

Harvey, John ^[1]



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Harvey, John

by Martin Reidinger, 1988

11 Dec. 1724[?]-3 May 1775

John Harvey, colonial and Revolutionary leader, was born at the family home at Harvey's Neck in [Perquimans County](#) ^[2], one of twins, the son of colonial justice and Council member Thomas Harvey (1692–1729) and Elizabeth Cole Harvey. He was the grandson of [Thomas Harvey](#) ^[3] (d. 1699) who was deputy governor of the colony during 1694–99, and great-grandson of colonial leader [Benjamin Laker](#) ^[4]. He was also the brother of [Miles Harvey](#) ^[5] (1728–76), a leader in the movement for independence.

Not a great deal is known about Harvey's early life. He was born into considerable wealth for the time, even receiving two of his own personal slaves before his fifth birthday. The will of the second Thomas Harvey called for his sons to attain good educations, but no records are known of how young John Harvey received his schooling. It would not have been unusual for one of his class to have had a personal tutor or to have studied in England.

Whatever his educational background, he must have shown considerable political aptitude, because he was elected one of Perquimans County's five representatives in the Assembly when he was only twenty-one. However his first appearance in the Assembly was brief, for this sixteen-day session was to be the last that Albemarle representatives would attend for the next eight years because of a dispute over how many members the counties were entitled to. During this period he remained active in public affairs. He served as a justice of the county in 1751 and was continually elected to the Assembly, but these elections were all voided by the governor. By the time the representational issue was settled in 1754, Harvey headed the Perquimans delegation. In this first Assembly since the dispute he held many key positions on committees. He was especially instrumental in the committees responsible for appropriations for the [French and Indian War](#) ^[6], and was occasionally called upon to preside over the Assembly sitting as a Committee of the Whole to consider war appropriations. By 1756 Harvey had emerged as the leader of the northern faction in the Assembly. In that year he was presented by his group as a candidate for speaker of the Assembly. Although his supporters were in the majority, there were not enough of them present on the first day of the session; therefore, [Samuel Swann](#) ^[7], longtime leader of the southern faction, was once again elected to the speakership by a narrow margin. Over the next ten years the factions patched up most of their differences, so Harvey made no more challenges to the speaker's post but continued to dominate many important committees, such as the one to establish a postal route through the colony in 1765.

In the first session under Governor [William Tryon](#) ^[8] in November 1766, the speakership was open. The sectional differences were well healed now, as exemplified by Harvey's being nominated for the position by [Richard Caswell](#) ^[9] of [Dobbs County](#) ^[10]. His election by the full Assembly was unanimous. Little did they realize at the time that John Harvey was to be the last speaker of the colonial Assembly.

In November 1768 Harvey took the lead in the colony's resistance to Crown policies. He believed that the imposition of the Townshend duties was unconstitutional and injurious to the rights of the colonists, and that the only remedy to such problems was for the colonies to present a united front in opposition. On placing the circular letters from Massachusetts and Virginia before the Assembly, Harvey met with a rather complacent response: a committee was appointed to look into the matter and to reply to [the Crown](#) ^[11]. As head of this committee, he went beyond his instructions in corresponding with other colonies to assure them that North Carolina would be among those to stand by them "in pursuing every constitutional measure for redress of grievances." At this point Harvey took on the role of "Father of the American Revolution in North Carolina," as he was called by [R. D. W. Connor](#) ^[12].

In the next Assembly, which met in October 1769, Harvey had more cooperation from his comrades. In this session he presented the Assembly with resolutions passed earlier by the Virginia assembly that Parliament had no right to tax the colonies, that petition for redress of grievances was a right of all British subjects, and that they were still loyal to the Crown but only trying to preserve their rights as Englishmen. The Assembly passed these resolutions verbatim, largely at Harvey's instigation. Soon afterwards the governor dissolved the Assembly to prevent the passage of a nonimportation association. On this note Harvey took the bold, unprecedented step of calling an extralegal body, independent of the governor, to act on the matter. Elected moderator, Harvey presided over this convention, which passed the association easily and then adjourned. North Carolina was now in the mainstream of a united colonial front, due primarily to Harvey's power and influence.

