

Harnett, Cornelius ^[1]

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by Donald R. Lennon, 1988

d. 1742

Cornelius Harnett, colonial official, planter, and [innkeeper](#) ^[2], formerly a merchant of Dublin, Ireland, settled in [Chowan County](#) ^[3] by 1720. In 1722, when he sold land on Queen Anne's Creek to Chief Justice [Christopher Gale](#) ^[4], Harnett referred to himself as a planter. He allied himself with the erratic Proprietary Governor [George Burrington](#) ^[5]; and when [Sir Richard Everard](#) ^[6] replaced Burrington in 1725, Harnett sided with his deposed friend. On the night of 7 Dec. 1725, the two men led a riot in [Edenton](#) ^[7] directed against Everard and his supporters. According to the indictment brought against them, the rioters "assaulted" the governor's residence, broke into two other houses, assaulted three men, and caused one man's wife to miscarry due to fear for her husband's safety. On this occasion, Harnett was referred to as "a Ruffianly Fellow."

With criminal charges lodged against them, Burrington and Harnett left [Edenton](#) ^[7]. Harnett settled on the [Cape Fear River](#) ^[8] where he purchased lots in the town of Brunswick. He subsequently opened an inn in the town and operated a ferry across the river at that point.

Upon Burrington's return to power in 1730 as the first royal governor of North Carolina, Harnett was named to the governor's council. Burrington was thereupon accused by the opposition of packing the council with men who would do his bidding, men "of such vile characters and poor understandings, that it is the greatest abuse of power imaginable upon the ministry to recommend such of them." These "characters" included [Matthew Rowan](#) ^[9], [Edmund Porter](#) ^[10], and [John Baptista Ashe](#) ^[11]. Much to the governor's chagrin, Harnett soon took issue with several major questions. Along with Ashe, Porter, and [William Smith](#) ^[12], he reproached the governor for his method of addressing the council and for the wording of his message concerning justices and assistant judges. When Burrington dismissed Porter from the council, Ashe and [Nathaniel Rice](#) ^[13] joined Harnett in strongly opposing the action.

Early in 1732 Burrington complained to the [Board of Trade](#) ^[14] and Plantations that he had appointed Harnett on the advice of others without knowing him personally, and that his presence on the council was a disgrace. Obviously the governor chose to forget the events of 1725, when the two men had been allied against the Everard faction. Privately, Burrington informed Harnett that he "was no longer his friend" and berated him in his own home as a "fool, blockhead, puppy, and Ashe's tool." After receiving repeated abuses from the governor, Harnett resigned from the council in October 1732.

Harnett subsequently served as vestryman for St. Philips Parish at Brunswick, justice of the peace for Bladen (1732) and New Hanover (1736–41) counties, and sheriff of [New Hanover County](#) ^[15] (1739–40). He apparently had large landholdings in [Bladen](#) ^[16] and New Hanover counties where he operated plantations and sawmills. Upon his death, he was survived by his widow, Elizabeth, and a son, [Cornelius, Jr.](#) ^[17], the Revolutionary War statesman.

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