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Our Debt to Cornelius Harnett.

AN ADDRESS BY

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## OUR DEBT TO CORNELIUS HARNETT.\*

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### I.

ON THE 28th of April†, 1781, there died in the town of Wilmington, at the age of fifty-eight, a man whose fame as a civic leader finds a unique attestation in the very obstacles that it has had to surmount. Scholar though he was, we look in vain for a book, a pamphlet, or even an entire speech of his own inditing. If a funeral oration was pronounced over him or an obituary written about him, neither has come down to us. There is not in existence a statue or even a bust or picture of any sort to indicate to the eye what manner of man he was. He left neither son nor daughter to perpetuate his name or to plead with posterity for his fame. The brief inscription which he asked to be placed upon his modest tomb makes no mention of any service, public or private, that he ever rendered. And yet, to one who studies impartially the annals of this State during the latter half of the eighteenth century, the conviction will become irresistible that the mightiest single force in North Carolina history during the whole of the Revolutionary period was Cornelius Harnett, of New Hanover County.

Members of the North Carolina Society of the Colonial Dames of America, the honors of this day are yours. In behalf of the city of Wilmington, of the County of New Hanover, of the Lower Cape Fear section, of the State of

(\* ) An address delivered in Wilmington, N. C., May 2, 1907, at the unveiling of the monument erected to Cornelius Harnett by the North Carolina Society of the Colonial Dames of America.

(†) The inscription on Harnett's tomb, "Died April 20, 1781," is plainly incorrect. His will, written in his own handwriting, is dated April 28th. Tradition has it that he died immediately after making his will.

North Carolina, in behalf of the spirit of liberty in whatever breast it beats, I thank you for your memorial to the dead and your incentive to the living. This monument marks a new recognition of Harnett's services to his State and Nation. It means that his fame enters to-day upon another stage of its triumphal progress. It proclaims also that the brave men who wrought with him in camp or council, the knighthood of the Lower Cape Fear, shall again be re-enthroned and re-acknowledged.

“On this green bank, by this soft stream,  
 We set today a votive stone;  
 That memory may their deed redeem,  
 When like our sires, our sons are gone.

Spirit that made those heroes dare  
 To die, and leave their children free,  
 Bid Time and Nature gently spare  
 The shaft we raise to them and thee.”

## II.

This is neither the time nor the place to enter upon a detailed biography of Cornelius Harnett. Such a biography is made possible, however, by the completed publication of the *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina\**. There are in these twenty-six volumes more than eight hundred references to the activities of Cornelius Harnett. A careful reading of these references will convince any one that Harnett not only deserves to rank but will yet rank as a national figure in the history of the American Revolution. So closely was he connected with the Revolutionary movement, so accurately did he typify its spirit and purposes, that there would seem to have been a sort of pre-established harmony between the mind of Cornelius Harnett and the popular impulses of the time.

(\*) “The best printed records are those of New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and North Carolina.” (Hart's *American History Told by Contemporaries*, vol. II, p. 6.)

If it be true, as Browning says, that

“A people is but the attempt of many  
To rise to the completer life of one,”

then Cornelius Harnett is distinctively the Revolutionary hero of North Carolina.

Let me correct at the outset the mistaken idea that Harnett was born in England. This view was universal until the Honorable George Davis, in an address delivered at the University of North Carolina, June 8, 1855, showed that the historians had confused Harnett with his father, Cornelius Harnett, Senior, and that the son was almost certainly born in Chowan County, North Carolina\*. That he was born in North Carolina and probably in Edenton, Chowan County, is plainly established by the following extract from a letter to Harnett written by Governor Caswell, September 2, 1777†: “We have been alarmed with the rising of Tories and forming of conspiracies: the former among the Highlanders and Regulators and in the county in which you had the honor to draw your first breath, and in Bertie and Martin.” He was born April 20, 1723, and was thus but a few months younger than Samuel Adams, of Massachusetts, a name that was to be associated with his in later years by friend and foe.

The only sketch that we have of Harnett's personal appearance is from the pen of Archibald McLaine Hooper, who was a boy when Harnett died and who, as the nephew of William Hooper, signer of the Declaration of Independence, had many opportunities of seeing the

(\*) *Lippincott's Pronouncing Dictionary* and *Drake's Dictionary of American Biography* both say that Harnett was born in England. *Appleton's Cyclopædia of American Biography* (1887) and *Johnson's Universal Cyclopædia* (1894) say “born probably in North Carolina”. The *National Cyclopædia of American Biography* (1897) and the *Biographical History of North Carolina* (article by R. D. W. Connor, vol. II, 1903) add “probably in Chowan County”.

(†) *State Records* XI, p. 603.

man about whom he was to write in after years with affection and reverence. "His stature," says Mr. Hooper,\* "was about five feet, nine inches. In his person he was rather slender than stout. His hair was of light brown, and his eyes hazel. The contour of his face was not striking nor were his features, which were small, remarkable for symmetry; but his countenance was pleasing, and his figure, though not commanding, was neither inelegant nor ungraceful. Easy in his manners, affable, courteous, with a fine taste for letters and a genius for music, he was always an interesting, sometimes a fascinating companion. In conversation he was never voluble. The tongue, an unruly member in most men, was in him nicely regulated by a sound and discriminating judgment. He paid, nevertheless, his full quota into the common stock, for what was wanting in continuity or fullness of expression, was supplied by the glance of his eye, the movement of his hand, and the impressiveness of his pause. Occasionally, too, he imparted animation to discourse by a characteristic smile of such peculiar sweetness and benignity as enlivened every mind and cheered every bosom within the sphere of its radiance."

