

Relfe (Ralph, Relph, Rolfe), Thomas ^[1]

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by Mattie Erma E. Parker, 1994

ca. 1645–1713 or 1714

Thomas Relfe (Ralph, Relph, Rolfe), jurist, legislator, provost marshal, and surveyor general, was the son of Dr. Thomas and Dorothy Relfe, who moved from Virginia to the Carolina colony about 1663. It has been suggested that Dr. Relfe may have been the son of the early Jamestown settler John Rolfe and his Indian wife, Pocahontas. The theory rests on circumstantial evidence and an assumption as to the "correct" spelling of the name Relfe (Rolfe), which has many variants in the old manuscripts. More substantial evidence would be necessary to establish the theory as fact.

On 25 Sept. 1663 Dr. Relfe was issued a patent for 750 acres of land in the Carolina colony, then called Albemarle ^[2]. About that time the family moved to the grant, which was on the Pasquotank River ^[3]. In addition to the parents, the family included son Thomas, then about eighteen years old, and a younger son, William. Several relatives of the Relfes moved to Albemarle about the same time, including the families of Richard Roads (Rhodes) and John and William Jennings, but the relationships are not clear. There also were other Carolina settlers named Relfe, but they appear in the records a little later and their relationship, if any, is unknown.

The sparse surviving records of Albemarle tell little about the Relfe family's early years in the colony. Dr. Relfe probably died before March 1680, when a court ordered John Jennings to return an account of the estate of a "Thos. Roelph." No later reference to the doctor has been found, nor is there information respecting his wife.

By 6 Jan. 1689/90, Thomas Relfe was a justice of Pasquotank ^[4] Precinct Court, an office that he also held in 1694 and 1700. No doubt he served on the court in some or all of the intervening years, for which there are virtually no extant records of that court. By the 1690s Relfe bore the title of captain, which suggests that he was active in the militia.

About 1683 Thomas Relfe married Mary Keile (Keele), widow of Thomas Keile. Before her marriage to Keile, Mary appears to have been married to one Butler and to have had a daughter, Ann, by him. She had three children by Keile—Thomas, Sarah, and Robert—and she bore Relfe two children—Thomas and Dorothy. Relfe was guardian as well as stepfather to the Keile children. Yet another member of his household was William Roads, who also was Relfe's ward. Roads was either Relfe's nephew or his wife's.

Relfe continued to live in Pasquotank Precinct, where his parents had settled. He owned at least 600 acres of land in addition to that inherited from his father. His brother William also lived in Pasquotank and had extensive landholdings. Both Thomas and William served on the Anglican church vestry for the Pasquotank parish. They were strongly opposed to permitting Quakers ^[5] to serve in governmental positions.

In 1694 the General Court appointed Thomas and William Relfe administrators of the estate of Elizabeth Roads (widow of Richard Roads) as "nearest of kin" to the orphans. In spite of their being designated "nearest of kin," a later court (in 1695) granted guardianship of two of the Roads orphans to Dorothy Jennings, wife of John Jennings, in compliance with a petition in which Dorothy identified herself as "grandmother and nearest of kin" to the orphans. The William Roads who was reared by Thomas and Mary Relfe appears to have been a third orphan of Richard and Elizabeth Roads. These and other records indicate that Thomas and William Relfe were close kin to Dorothy Jennings and to either Richard Roads or his wife Elizabeth, but they do not make the relationships clear.

Thomas Relfe was politically active much of his life. In addition to sitting on the Pasquotank court, he held offices significant to the entire colony. On 27 Sept. 1694 he took oath as provost marshal (high sheriff) for Albemarle, an office he held through December 1696. From July 1696 through March 1702/3 he served as deputy for the surveyor general. By commission dated 26 Aug. 1703 Relfe himself was appointed surveyor general, a position that he held until some date in 1705. He was a member of the Assembly in 1711 and perhaps other years. In July 1712 he became a justice of the General Court, on which he sat through August 1713.

Relfe died between 26 Oct. 1713, when he made a deposition in a lawsuit, and 10 Aug. 1714, when the governor and Council ordered payment to Mary Relfe of money due her deceased husband. In the deposition Relfe gave his age as sixty-eight. For some reason his will, made in 1704, was not probated until 1720. In the will, Relfe named as legatees his wife Mary, his son Thomas, his daughter Dorothy, and William Roads.

Mary Relfe died between 13 Jan. 1724/25, when she made her will, and 20 Aug. 1725, when her will was probated. Apparently, both of her children by Relfe and one of her sons by Keile already had died, for her legatees did not include her daughter Dorothy Relfe or her sons Thomas Relfe and Thomas Keile. Indeed, she bequeathed "the chest that was my son Thomas Relfs" to William Roads, as well as other items of substantial value, including land. Possibly the bequest of land was confirmation of a bequest by her husband, who had bequeathed a tract of land to William Roads on condition

that "he stays with his aunt until he comes of age." Mary Relfe's legatees also included William Relfe's two grandchildren, Thomas and Mary Relfe, as well as her daughters Ann and Sarah, her son Robert Keile, and members of their families.

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