

Cornell, Samuel ^[1]

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by William S. Price, Jr., 1979

1730–81

Samuel Cornell, member of the royal council, was a native of Long Island, N.Y., who settled in New Bern in about 1754 and established a mercantile business. Within ten years he had become the wealthiest man in the North Carolina colony, owning two plantations on the Trent River and a house in New Bern valued at £7,500 in 1779. His cellar could hold eighty hogsheads of rum, and in addition to several warehouses and a retail store, he possessed at least three trading vessels. In 1784 his realty in North Carolina was valued at £40,976 sterling. Thirteen years later, in a lawsuit brought by his executors, the indebtedness of North Carolinians to Cornell was said to exceed £44,000.

Because of his wealth, Cornell came to the attention of Governor William Tryon ^[2] shortly after his arrival in North Carolina. In 1767 the merchant loaned the colony eight thousand pounds for the construction of the executive mansion in New Bern called Tryon Palace ^[3]. Out of gratitude, the governor nominated Cornell to a seat on the royal council, and on 16 Oct. 1770 he was sworn in. Cornell attended council sessions with regularity and generally supported Tryon's programs. When the expedition to crush the Regulators ^[4] was launched in the spring of 1771, Cornell underwrote it with the loan of six thousand pounds and served in the field as a general officer. He received a leg wound at the Battle of Alamance ^[5] but recovered quickly.

After Tryon's 1771 departure from North Carolina to become governor of New York, Cornell continued to serve on the council. In the summer of 1775 he began to fear that Patriots might force him to underwrite currency issues of the provincial congresses ^[6], and he obtained permission from Governor Josiah Martin ^[7] to move to New York. Hoping to block confiscation of his North Carolina holdings, Cornell sailed back to New Bern in December 1777. Initially, the local committee of safety refused to allow him to land until he swore allegiance to the revolutionary cause. Governor Richard Caswell ^[8] intervened, however, permitting Cornell ashore to inventory his household effects and collect a few servants. In an unsuccessful effort to prevent confiscation, he deeded all his North Carolina property to three of his daughters.

Cornell returned to New York to sit out the war. Early in 1781 he joined an expedition sailing to relieve British troops in Virginia, but he became ill during the voyage and returned to New York. Shortly after arriving there he died. At the close of the Revolution, his heirs sued to recover his property in North Carolina in litigation that became the famous Bayard v. Singleton ^[9] case of 1786–87.

References:

Bayard-Campbell-Pearsall Collection (New York Public Library), for many of Cornell's business papers.

North Carolina State Archives (Raleigh), for Cornell to Elias Debrosses, letter (original in C.O. 5/154), Loyalist Claims Commission Transcripts (claim filed by Henry Chad), and Miscellaneous Estates Papers (1746–1864, Craven County).

William L. Saunders, *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, vols. 8–9 (1890).

Additional Resources:

CSR Documents related to Samuel Cornell, Documenting the American South, UNC Libraries:
<https://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/creators/csr10662> ^[10]

New York Public Library. *Papers relating to Samuel Cornell, North Carolina loyalist*. New York [The New York public library]. 1913. <https://archive.org/details/papersrelatingto00newy> ^[11] (accessed July 8, 2013).

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