We know comparatively little of the early years of Harnett's life, but from 1750 to his death in 1781 he had filled every position of honor and trust that a grateful and devoted State could bestow upon him. Justice of the peace for New Hanover, commissioner for the town of Wilmington, member of thirteen colonial assemblies under royal authority, deputy provincial grand master of North America in the Masonic order, chairman of the Wilmington and New Hanover committees of safety, president of the provincial council of safety and thus virtually governor of North Carolina, member of the committee that

(\* See *Life and Letters of Cornelius Harnett* by Honorable David L. Swain (*University Magazine*, vol. X, Feb., 1861, pp. 335-336).

drafted the first constitution of the State, delegate to the Continental Congress at Philadelphia—these positions he not only filled but made illustrious by a courage, ability, and integrity that constitute a priceless asset in the history of our State.

It is not as an office-holder, however, but rather as a leader of men that Harnett has made his most lasting impress upon our Revolutionary history. In crises that demanded coolness of judgment, quickness of action, and fearlessness of consequences the people of the Lower Cape Fear and later of the whole State turned instinctively to Harnett. There was about this man a certain masterfulness both in thought and action that made him naturally and inevitably a leader. As Morley says of Gladstone, "He had none of that detachment, often found among superior minds, which we honor for its disinterestedness even while we lament its impotence in result." Let us glance now at some of the crises in North Carolina history and Harnett's relation to them.

The year 1766 was a critical one in American history. The Stamp Act had been passed the year before by the British Parliament, and the royal governors in the various colonies were finding great difficulty in maintaining their authority. Representatives of nine of the colonial assemblies had met in New York to protest against the oppressions of the Stamp Act and to urge its repeal. North Carolina was not represented at this meeting because Governor Tryon, foreseeing the possibility of united action, had refused to call a meeting of the North Carolina Assembly. Had the other governors been shrewd enough to take this action there would have been no meeting in New York, for the delegates to the meeting were in every case elected by their assemblies. Let us concede at once that Tryon was one of the ablest Englishmen ever sent to the colonies. He could accomplish more by the forcefulness of his personality and the awe inspired by his mere presence than other rulers could do by edicts and armies.

On the morning of February 21, 1766, Tryon had every reason to congratulate himself on the result of his Stamp Act diplomacy and to believe that his next letter to his home government would be a victorious recital of difficulties overcome and insubordination curbed. But he reckoned without his host. He was now to learn that the House of Hanover with all its prestige was no match for the patriot citizens of New Hanover. The letter which he wrote four days later contained the most humiliating acknowledgment of baffled pride and irredeemable failure that Tryon was ever called upon to pen. The letter follows\*:

“It was about 10 o'clock [February 21, 1766] when I observed a body of men in arms from four to five hundred move toward the house [“Castle Tryon” in Brunswick.] A detachment of sixty men came down the avenue, and the main body drew up in front in sight and within three hundred yards of the house. Mr. Harnett, a representative in the Assembly for Wilmington, came at the head of the detachment and sent a message to speak with Mr. Pennington [his Majesty's Comptroller]. When he came to the house he told Mr. Pennington the gentlemen wanted him. I answered: ‘Mr. Pennington came into my house for refuge, he was a Crown Officer, and as such I would give him all the protection my roof and the dignity of the character I held in this Province could afford him.’

“Mr. Harnett hoped I would let him go, as the people were determined to take him out of the house if he should be longer detained, an insult, he said, they wished to avoid offering to me. An insult, I replied, that would not tend to any great consequence after they had already offered every insult they could offer, by investing my house and making me in effect a prisoner before any grievance or oppression had been first represented to

(\*) From Tryon's *Letter Book*, letter to Secretary Conway, February 25, 1766. See *Colonial Records* VII, pp. 172-174.

me. Mr. Pennington grew very uneasy, said he would choose to go to the gentlemen. I again repeated my offers of protection, if he chose to stay. He declared, and desired I would remember, that whatever oaths might be imposed upon him, he should consider them acts of compulsion and not of free will; and further added that he would rather resign his office than do any act contrary to his duty. If that was his determination, I told him he had better resign before he left me.

“Mr. Harnett interposed, with saying he hoped he would not do that. I enforced the recommendation for resignation. He consented, paper was brought and his resignation executed and received. I then said: ‘Mr. Pennington, now, sir, you may go.’ Mr. Harnett went out with him; the detachment retired to the town. Mr. Pennington afterwards informed me they got him in the midst of them when Mr. Ward, master of the *Patience* asked him to enter his sloop. Mr. Pennington assured him he could not as he had resigned his office. He was afterwards obliged to take an oath that he would never issue any stamped paper in this province. The above oath the Collector informed me he was obliged to take, as were all the clerks of the County Courts and other public officers.

“By the last accounts I have received, the number of this insurrection amounted to 580 men in arms and upwards of 100 unarmed. The Mayor and Corporation of Wilmington and most of all the gentlemen and planters of the county of Brunswick, New Hanover, Duplin, and Bladen, with some masters of vessels, composed this corps.”

Before this incident Harnett had been best known as a skillful financier. As far back as December 5, 1759, both houses of the Assembly had made him chairman of a committee to “examine, state, and settle the public accounts of this province.” This tangled business he had unraveled with such dispatch and accuracy that to



the day of his death his primacy in matters of finance was never questioned. But after his defiance of Tryon in 1766—an act performed ten years before the Declaration of Independence and seven years before the Boston Tea Party—Harnett became in an especial sense the leader of his people and the target of British malevolence and denunciation. Every State boasts its heroes of the Stamp Act, but in all the examples of resistance to this oppressive act, I find no deed that equals Harnett's in its blend of courage, dignity, and orderliness. He and Tryon had looked each other in the eyes, and the eyes of the Englishman had quailed.

