

Griffin, Charles ^[1]

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by Herbert R. Paschal, 1986

ca. 1679–ca. 1720

Charles Griffin, first known schoolteacher in North Carolina, Brafferton Professor at Virginia's College of William and Mary, and a pioneer in the education of the southern Indian, was born probably in England. He migrated to North Carolina from the West Indies about 1705. At some time before immigrating to the colony, he received a reasonably good education although there is no evidence that this included university training.

While a devout [Anglican](#) ^[2], Griffin settled in the strongly [Quaker](#) ^[3] precinct of Pasquotank and opened a school there for boys and girls. This is the first known school in the history of the colony. Despite the Anglican can religious training Griffin gave all of his students, the Quakers sent their children to his school, which was an immediate and unqualified success. Griffin became lay reader for the ministerless Anglicans in Pasquotank Precinct and soon had "an orderly congregation" through "his decent behaviour" and "unblemished life" and "by apt discourses from house to house according to the capacities of an ignorant people."

In April 1708, two Anglican missionaries of the [Society for the Propagation of the Gospel](#) ^[4] arrived in the colony. One of the ministers, William Gordon, assumed responsibility for the two parishes in Chowan and Perquimans precincts while the other, James Adams, took upon himself the care of the parishes in Pasquotank and Currituck. The difficulties of life and service on the frontier proved too much for Gordon, who returned to England after less than six months at his post. Before leaving, he persuaded Griffin, whose services as a lay reader were no longer needed in Pasquotank, to move to St. Paul's Parish in Chowan Precinct where he served as clerk of the vestry and lay reader at a salary of £20 per annum. In addition, Griffin organized a new school in Chowan while James Adams assumed charge of his old school in Pasquotank. At first all went well, but in October 1709 James Adams wrote the SPG officials that Griffin "has fallen into the sin of fornication, and joined with the Quakers' interest." This last phrase probably means that Griffin had joined the political faction in the strife torn colony led by Governor [Thomas Cary](#) ^[5], who drew much support from the Quaker element in the population. This political factionalism would break into open warfare in the spring of 1711, only to be followed by Indian massacre and war that fall.

Perhaps as a result of the charges against him or to escape the difficulties besetting the colony, Griffin moved to Virginia. By 1714, he had become involved in the plan of Governor [Alexander Spotswood](#) ^[6] to protect the Indian frontier and to better regulate the Indian trade. Spotswood's plan called for consolidating friendly tributary tribes on frontier reservations where a fort would be erected and garrisoned. A minister and schoolmaster would also be located there to Christianize and civilize the Indians. In early 1715, Griffin was employed by Governor Spotswood at a salary of £50 per annum to teach the children of the [Saponi Indians](#) ^[7] and other Siouan tribes at Fort Christanna on the Meherrin River. Here, in "a very handsome schoolhouse," he taught about seventy Indian children to read and write from the Bible and the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. He proved to be an outstanding success as a teacher and gained the total affection of the Indians, who on one occasion sought to make him their king. Unmarried, Griffin whiled away his time writing his observations on the benefits of a solitary life.

The act providing for the fort and its garrison was ultimately disallowed in England by an order in council, and Griffin was forced to abandon his school at Fort Christanna early in the summer of 1718. Griffin, however, had not completed his work with the Indians. He was almost immediately named master of the Indian school at the [College of William and Mary](#) ^[8]. This school was maintained through funds provided by the will of the eminent English scientist, Robert Boyle, and the position of Indian master was known as the Brafferton Professorship because the Boyle funds came from the revenue of Brafferton Manor in Yorkshire. A commodious, two-story brick building housed the master and his Indian pupils on the college campus. It is here, surrounded by his Indian charges, that Griffin drops from view. His fate is unknown, but it seems likely that he had died by 1720.

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Additional Resources:

"First School." N.C. Highway Historical Marker A-14, N.C. Office of Archives & History.

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