

Sims, George ^[1]

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by Arthur C. Menius, 1994; Revised by Jared Dease, Government and Heritage Library, January 2023

1728–1808

See also: [Nutbush Address](#) ^[2]

George Sims, schoolmaster and Regulator spokesman, thrust himself into the limelight with a timely appeal to the agitated people of western North Carolina and then just as suddenly disappeared from the public view. Born to George, a Brunswick County, Va., planter, and Martha Sims, he moved with his brothers to the Nutbush section of north-central Granville (now [Vance](#) ^[3]) County before 1750. About 1758 Sims wed a Miss Bullock, thereby linking himself to such Granville luminaries as Len Henley Bullock, a future member of the Transylvania Company. Supporting his family, which eventually included eight sons and four daughters, as a schoolmaster and small farmer, Sims used what spare time he had to read widely.

Sims's increasing familiarity with legal theory and his growing dissatisfaction with local government bore fruit in 1765. On 6 June he drafted "[An Address to the People of Granville County](#)" ^[4]. Finding a responsive audience among those who would soon inaugurate the Regulator movement, the paper slowly achieved currency throughout the western half of the province. At the August 1767 session of the [Orange County](#) ^[5] Court, for example, it attracted considerable attention. [Herman Husband](#) ^[6] quoted large blocks of the essay in both of his pamphlets justifying the Regulation and as such parts of Sims's work were published in New England and elsewhere.

Probably intending to advance the maverick political career of Thomas Person, to whom the document was dedicated, as well as his own, Sims produced a competent exposition of the public ills of the area and a viable outline for action. Unlike the Regulators who followed him, he had not lost faith in local government in general, but only in certain officials, particularly Clerk of Court [Samuel Benton](#) ^[7]. He emphasized this in the best-known passage from the document: "Well, Gentlemen, it is not our mode, or form of Government, nor yet the body of our laws, that we are quarreling with, but with the malpractices of the Officers of our County Court, and the abuses which we suffer by those empowered to manage our public affairs." Sims accused Benton of perverting the just aims of government by making exorbitant demands of the people and seizing their property to settle them. He pledged to pay no more fees to Benton until the official produced a body of law that authorized them and implored his audience to do likewise.

Recommending circumspection, Sims demonstrated his careful consideration of the situation and his familiarity with the Whig thought so influential in Revolutionary America: "And first, let us be careful to keep sober, that we do nothing rashly; but act with deliberation. Secondly, Let us do nothing against the Known and established laws of our land, that we may not appear as a faction endeavoring to subvert the laws. . . . But, let us appear what we really are, To wit, free subjects by birth, endeavoring to recover our native right according to law. . . . Thirdly, let us behave ourselves with circumspection to the Worshipful Court. . . . Let us deliver them a remonstrance."

Besides its influence on the burgeoning dissatisfaction in the backcountry that culminated in the Regulation, Sims's address draws, according to James P. Whittenburg, its significance in comparison to similar documents from three further factors: (1) Sims asserted that Benton deprived his constituents of their constitutional rights, (2) Sims cited common law as the protector of those rights, and (3) his argument introduced the appeal to legal theory into the Regulation.

Sims's bold statements of course upset the county officialdom. Benton caused him to be arrested for libel on 7 Aug. 1765. According to Herman Husband, a verdict had not been reached five years later. The plaintiff's case was no doubt aided by the defendant's ill-advised implication that Benton had been a criminal before he took office. This reaction, as well as the increasingly violent nature of the Regulation, discouraged Sims from further protest. He apparently failed to serve in the American Revolution, but in 1777 he finally gained public office as constable from St. David's District in the southwestern corner of the newly formed [Caswell County](#) ^[8].

When Sims relocated to that place is uncertain, but by the mid-1780s he was one of the more substantial members of the community, owning, in addition to enslaving six people, 1,138 acres. Of this, 1,038 acres had been granted to Sims by the state, and he sold these tracts for £338 North Carolina currency in 1789. His household during this period was large, consisting of five white males and seven white women as well as the blacks. In his later years Sims's land and amounts of people he enslaved fluctuated only moderately. Three years before his death at age eighty, he had enslaved five black people and owned 336 acres of land.

George Sims, a distant forebearer of the Duke family of [Durham](#) ^[9], achieved rapid notoriety because his views suited a certain place and time. When he failed to follow up his brief fame and the temper of the people changed, he returned as readily to obscurity. Sims's role in publicizing the backcountry grievances, however, cannot be ignored.

References:

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