The year 1771 witnessed another crisis in North Carolina history, the uprising of the Regulators, culminating on the 16th of May in the Battle of Alamance. To one who studies carefully the character of Harnett it occasions no surprise that he did not sympathize with the Regulators. He had neither the mind of a visionary nor the temper of an insurrectionist. He knew that the time was not ripe for measuring swords with the armies of King George. He saw clearly also that the Regulators were held together not by the cohesion of principle but merely by a common hatred of governmental officials and a determination to wreak vengeance upon them. No man felt more keenly than Harnett the difference between liberty and license. To his mind the Regulators were playing with fire; they were adopting measures that were neither remedial nor palliative; they were jeopardizing the very existence of free institutions and constituted authority.

Willing always to back his opinions by a generous expenditure of his means, Harnett contributed more money to the anti-Regulator movement than any other citizen in the colony. At its first meeting after the Battle of Alamance the Assembly voted unanimously to reimburse Harnett, but refused to reimburse the Honorable

Samuel Cornell. The resolution reads as follows\*:

“This house cannot agree to the allowance proposed to be made to Honorable Samuel Cornell, Esq., though thoroughly convinced of his merit and activity in the late expedition. The allowance to Mr. Harnett was made not only because his services entitled him to the notice of this house, but in consideration of his not having been in any office or employment from which he could possibly derive any compensation for the great expense he was at in that expedition.”

Harnett's attitude toward the Regulators was not only approved by the Assembly, but was vindicated by the course of events. When the great Revolution came, it proved to be in no sense an outgrowth of the movement started by the Regulators. Most of the Regulators were Tories during the whole of the Revolutionary War.† That there were good and patriotic men among the Regulators in 1771 no student of our history can doubt; that the Battle of Alamance served to turn the minds of thoughtful men to the imminence of a final break with England is equally probable. Our debt, however, to Harnett and the other far-sighted leaders of the time who rallied around him is none the less real. They proved to the world that the Revolution in North Carolina was to be led by men who knew as by instinct the difference between lawlessness and self-government, who had weighed the questions at issue in the scales of pure

(\* ) *Colonial Records* IX, p. 205.

(†) The Battle of Alamance and the character of those who took part in it will doubtless be discussed for centuries to come. See Professor John S. Bassett's article on *The Regulators of North Carolina* in the Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1894, p. 211. See also Joseph M. Morehead's *James Hunter* (1897), Haywood's *Governor William Tryon and his Administration in the Province of North Carolina* (1903), Waddell's *A Colonial Officer and his Times* (1890), and Mrs. McCorkle's *Was Alamance the First Battle of the Revolution?* (in *The North Carolina Booklet*, November, 1903).

principle, and who ceased to be loyal to England only that they might pledge undying loyalty to the spirit of liberty.

Men were still discussing the Battle of Alamance when in May, 1775, the news came to North Carolina of the Battle of Lexington. The times were ripe now and the whole province was ready for the impending conflict. Harnett heard the news on May 8. "For God's sake," he cried, "send the man on without the least delay and write to Mr. Marion to forward it by day and night." During the same month Mecklenburg County draws up the first Declaration of Independence and inscribes the first date on the flag of North Carolina. On the 16th of July, Governor Josiah Martin begs his home government to proscribe at least four North Carolinians\*: "Hearing of a proclamation of the king, proscribing John Hancock and Samuel Adams, of Massachusetts, I hold it my indispensable duty to mention to your lordship Cornelius Harnett, John Ashe, Robert Howe, and Abner Nash as persons who have marked themselves out as proper persons for such distinction in this colony by their unremitting labours to promote sedition and rebellion here from the beginnings of the discontents in America to this time; that they stand foremost among the patrons of revolt and anarchy." On the 18th of October, 1775, the first meeting of the new provincial council was held at Johnston court house. The council represented every district of the province, and no abler body of men had ever met in North Carolina. Bancroft†, with apt phraseology, characterizes three of the leaders in the council, but adds: "On none of these three did the choice of president fall; that office of peril and power was bestowed unanimously on Cornelius Harnett, whose disinterested zeal had made him honored as the Samuel Adams of North Carolina." This council

(\* ) *Colonial Records* X, p. 98.

(†) *History of the United States* vol. VIII, p. 98.

was soon required to sit continuously. It was called the council of safety, and Harnett remained president and thus the chief executive of the province until a few months of the time when he was sent as a delegate to the Continental Congress at Philadelphia.

The year 1776 opened ominously for North Carolina. The Scotch Highlanders in the Lower Cape Fear section constituted an element of danger. They had raised the royalist standard and under General Donald McDonald, a hero of Colloden, were eager to vindicate the confidence reposed in them by King George. Should the Highlanders win their first battle, North Carolina would not only be overrun by English troops but would be used as a radiating center from which devastating armies would march into the other Southern colonies. Harnett and his council were unremitting in their labors and seem to have had the situation well in hand from the start. With such men as James Moore, Richard Caswell, Alexander Lillington, John Ashe, and James Kenan as leaders of the colonial troops, Harnett waited impatiently but confidently for news of the first victory to be won by American arms in a pitched battle of the Revolution. The official report of the battle was sent by Caswell to "Cornelius Harnett, President." It is hardly probable that Harnett or any of the council had anticipated so decisive and glorious a victory as was actually achieved. At Moore's Creek Bridge\*, eighteen miles northwest of Wilmington, February 27, 1776, in a battle lasting but a few minutes, sixteen hundred Tories had been defeated by one thousand patriots, the power of the Highlanders had been forever broken, and the first stanza in the battle hymn of American freedom had been written on North Carolina soil by the heroes of the Lower Cape Fear.

(\*) See the interesting paper on *The Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge* by Professor M. C. S. Noble in *The North Carolina Booklet*, March, 1904.