When the Assembly met in December 1770, Harvey was absent due to ill health, but he maintained his influence in government through correspondence with such leaders as [James Iredell](#) ^[13] and even Governor William Tryon. In this

period Harvey supported Tryon's attempts to quell the Regulator movement ^[14].

Harvey was next in the Assembly in January 1773, when recognition of his leadership ability was once again shown by his being nominated for the speakership by the man who had held that position in his absence, Richard Caswell. One of the major events of this session was the final settlement of the quorum controversy, which had hung over the colony for decades. When Governor Josiah Martin ^[15] introduced the issue, Harvey plainly stated that the members of the Assembly felt that it was not in the best interest of their constituents to act without a majority of the members present. Harvey's word was so respected, even by the governor, that the question was never raised again.

The colony's work on behalf of the American Revolution really began with the session of December 1773. Harvey put before the Assembly a letter from Virginia proposing that each colony establish a committee to communicate with the other colonies the actions of the Crown that were detrimental to colonial interests. The creation of such a committee was approved, and Harvey was named a member of this first North Carolina Committee of Correspondence ^[16]. Yet he was still held in high favor by Crown officials. In 1773 and 1774 he was voted special bonuses of £100 and £200 respectively; both were approved by the governor and Council "with greatest pleasure . . . as a token of respect . . . for Col. Harvey." This was soon to change, however, for the next item on the Assembly's agenda was the election of delegates to the Continental Congress. Governor Martin was determined to keep this from happening, just as Governor Tryon had prevented delegates from being sent to the Stamp Act Congress nine years earlier. Enraged by Martin's refusal to call the Assembly back into session, Harvey again turned to the option of convening a meeting independent of the governor. He spear-headed the organization of the convention, even having broadsides on the subject printed and distributed under his name. Although Martin issued a proclamation forbidding that it take place, North Carolina's First Provincial Congress ^[17] met at New Bern on 25 Aug. 1774. Harvey was named moderator. Among other things the Congress elected delegates to the Continental Congress, banned all trade with Britain and the importation of slaves, and passed a "no tea" resolution. On closing, it empowered Harvey to convene another such congress when he saw fit.

When Governor Martin called the next Assembly to meet at New Bern on 4 Apr. 1775, Harvey convened the Second Provincial Congress at the same place on the day before. The Congress reelected its delegates to the Continental Congress and engaged in other revolutionary activities, which were endorsed by the Assembly. Both sessions were short: the Assembly was dissolved on 8 April by a frustrated Governor Martin, and the Congress adjourned later that day.

Harvey had always been somewhat sickly and was seriously ill on a number of occasions, as demonstrated by his missing the Assembly sessions in 1770 and 1771. By the end of the Second Provincial Congress his health must have been declining rapidly, because that body made provision that Samuel Johnston ^[18] should call the next Congress in the event of Harvey's disability. The exact date of his death is unrecorded, but a letter of 19 May 1775 from New Bern relates that he had recently died at his home in Perquimans County as a direct result of a fall from his horse. From the date and place of this letter, he probably died sometime between 15 April and 12 May 1775. Griffith McRee ^[19], in *The Life and Correspondence of James Iredell*, mentions the date of death as 3 June 1775. This could well have been a printing error which was meant to read 3 May 1775; because McRee's work was published in 1857, it is likely that he had access to the inscription on Harvey's tomb. The colonial leader was buried at Belgrade Farm, Perquimans County, in a large granite tomb on the shore of Albemarle Sound. In over two centuries of erosion, the structure has been washed out into the sound, though reportedly it is still intact.

Aside from his other activities Harvey always maintained an interest in his home county of Perquimans, encouraging special legislation on its behalf. He was one of those responsible for the charter of the town of Hertford in 1758.

He married Mary Bonner, probably in early 1745. They had ten children, seven of whom survived to adulthood. Of these Thomas and Miles served in the 1776 Assembly, which adopted the Halifax Resolves ^[20].

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