personal property, unusual for North Carolina at such an early date. John and Mary Porter had five children who survived to maturity. Their three sons, Edmund, [John](#) ^[4], and Joshua, maintained the prominence of the

family in the political life of the colony. Sarah, the oldest daughter, married first John Lillington and second Seth Pilkington. Both husbands were residents of the town of [Bath](#) ^[18]. The youngest daughter, Elizabeth, married first Thomas Fry of London and Bath and second Dr. Patrick Maule. Dr. Maule, brother of [William Maule](#) ^[19], was an early resident of Bath. A member of the Assembly in 1726 and described as a "man of learning and plentiful fortune," he served as deputy judge of the Admiralty for Bath under his brother-in-law, Edmund Porter.

Of the sons, Joshua Porter was a justice of Beaufort-Hyde and a member of the colonial Assembly in 1726. He married first Catherine, the widow successively of his father's old adversary William Glover and [Tobias Knight](#) ^[20]. With his second wife, Dorothy, the daughter of Robert Peyton, he had a son, John Peyton Porter, and a daughter, Elizabeth. Joshua Porter died in Beaufort in 1734.

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Additional Resources:

Colonial and State Records of North Carolina, Documenting the American South, UNC Libraries:

<https://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/search> ^[21]

Description by Thomas Pollock concerning Cary's Rebellion [Extract]. Pollock, Thomas, 1654-1722, 1708, Volume 01, Pages 696-699: <https://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr01-0370> ^[22]

Cary's Rebellion, Learn NC: <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-colonial/1971> ^[23]

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