Moore's Creek was the Rubicon over which North Carolina passed to independence and to constitutional self-government. As far back as April 26, 1774, William Hooper, of New Hanover County, in a strain of prophecy antedating by a year the like anticipations of Washington and Jefferson, had written to James Iredell\* that the colonies "are striding fast to independence, and ere long will build an empire upon the ruins of Great Britain; will adopt its constitution purged of its impurities, and from its defects will guard against those evils which have wasted its vigor." Fortunately the colonies were not destined to build an empire "upon the ruins of Great Britain"; but before the close of the year 1776 North Carolina, under the lead of her council, was to fulfill accurately all the other terms of Hooper's remarkable forecast.

The date of the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge is not inscribed upon the flag of North Carolina but it is related to the second date on our flag, April 12, 1776, as cause to effect. Had there been no Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge or had the battle resulted in a defeat for the colonial troops, North Carolina could not so soon have proclaimed her independence. This initial victory of the Revolution, won by Caswell and Lillington, kindled the fires of patriotism, brought ten thousand eager soldiers into the field, sent Cornwallis and Clinton scurrying out of our borders, gave confidence to our leaders, nullified the threat of Highlander and Regulator, fused the state into a unit for independence, and thus made possible and inevitable the proudest date in North Carolina history.

"North Carolina," says Bancroft†, "was the first colony to vote explicit sanction to independence." Frothingham‡

(\* See p. 38 of Dr. E. A. Alderman's eloquent Address on William Hooper, delivered July 4, 1894, at the Guilford Battle Ground.

(†) *History of the United States*, vol. VIII, p. 352.

(‡) *Rise of the Republic of the United States*, p. 502.

phrases it more accurately: "North Carolina was the first colony to act as a unit in favor of independence." But the clearest account is given by Henry William Elson.\* "Up to April, 1776," says he, "all the talk of independence had been private talk. This showed the drift of popular feeling, but something more must be done to achieve it. North Carolina won the honor of being first to make an official move. On the 12th of April that colony instructed its delegates in congress 'to concur with the delegates of the other colonies in declaring independence and forming foreign alliances.' This was a move of the greatest importance, and it was but a short time until Rhode Island and then Massachusetts followed the example of their Southern sister. The fourth colony to pronounce for independence was Virginia, which went farther than the others by instructing its delegates to propose independence to the Continental Congress."

In spite of these patent and admitted facts, Lecky says, in a work† still lauded and quoted as an authority on both sides of the Atlantic: "The Central and Southern Colonies long hesitated to follow New England. Massachusetts had thrown herself with fierce energy into the conflict, and soon drew the other colonies in her wake." The monument that we unveil today is a monument not only to Harnett and the other heroes of the Lower Cape Fear, but to the truth of history and the duty of preserving and defending it.

Harnett's share in the achievement of April 12 has been ignored even by the historians who concede most freely the significance of the date in American history. The convention met at Halifax on the 4th of April. On the 8th of April it was resolved‡, "That Mr. Harnett, Mr. Allen Jones, Mr. Burke, Mr. Nash, Mr.

(\*) *History of the United States of America*, 1904, p. 252.

(†) *History of the Eighteenth Century*, vol. III, p. 386.

(‡) *Colonial Records X*, p. 504.

Kinchen, Mr. Thomas Person, and Mr. Thomas Jones be a select committee to take into consideration the usurpations and violences attempted and committed by the King and Parliament of Britain against America, and the further measures to be taken for frustrating the same, and for the better defence of this Province." As chairman of this select committee Harnett wrote the famous report, and on the 12th of April read it to the convention. It was immediately and unanimously adopted.

In ringing sentences, not unworthy of Burke or Pitt, the report set forth in a short preamble the usurpations of the British Ministry and "the moderation hitherto manifested by the United Colonies." Then came the declaration which to those who made it meant long years of desolating war, smoking homesteads, widowed mothers, and fatherless children, but to us and our descendants a heritage of imperishable glory: "Resolved\*, That the delegates for this Colony in the Continental Congress be empowered to concur with the delegates of the other Colonies in declaring Independency, and forming foreign alliances, reserving to this Colony the sole and exclusive right of forming a Constitution and laws for this Colony, and of appointing delegates from time to time (under the direction of a general representation thereof,) to meet the delegates of the other Colonies for such purposes as shall be hereafter pointed out." Had Harnett done nothing else than write these words, the most memorable and far-reaching ever uttered in a state convention, he would have amply deserved the granite shaft which today we uncover to his memory.

A few months later the little town of Halifax was to witness another historic scene, Harnett again being the central figure. Late in July the news had come that the example of North Carolina had been followed

(\*) *Colonial Records* X, p. 512.

by all the other colonies, that on the 4th of July the Declaration of Independence, prepared by Thomas Jefferson, had been adopted and signed by all the delegates of the thirteen colonies. The council of safety for North Carolina immediately resolved\* "That Tuesday, the first day of August next, be set apart for proclaiming the said Declaration at the Court House in the Town of Halifax". It is needless to say that when August 1 came, no question was raised as to who should read the great document. There was one man and only one whose name in every hamlet in North Carolina stood as the supreme embodiment of independence. Hardly four months had passed since he had read his own immortal declaration, and the declaration which he was now to read was but the enactment by a Continental Congress of what he had proposed to a provincial congress. It is no wonder that when Harnett concluded the reading, "the soldiers bore him on their shoulders through the streets of the town, applauding him as their champion and swearing allegiance to the instrument he had read†".

The year 1776 was to close with another memorable event which took place also at Halifax. This was the adoption on the 18th of December of the first constitution for North Carolina. For more than a year, from October 18, 1775, to December 18, 1776, the colony had been governed by the council of safety with Cornelius Harnett as President. During all this time no charge was ever brought against any member of the council, no protest was made against any of their decisions, no rivalry or intrigue from within marred the force of their authority, and no faction or insurrection from without stayed the arm of their power.

