

Stephens (Stevens), Samuel ^[1]

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by Mattie Erma E. Parker, 1994

ca. 1629–70

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

Samuel Stephens (Stevens), governor of [Albemarle County](#) ^[3], was born in Virginia, the son of Richard (ca. 1600–ca. 1636) and Elizabeth Piersey Stephens (b. 1610). In records of the Virginia Company of London, his father is referred to as "Mr. Rich: Stephens of London painter stainer," a short way of saying that Stephens was a member of the City of London Livery Company of Painters. London Painter Stainer was one of the organizations that had subscribed to the Virginia Company. Perhaps because of his membership in it, Richard Stephens was assigned one "share" of land in Virginia at a meeting of the council of the Virginia Company held in London in March 1622/23. In early July he signed an agreement to go to Virginia as a settler and take with him supplies to the value of £300, which he later agreed to increase by £30. The promised supplies, contained in twenty-one hogsheads, were put on board the ship *George* by 31 July 1623, and soon afterwards Stephens, with two servants, sailed on the *George* for Virginia. By the end of 1623 Richard Stephens had acquired a house and lot in Jamestown and had been granted additional land for a garden. In March 1623/24 he was a member of the House of Burgesses, and by 1630 he was a member of the Virginia Council, on which he apparently remained for the rest of his life.

Samuel Stephens's mother, Elizabeth, was the daughter of the wealthy Abraham Piersey and his wife Elizabeth Draper, the daughter of Vincent Draper of London. In 1616 Piersey, who appears to have been recently widowed, migrated to Virginia, leaving in England his two small daughters, Elizabeth and Mary. In Virginia, Piersey operated a [mercantile business](#) ^[4] as factor for English merchants. He soon became prominent politically. By 1618 he was cape merchant, or treasurer, for the colony, in 1622 he was burgess, and by 1624 he was a Council member, a position that he held until his death. In 1623 he brought his daughters to Virginia. He died in October 1628, leaving an estate considered the largest then known in Virginia.

Richard Stephens and Elizabeth Piersey appear to have married about the time of Abraham Piersey's death. Samuel was the elder of their two children; their younger son, William, was born about 1631. Richard died about 1636, apparently in the summer of that year. By 1638 Elizabeth had married [Sir John Harvey](#) ^[5], then governor of Virginia.

Nothing is known of Samuel Stephens's early life. In 1652 he married [Frances Culpeper](#) ^[6], the daughter of Thomas Culpeper of Feckenham, Worcestershire, England, and his wife Katherine St. Leger, whose father was Sir Warham St. Leger of Ulcombe, County Kent. Frances is believed to have migrated to Virginia with her parents about 1650. Shortly before his marriage, Stephens executed documents that provided that a plantation known as Bolthorpe, consisting of 1,350 acres on Warwick River, was to become the property of Frances at his death.

On 9 Oct. 1662 the Council of Virginia appointed Stephens, then called captain, to be "commander of the southern plantation," with authority to appoint a [sheriff](#) ^[7]. The "southern plantation" was the newly begun settlement in the Albemarle area, which then was part of Virginia but soon would be included in a grant from the [Crown](#) ^[8] to the Lords Proprietors of [Carolina](#) ^[9]. Presumably Stephens, as commander, governed the Albemarle settlement until late 1664, by which time the Lords Proprietors had possession of the area and had appointed their own governor, [William Drummond](#) ^[10]. No record, however, has survived regarding Stephens's activities as commander.

On 8 Oct. 1667 the [Lords Proprietors](#) ^[11] appointed Stephens to succeed Drummond as governor of Albemarle. Stephens took office at some subsequent date and governed the colony until his death. In that period or earlier he acquired about five thousand acres of land in Albemarle, including Roanoke Island.

Few records of his administration have survived, but those few make it evident that the period was a difficult one for him and for the colony at large. Conditions in Albemarle were bad when Stephens took office, and they grew worse. The Proprietors, during Drummond's administration, had promulgated land policies that were so restrictive that many colonists considered them ruinous. The widespread discouragement resulting from the Proprietors' policies was increased by hardships caused by natural disasters. Two months before Stephens's appointment, a [hurricane](#) ^[12] had devastated the colony, destroying most of the crops and many buildings. The next year's crops were killed by a three-months' drought and a month of excessive rain that followed the drought. The next year, 1669, crops and buildings again were destroyed by a hurricane. The frustration and despair of the colonists were aggravated by diseases that killed cattle and hogs in large numbers and by illnesses, apparently epidemic, that incapacitated the people for long periods. The spirits of the colonists were lifted briefly in 1668, when the Proprietors, in response to an earlier petition, ostensibly liberalized their land policies, sending to Stephens a document called by the colonists the "[Great Deed of Grant](#)" ^[13], which authorized Stephens to grant land on the liberal terms in effect in Virginia. Hope soon fell, however, for the Proprietors, in a letter to Stephens,

directed him to have the Assembly enact legislation imposing many of the restrictions that the Great Deed purported to remove, in effect nullifying most of the concessions that appeared to have been made in the Great Deed of Grant. Despite what must have been bitter opposition, Stephens succeeded in getting the Assembly to enact most of the legislation that the Proprietors demanded.

No doubt animosities aroused by enactment of the new laws were a significant factor in the political situation that existed during much of Stephens's administration. The colony became divided into factions, torn with dissension, and filled with hostility towards Stephens, who was subjected to insolence and abuse. Some colonists were reported to have drawn their swords against him. Although Stephens met such actions with mildness and apparently did not have the offenders punished, the hostility towards him continued until his death, which occurred in late February or early March 1669/70.

Despite the hostility that Stephens aroused in Albemarle, he appears to have had many virtues. Sir William Berkeley ^[14], then governor of Virginia and one of the Proprietors of Carolina, described him as a man of courage and great integrity who loved the Albemarle colony and had many personal traits that usually arouse love and admiration. Admitting that Stephens lacked "that fullness of understanding" that men reared in Europe gained from early experience in handling important affairs, Berkeley felt that Stephens's personal virtues offset that lack. According to Berkeley, it was Stephens's mildness alone that had prevented those threatening him with swords from suffering capital punishment.

Stephens had no children. Soon after his death a Virginia court put his widow, Frances, in possession of Bolthorpe, as provided in his marriage settlement. For unknown reasons, Stephens's will was judged invalid when presented for probate in Virginia, and his estate in that colony was administered under common law, with Frances as administratrix. The portion of the estate that was in Albemarle was administered by John Culpeper ^[15], who appears to have been Frances's brother.

In June 1670 Frances married Sir William Berkeley. At Berkeley's death she inherited his Proprietorship in Carolina but sold it in the 1680s. About 1680 she married Philip Ludwell ^[16], a member of the Virginia Council, who in 1689 was appointed governor of Albemarle. Frances, however, did not officiate a second time as first lady of Albemarle, for Ludwell retained residence in Virginia, going to Albemarle only at intervals. She died about 1691.

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