

Eastchurch (Esthurt), Thomas ^[1]

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by Mattie Erma E. Parker, 1986

d. ca. January 1677/78

See also: [Thomas Eastchurch](#) ^[2], Research Branch, NC Office of Archives and History

Thomas Eastchurch (Esthurt), [surveyor](#) ^[3] general in the North Carolina colony and [speaker of the Assembly](#) ^[4], was commissioned governor but died without taking office. Described by the Carolina [Proprietors](#) ^[5] as "a gentleman of a very good family," he was related to [Thomas Clifford](#) ^[6], lord high treasurer of England (1672–73). He may have been related to a Thomas Eastchurch of Devon who in 1628 was graduated from Queen's College, Oxford, but he probably was not that individual.

Eastchurch was in the northern Carolina colony, then called [Albemarle](#) ^[7], by October 1669, when he was surveyor general. He probably held office at that time by appointment from local officials. In 1671, however, he was appointed to the same position by the Carolina Proprietors, following a period of more than a year in which he had been in Virginia. He returned to Albemarle and assumed the post of surveyor general in December 1671 or soon afterwards.

In the fall of 1675 Eastchurch was speaker of the Albemarle Assembly and leader of the political faction then in control of that body. Aided by his followers, he ousted the acting governor, [John Jenkins](#) ^[8], and had him imprisoned on charge of "severall misdemeanors." Eastchurch, as speaker, then assumed the powers of governor and exercised them for some months, although he did not assume the title of the office he had usurped. By March 1676 his seizure of the governor's powers was challenged by Jenkins, whose followers had released him from prison by force and held an election in which Jenkins was chosen "Generalissime." For a time Eastchurch and Jenkins headed rival governments, each attempting to control the colony. In late spring or early summer, however, Eastchurch went to London to appeal to the Proprietors for support.

The struggle between Eastchurch and Jenkins had resulted chiefly from failure of the Proprietors to appoint a governor in 1674, when the term of the incumbent, Jenkins, had expired under a provision of the [Fundamental Constitutions](#) ^[9] of Carolina. In the absence of a duly appointed successor, Jenkins had continued to hold office until ousted by Eastchurch. Although each contender advanced legal arguments to justify his actions, the colony in fact was without de jure government, for the Fundamental Constitutions made no provision for such an emergency as had arisen.

The constitutional crisis was exacerbated by factional feuds and personal animosities, which had long plagued Albemarle. For years the colony had been subjected to disorders and irregularities, such as disruption of the proceedings of governmental agencies, verbal and physical assaults on officials, and vindictive lawsuits on trumped up grounds against political leaders. Eastchurch had been involved in the factional feuds before September 1670, when his property was attached through lawsuits that appear to have been politically inspired. At that time Eastchurch was in Virginia, and he did not return to answer the suits against him. He remained in Virginia until some date after 11 Dec. 1671, when he wrote to the Albemarle governor, [Peter Carteret](#) ^[10], informing Carteret of his recent appointment as surveyor general by the Proprietors.

Eastchurch had aspired to the governorship of Albemarle long before his seizure of its powers in 1675. At least two years earlier he had sought the position through his influential kinsman, Lord Clifford, who approached the Proprietors on Eastchurch's behalf and obtained commitments of support from several. At that time, however, the Proprietors in London expected to relinquish their interests in the Albemarle area to their fellow Proprietor, [Sir William Berkeley](#) ^[11], then governor of Virginia. Consequently, they did not appoint a governor for the colony when the office became vacant in 1674.

Possibly the commitments some Proprietors had made on his behalf emboldened Eastchurch to seize prematurely the powers he sought. Whatever the source, his confidence was justified. When he appeared before them in 1676, the London Proprietors gave full credence to his account of affairs in Albemarle and granted his request for their support. Despite strong opposition from [George Durant](#) ^[12], who had gone to London as spokesman for the opposing faction, the Proprietors commissioned Eastchurch governor in November 1676 and appointed a council composed chiefly of his supporters.

Eastchurch did not leave London to assume office as governor until early summer 1677. He was accompanied on the voyage by one of his chief Albemarle supporters, [Thomas Miller](#) ^[13], who had joined him in London and had received commissions as member of the Council, register (or secretary) for the colony, and customs collector. In the earlier feuds, Miller, even more than Eastchurch, had aroused personal hostility among the colonists. On their way to Albemarle, which lay by the West Indies, Eastchurch and Miller stopped for a time at [Nevis](#) ^[14]. There Eastchurch met a wealthy woman, whose name is not known, and married her. Wishing to extend his stay at Nevis, Eastchurch gave Miller a "commission"

as president of the Albemarle Council and sent him to govern the colony until his own arrival. In so doing, Eastchurch overlooked or ignored the fact that he had not qualified as governor in Albemarle and for that reason and others lacked legal authority to appoint an acting governor. Despite the lack of validity of his appointment, Miller assumed the powers of governor on his arrival in Albemarle, using armed force to obtain and hold office. The opposition that he met initially was soon increased by illegal and oppressive measures that he and his council instituted. Plans for his overthrow were well under way by fall.

Meanwhile, Eastchurch pursued his honeymoon in Nevis. Not until December did he reach Virginia en route to Albemarle. By that time, an armed uprising against Miller, later called *Culpeper's Rebellion* ^[15], was in progress. Miller and members of his council had been imprisoned and their chief supporters had fled to Virginia. On hearing the news, Eastchurch decided to remain in Virginia and seek aid from the deputy governor of that colony, Herbert Jeffreys. He sent a proclamation to Albemarle, dated 22 Dec. 1677, ordering the colonists to lay down their arms and release Miller from prison. The Albemarle inhabitants responded by sending armed forces to the northern part of their colony to prevent Eastchurch from entering it. As events developed, armed forces were not needed to keep Eastchurch out of Albemarle. Soon after issuing his proclamation, Eastchurch became ill and died in Virginia.

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