But the Continental Congress had urged the States to form constitutions, many of them had already complied,

(\*)*Colonial Records* X, p. 688.

(†) See *Defence of the Revolutionary History of North Carolina* (1834) by Joseph Seawell Jones, and *Colonial Records* X, p. 716.



and the council of safety for North Carolina had itself broached the question of a "temporary civil constitution\*" the day after the declaration of April 12. The convention at Halifax did its work so well that the constitution there formed continued in use without the slightest change until 1835.

Richard Caswell, a native of Maryland but one of the heroes of Moore's Creek Bridge, presided over the convention and became the first governor of North Carolina under the new constitution. Harnett was vice-president of the convention and was chosen first councilor of state. What parts these two leaders took in the discussions of the convention it is impossible to say. Harnett's position as vice-president was doubtless designed to give him greater freedom of debate and thus to enable the convention to draw upon his unequalled stores of civic wisdom and political experience.

Tradition maintains that Harnett caused the insertion of section XXXIV†: "That there shall be no Establishment of any one religious Church or Denomination in this State in Preference to any other, neither shall any person, on any pretence whatsoever, be compelled to attend any Place of worship contrary to his own faith and Judgment, or be obliged to pay for the purchase of any Glebe, or the building of any House of Worship, or for the maintenance of any Minister or Ministry, contrary to what he believes right, or has voluntarily and personally engaged to perform, but all persons shall be at Liberty to exercise their own mode of Worship." It may be remarked in this connection that the Bill of Religious Freedom, prepared by Jefferson for Virginia, did not pass until 1799, and that Jefferson justly considered the authorship of this Bill worthy of commemoration on his tomb.

The most difficult task before the constitutional con-

(\*) See *Colonial Records* X, p. 515.

(†) *Colonial Records* X, p. 1011.

vention was undoubtedly that of defining the powers of the governor. North Carolina had suffered under her governors, both proprietary and royal. She was in no mood now to make her chief executive a dictator, nor could she ignore the fact that the exigencies of war demanded a strong directive power at the helm. Fortunately there is a bit of evidence that shows that Harnett did more than any one else to settle this complicated question. In a letter\* written February 7, 1778, Governor Caswell complains that his powers are too limited, and adds incidentally that if any one is to blame for this state of things, that man is Cornelius Harnett.

The new constitution was but a few months old when in April, 1777, Harnett was unanimously elected a delegate to the Continental Congress, which was then holding its session at York, twenty-two miles southeast of Pittsburg, and also at Philadelphia. The position of delegate to the Continental Congress was considered "the highest honor that a free state can bestow"† It had long been a foregone conclusion that Harnett would be sent to the Continental Congress, and for this reason the constitutional convention at Halifax had not presented his name for governor. His abilities, his services, his national renown alike demanded that he should sit in the same representative body with Samuel Adams of Massachusetts and Thomas Jefferson of Virginia. The opportunity came when William Hooper resigned his position as delegate. North Carolina's three delegates were then Cornelius Harnett, Thomas Burke, and John Penn.‡

Harnett's letters from the Continental Congress throw an interesting side light on his character. That he brought a truly national spirit to his new duties is shown by the sorrow and indignation with which he notes in

(\*) *State Records XIII*, p. 31.

(†) *State Records XI*, p. 827.

(‡) *State Records XI*, p. 470.

one of his letters "the ridiculous jealousy between North and South\*". He speaks of himself as an old man now and longs to be again in Wilmington. His mind was never more active but his body was tortured with the gout. He was inoculated on his way to Philadelphia and was thus unable to attend the first few meetings of the Congress held after his arrival. The universal dread of smallpox is indicated in a letter† that he wrote from Philadelphia, July 20, 1777, to his friend and business associate, William Wilkinson, Esq., of Wilmington: "I was inoculated at Port Tobacco and had the disorder very favorably. My arm continues very sore and inflamed, indeed so bad that I cannot wear a coat, and has prevented my attending Congress, though I arrived here the 18th. Inclosed is a letter for Mrs. Harnett which I must beg the favor of you to have well smoked with brimstone, as she is very fearful of the smallpox. I put all my letters in the sun for an hour before I seal them, and am very certain the infection cannot be conveyed in a letter so far, but it is best to be cautious".

The following letter‡ to Mr. Wilkinson carries its own brimstone. It is written from York, Pennsylvania, December 28, 1777: "Tell Mrs. Harnett (for I forgot to mention it to her) that two or three gallons of pickled oysters would be the greatest rarity she could send me. I have not tasted one since I left home—also a few dried fish of any kind, a dozen or two; even if they stank they would be pleasing. I am heartily tired of eating the flesh of four-footed animals. We can get very little else in this plentiful country that you have so often praised and even bragged of. Believe me it is the most inhospitable scandalous place I ever was in. If I once more can return to my family, all the devils in hell shall not separate us".

(\* ) *State Records XI*, p. 826.

(† ) *State Records XI*, p. 741.

(‡ ) *State Records XI*, p. 827.

To Governor Caswell he writes\*, March 20, 1778, that he does not desire re-appointment but adds: "I think it is my duty to serve my country to the best of my poor abilities, either with or without pay". The extent of his financial sacrifices is touched upon in a letter† from Philadelphia to Thomas Burke, October 9, 1779: "I shall return indebted to my country at least 6000 pounds, and you know very well how we lived. Do not mention this complaint to any person. I am content to sit down with this loss and much *more*, if my country requires it".

