

Jenkins' Ear, War of ^[1]

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by Louis P. Towles, 2006

The [War of Jenkins' Ear](#)^[2] (1739-42), a [West Indies](#)^[3] maritime struggle that was part of the wider Anglo-Spanish War (1739-48), was fought between England and Spain over the control of trade in the Caribbean. To a lesser degree, the war also involved the defense of Great Britain's colonies in the Western Hemisphere and the fear that Spain and France might form an alliance to contain future British expansion in America. Spain sought to prevent Dutch, Danish, English, and French smugglers from trading with its American possessions and to limit the legal transactions of the English-owned South Sea Company with the area.

The unusual name of the war stemmed from an incident in 1731 in which a Spanish gunboat crew boarded the English ship *Rebecca* to confiscate some of its cargo. When the captain of the ship, Robert Jenkins, resisted, the Spanish soldiers tore off his ear and told him to "carry it to his King and tell him they would serve him in the same manner should an opportunity offer." Jenkins took his severed ear to England in a bottle in search of compensation and displayed it to the country, arousing considerable popular indignation.

Between August and mid-December 1740 Governor [Gabriel Johnston](#)^[4] of North Carolina raised and dispatched 400 men, the same number as Virginia, to fight in the war, admitting that he could have gathered half as many again if he had possessed the resources to feed and deliver them to the West Indies. As it was, he was able to supply the needs of his recruits with £1,200 raised by the colonial Assembly but had to furnish transportation from discretionary funds because shipowners would not accept North Carolina's paper money.

The North Carolina volunteers arrived in Jamaica by 9 Jan. 1741 and joined nearly 9,000 soldiers, both regular troops and provincials, and 15,000 sailors who awaited orders. On 23 March they attacked [Cartagena](#)^[5] but did not capture the city. Losses for the Cartagena Expedition, from both fighting and yellow fever, were heavy, forcing Adm. [Edward Vernon](#)^[6] to become less aggressive in future operations. For the remainder of the war, and in the following [King George's War](#)^[7] (1744-48), Vernon limited his activities to protecting English shipping in the Caribbean and destroying local Spanish trade.

The War of Jenkins' Ear brought no sense of accomplishment to the English colonies in America generally or to North Carolina in particular. Only 600 of the original 3,600 volunteers lived to return to their respective colonies. In North Carolina, 25 out of one company of 100 men returned home; the other three companies probably fared no better. In addition, beginning in 1741 dozens of [colonial](#)^[8] vessels were lost along the Carolina coast to Spanish privateers, a number of which briefly operated out of the [Outer Banks](#)^[9]. Cities like Beaufort and [Brunswick](#)^[10] were raided and forced to pay tribute, and proposed powder magazines and forts (Ocracoke Island, Bear Inlet, Topsail Inlet, and on the [Cape Fear River](#)^[11]) either were not built or accomplished nothing. The feeling in North Carolina was that colonial interests were sacrificed to broader English objectives.

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Subjects:

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[UNC Press](#)^[13]

[War](#)^[14]

Authors:

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Origin - location:

[Coastal Plain](#)^[16]

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