

Ashe, John Baptista ^[1]

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Ashe, John Baptista

by William S. Price, Jr., 1979

d. October 1734



Sloop Point Plantation, house built by Ashe in 1730. Image courtesy of Flickr Commons.

^[2]John Baptista Ashe, *colonial* ^[3] official, was the son of *John Ashe* ^[4], who had settled in South Carolina after emigrating from Wiltshire, England, in about 1700. The elder Ashe served as an assemblyman and died in London in 1703 while on a mission petitioning for relief for South Carolina religious dissenters ^[5]. About 1718, John Baptista Ashe settled in the *Albemarle* ^[6] region of North Carolina and the following year married Elizabeth Swann, daughter of *Samuel Swann* ^[7]. Allied by this match with some of the leading families in the province, the Lillingtons, Moseleys, and Moores, Ashe became a part of the social and political elite of the colony.

Ashe was elected to the lower house of the assembly from Beaufort Precinct in 1723 and served through 1727. During sessions in 1725 and 1726, he was speaker of the assembly. Identified during the proprietary governorship of *George Burrington* ^[8] in 1724–25 as one of that controversial executive's confederates, Ashe was elevated to the council when Burrington returned to North Carolina as the first royal governor in February 1731. Appointments to other lucrative offices ensued when Ashe moved southward to the lower *Cape Fear* ^[9] area, which the governor was interested in developing. By April 1731 he was public treasurer of New Hanover Precinct and later in the year, deputy surveyor "for all the new Cape Fear lands." Yet by the spring of 1732, Ashe and the governor had become enemies; Ashe joined with *Chief Justice William Smith* ^[10] and *Secretary Nathaniel Rice* ^[11] in opposing the hot-tempered Burrington. By October 1732, Burrington had jailed Ashe briefly on a libel charge.

It is difficult to understand why Ashe broke with Burrington, but there are at least two possible reasons. Burrington's violent conduct was earning him many enemies in North Carolina and in England, and Ashe undoubtedly foresaw problems for those identified with the governor. Also, Smith and Rice were personal friends of Martin Bladen, a member of Parliament and a leading figure on the *board of trade* ^[12], which was charged with the overall administration of the colonies; by allying with these men, Ashe could hope to profit from Burrington's inevitable fall. Ashe consistently opposed the governor on all substantive issues during the remainder of his service on the council.

Before Burrington was relieved as governor in November 1734, Ashe died, probably late in October. He had not been active in politics during the preceding summer and possibly was in a deteriorating physical state. Ashe was buried on his plantation, Grovely, near Brunswick. His considerable estate, including at least 5,000 acres of land was left to two sons and a daughter, who had married *George Moore* ^[13] of the eminent lower Cape Fear family. Ashe's sons, *John* ^[4] and *Samuel* ^[14], were respectively a revolutionary general and a governor of the state.

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