In the following urgent letter‡ to Thomas Burke, written December 16, 1777, the last that I shall quote, the characteristic determination and unshaken confidence of Harnett stand clearly revealed. His ruling desire is that North Carolina may prove worthy of the responsibility laid upon her: "I beg you will inform me of the temper you find our Assembly in. Are they inclined to pursue spirited measures? For God's sake fill up your battalions, lay taxes, put a stop to the sordid and avaricious spirit which infected all ranks and conditions of men. All our foreign intelligence indicates that Europe will soon be in a flame. Let us not depend upon this. If we have virtue, we certainly have power to work out our own salvation, I hope without fear and trembling".

In the winter of 1780, having signed the Articles of Confederation in the summer of 1778, Harnett journeyed for the last time back to Wilmington. The trip was a severe one and Harnett's health, never very robust, was ill able to stand the strain to which it was now subjected. The tide of battle had turned southward and Harnett knew his danger. Every proclamation of British amnesty had expressly excepted him from its provisions, and when at last Wilmington fell into the hands of the enemy, January 29, 1781, their every effort was bent

(\*) *State Records* XIII, p. 385.

(†) *State Records* XIV, p. 348.

(‡) *State Records* XI, p. 696.

toward his capture. Harnett had with him a large sum of money\* for the purchase of clothing and munitions of war for the North Carolina troops. This sum he managed to convey beyond the reach of danger and would himself have escaped had not a paroxysm of gout rendered him helpless. In Onslow County, thirty-two miles from Wilmington, at the home of his friend, Colonel Spicer, he was captured and carried at once to Wilmington. His sufferings were intense, but he is said to have declined the advice of physicians though grateful for their kind attentions. The end probably came on the 28th of April. A few hours before his death he wrote his will and dictated a couplet from Pope's *Essay on Man* to serve as his epitaph.

If it be true that

"The sunset of life gives us mystical lore  
And coming events cast their shadows before",

let us believe that though he did not live to see the consummation of his labors, there yet passed before his dying eyes the vision of a great and grateful commonwealth and that through the vista of the years he saw himself acclaimed as its foremost builder and its most illustrious martyr.

### III.

Harnett had been dead nearly fifty years when in 1825 a book was published in Boston entitled *The Memoir of the Life of Josiah Quincy, Jun.*, by his son Josiah Quincy. Josiah Quincy, Jun., one of the foremost orators and patriots† of Boston during Revolutionary times, was advised by his physicians in 1773 to make a sea voyage to Charleston, South Carolina, for his health. On his

(\*) See *Notes* by Archibald McLaine Hooper in *University Magazine*, vol. X, p. 234 (1861).

(†) His best known work is his *Observations on the Act of Parliament commonly called the Boston Port Bill* (1774).

return trip he traveled through North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and New York, making notes in his diary of the most interesting persons and things that he saw. On the 30th of March, 1773, he visited Wilmington and made the following entry in his diary: "Dined with about twenty at Mr. William Hooper's—find him apparently in the Whig interest,—has taken their side in the House—is caressed by the Whigs, and is now passing his election through the influence of that party. Spent the night at Mr. Harnett's, the Samuel Adams of North Carolina (except in point of fortune\*). Robert Howe, Esq., Harnett, and myself made the social triumvirate of the evening. The plan of continental correspondence highly relished, much wished for, and resolved upon as proper to be pursued".

When this comparison was made between Harnett and Adams, the latter was at the height of his fame, and such was Quincy's admiration for the New Englander that when dying at sea (April 26, 1775) Quincy was heard to murmur†: "I have but one desire and one prayer, that I may live long enough to have an interview with Samuel Adams or Joseph Warren; that granted, I shall die content". Though Quincy talked with the leading men in all the colonies that he visited, he nowhere else likens any one to his beau-ideal, Samuel Adams.

From 1825, when this tribute to Harnett was first made public, the recognition of his work has grown steadily until the present time. If it be true that in the career of Harnett can be traced the history of North Carolina during the Revolutionary period, it is no less true that in the growing recognition of Harnett's servi-

(\*) Harnett was perhaps the richest man in North Carolina. Adams's circumstances were such that when he was sent as a delegate to the first Continental Congress in Philadelphia his friends presented him with a wig, hat, coat, and pair of shoes that he might make a creditable appearance. See Hosmer's *Samuel Adams* p. 308.

(†) *Memoir* p. 345.

ces may be traced the deepening realization of our debt not only to him but to all of his co-workers. I shall mention, therefore, in chronological order the more noteworthy tributes to Harnett's memory, tributes that culminate today in the permanent memorial which we have just unveiled.

In 1834 the Boston press of Charles Bowen published the *Defence of the Revolutionary History of North Carolina* by Joseph Seawell Jones. In this work, which was widely circulated, Quincy's reference to his Wilmington visit was cited in full, and Harnett's services as president of the council of safety received a just appraisal. In 1844, in the *Wilmington Chronicle* for August 21, there appeared an appreciative memoir of Harnett which was reproduced in the *Raleigh Register* of August 30 and which gave Lossing the only material that he had for the sketch of Harnett in his famous *Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution* (volume II, 1852).

In 1851 Dr. Calvin H. Wiley published in London, from the press of Willoughby and Company, a novel\* called *The Adventures of Old Dan Tucker and his Son Walter: A Tale of North Carolina*. It is a Revolutionary story and went through several editions, Harnett figuring as one of the characters. "Here at all times," says Dr. Wiley, speaking of the Lower Cape Fear, "have lived some of the brightest ornaments of the State; and in the Revolution there were men who would have been giants anywhere. Cornelius Harnett, who was one of the guests of Col. Ashe, cut a distinguished figure in the councils of North Carolina during the war of the Revolution. He was a gentleman of fortune and education, fitted by nature and study to shine in any society; and yet, fond of retirement, modest and unceremonious, he was not conspicuous except in troublous times, and then he was the master-spirit".

(\* The story was begun in *Sartain's Union Magazine*, Philadelphia, March, 1849.

During the same year the first volume of Wheeler's *History of North Carolina* called attention to the need of a biography of Harnett. "It is a matter of deep regret," says the author, "that more of the history of this distinguished man, whose life was offered up to his country, is not known. It is hoped that this feeble notice [it is full of errors] will excite some friend of the State to collect and collate the full biography of this worthy citizen. Last Session of our General Assembly a proposition was made to name a county Harnett". In 1854, however, the motion which, from ignorance of North Carolina history, failed to pass in 1851 was carried unanimously, and Harnett County, with the appropriate name of Lillington for its county seat, marked the first recognition by the State at large of its indebtedness to the hero of the Lower Cape Fear.

The year 1855 witnessed a greatly increased interest in Harnett. The Wilmington Historical Society determined to erect suitable monuments\* not only to Harnett but to Lillington, Moore, and Howe—a determination which, however, was not carried out. Mr. Griffith McRee, of Wilmington, contributed to the *Wilmington Daily Herald* a eulogy of Harnett, which was copied in the April number of the *University Magazine*. The annual address before the literary societies of the University was delivered, June 8, by the Hon. George Davis, of Wilmington, his topic being *A Sketch of the Early Times and Men of the Lower Cape Fear*. "There was one", said the speaker, "who shone like a star in the early troubles of the State, of pure and exalted character, of unsurpassed influence with his countrymen, and the value of whose services was only equalled by the extent of his sufferings and sacrifices in the cause of liberty. And yet so little is he known that I doubt not, gentlemen, many of you have not even so much as heard his name. I speak of Cornelius Harnett, the pride of

(\*) See *University Magazine* vol. IV, p. 136, (1855).



the Cape Fear, the Samuel Adams of North Carolina". Extracts from this eloquent address were afterwards sent to all the public schools in the State to be used in the celebration of North Carolina day, December 18, 1903.

In 1861 the Hon. David L. Swain, President of the University of North Carolina, published in the *University Magazine* for February a study of *The Life and Letters of Cornelius Harnett*. In this article President Swain quotes liberally from the Hon. George Davis's address but adds little of his own. The article owes its chief value, however, to the part contributed by Archibald McLaine Hooper. His manuscript entitled *Notes Relative to Cornelius Harnett* had come into the possession of President Swain and was now published for the first time. As Hooper in his boyhood knew Harnett, the *Notes* are of great value, though some of the statements, especially in regard to Harnett's religious beliefs\*, must be accepted with reservation.

(\*) Utterly unwarranted inferences have been drawn from the couplet which Harnett asked to be placed on his tomb—

“Slave to no sect, he took no private road,  
But looked through Nature up to Nature's God”.

(*Essay on Man*, Epistle IV, lines 331-332.

The whole passage, one of the most splendid in eighteenth century literature, is as follows:

“See the sole bliss Heav'n could on all bestow!  
Which who but feels can taste, but thinks can know:  
Yet poor with fortune, and with learning blind,  
The bad must miss; the good, untaught, will find;  
Slave to no sect, who takes no private road,  
But looks through Nature up to Nature's God;  
Pursues that Chain which links th' immense design,  
Joins Heav'n and earth, and mortal and divine;  
Sees that no Being any bliss can know,  
But touches some above, and some below;  
Learns, from this union of the rising Whole,  
The first, last purpose of the human soul;  
And knows, where Faith, Law, Morals, all began,  
All end in Love of God and Love of Man.”

In 1872 Richard Frothingham, the New England historian and journalist, published his well-known *Rise of the Republic of the United States*. This work was based on a study of original sources and is quoted by historians as the most authoritative treatment of its subject yet published. Frothingham, as we have seen, concedes the priority of North Carolina in voting for independence and adds that among the North Carolina leaders "Harnett was the foremost actor in the movement for independence".

On the 3rd of February, 1890, Colonel James G. Burr, of Wilmington, a man of antiquarian tastes and scholarly attainments, delivered in the opera house of this city an address on *The Old Churchyard of St. James*. This address was given wide circulation by being republished in the *James Sprunt Historical Monograph*\* No. 4 (1904). As Colonel Burr was born in Wilmington, in 1818, and had the privilege in his early years of conversing with men who had known Harnett personally, his account of Harnett's capture is practically that of an eye-witness, and his estimate of Harnett's services may be said to reflect the opinions of many of Harnett's contemporaries: "While lying sick at the house of a friend on the New Berne road he was captured by a party sent out by Major Craig, the British Commandant of the town. His merciless captors compelled him to walk until he sank to the ground from utter exhaustion. Then they threw him like a sack of meal across the back of a horse and thus brought him into Wilmington. The effect of such treatment upon a system enfeebled by disease could have no other than a fatal termination. He sank under it, and the old churchyard of St. James contains all that was mortal of the first scholar, statesman, and patriot of the age in which he lived."

In 1903 Mr. R. D. W. Connor, Secretary of the North Carolina Historical Commission, contributed a series of

(\*) Issued by the press of the University of North Carolina.

articles on Harnett to the *Charlotte Observer*\*. These articles bore further fruit in the sketches of Harnett which Mr. Connor published in *The Biographical History of North Carolina* (vol. II, 1905) and in *The North Carolina Booklet* for January, 1906. It was also in 1903 that Honorable Thomas E. Watson, of Georgia, published his *Life and Times of Thomas Jefferson*. In speaking of the Declaration of Independence, written by Jefferson, Mr. Watson says: "Already Cornelius Harnett had led the way to Independence in North Carolina. The fact that North Carolina had given the first tap to the drum in the grand march of Independence was, indeed, long disputed; and the name of Cornelius Harnett was unknown to historians. He was serving as president of a Revolutionary government in October, 1775."

Ten days ago Dr. John Lesslie Hall, of the College of William and Mary, published his *Half-Hours in Southern History*†. In this book he speaks of Harnett as follows:

"Not all the heroes can serve on the field of battle. Among civic heroes and martyrs, Cornelius Harnett, called by Josiah Quincy 'the Samuel Adams of North Carolina', stands pre-eminent. He made his first reputation as an opponent of the Stamp Act; then he served on the Intercolonial Committee of Correspondence; sat in the Provincial Congress of North Carolina; was for a while acting-governor of the State; exerted great influence in inducing North Carolina to declare for independence; was branded by Sir Henry Clinton as a rebel beyond the pale of forgiveness. On July 25, 1776, after he had read the Declaration of Independence to a great throng at Halifax they bore him on their shoulders in

(\* See issues of January 4 and 18, February 1 and 15, March 8, April 5, May 11, June 21 and 28, July 26, August 9 and 30, September 13, October 25, November 22, and December 10.

(†) From the press of the B. F. Johnson Publishing Co., Richmond.

triumph through the town. In the drafting of the State Constitution in 1776, he became the father of religious liberty in North Carolina. He fearlessly dared the dungeon and the scaffold. When the British captured the Cape Fear region, Harnett was thrown into prison, and died in captivity."

#### IV.

Though these tributes to Harnett show that he has not been forgotten, they show also that his name does not appear in the American Statesmen Series, the American Men of Energy Series, the American Crises Biographies, or in any other series of historic lives. He is mentioned here and there by special investigators in Revolutionary history but his name is not to be found in the index to any recent history of the United States. That he deserves a place in United States history and in American biography is proved by the mere recital of what he did. The omission is not due to Northern prejudice or insularity but to the fact that no North Carolinian has yet written a life of Harnett. It is not to our credit that the hope expressed by Wheeler more than a half century ago in the first volume of his *History of North Carolina* remains as yet unfulfilled. If the Revolutionary history of North Carolina is ever to be given its meed of recognition by American historians, that history must be woven about the lives of our Revolutionary heroes.

Two weeks ago the last volume of the *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina* came from the press. These volumes have received the unstinted praise of every school of historians, North and South. The first duty that we now owe to Harnett is to see that his life is adequately written. He must be portrayed not merely as a North Carolinian but as an American, and documentary evidence must be cited rather than individual opinion. When this is done, Harnett will rank as one of the

national figures of the American Revolution, and the history of North Carolina will no longer seem an isolated fragment but an organic part of a larger whole.

One other thought in conclusion: It is not the painstaking biographer alone who contributes to history. The finer work of giving color, coherence, and vitality must come from the literary artist. Formal biographies and text-books of history can never carry as far as history translated into literature. Samuel Adams is not more widely known than Paul Revere. Marlborough said that he learned all of his English history from the dramas of Shakespeare. The world knows Scottish history not from Burton's learned volumes but from the pages of Walter Scott and Robert Burns.

"And what for this frail world, were all  
That mortals do or suffer,  
Did no responsive harp, no pen,  
Memorial tribute offer?"

The historian may galvanize the past, but the poet vitalizes it. Enshrine history in literature and you give it both currency and permanency.

The most suggestive thought in Rostand's *L'Aiglon* is that expressed by an old soldier in speaking of his dead commander, Napoleon Bonaparte :

"C'est maintenant qu'il fait ses plus belles conquêtes:  
Il n'a plus de soldats, mais il a les poètes."

In a recent address\*, the Honorable Henry Sherman Boutell used the following striking words: "Poets make many of our national heroes; and Massachusetts, my native State, has furnished the nation with most of our Revolutionary heroes; not because North Carolina and the other States of the Old Thirteen had no heroes, but because Massachusetts had the poets."

But Massachusetts did not always have the poets. When Rufus Choate in 1833 made his memorable appeal†

(\* ) Delivered at the University of North Carolina, May 31, 1905.

(†) See *Old South Leaflets* No. 110.

for the illustration of New England history by a series of poems and romances, the outlook was far from encouraging. New England had then no distinctive literature; nor had a single poet or prose-writer touched with the wand of his genius any event or locality in New England history. But in less than ten years from the time of Mr. Choate's address Emerson had written his great *Concord Hymn* and Hawthorne his *Twice-Told Tales*. The movement was now on, and in rapid succession, *Mosses from an Old Manse*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of the Seven Gables*, *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, and *Paul Revere's Ride* completed a cycle that has done more to popularize the history of Massachusetts than all the historians from William Bradford to John Fiske.

We hear much today of North Carolina's undeveloped resources,—of her hidden ores, her tumbling waters, and her unscarred forests. But greater than all these, more potent by far in their message to heart and brain, are the resources of a history rich in romantic appeal and resplendent in civic heroisms. These are the undeveloped resources that are waiting to become a part of the spiritual heritage of every child born within our borders.

There may be listening to me today some man or woman, some boy or girl, whose heart Almighty God has dowered with

“The light that never was, on sea or land,  
The consecration and the poet's dream”,

and who will yet transmute the base metal of our history into the pure gold of poetry and romance. If my voice could reach into every home and schoolroom in North Carolina, I would say, There is no higher call than this, no opportunity for service more exalted and beneficent. When our history shall have been thus written, the heroes of the Lower Cape Fear will rise to a new immortality; they will have become a part of a nation's

song and story; they will have joined the choir invisible

“Of those immortal dead who live again  
In minds made better by their presence”;

and the monument which we unveil today will be a monument not to the dead but to the ever living and the ever loved.