

# Redeeming the Fathers of America

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## Carter Braxton, Virginia 1736-1797

Carter Braxton was born on September 11, 1736 in King and Queen County, Virginia. Carter's grandfather, George Braxton Sr. immigrated from London to Virginia about 1690, lived at Mantua Estate on the Mattoponi River, and married Elizabeth Paulin. Carter's father, George Braxton Jr. was a wealthy merchant-planter.

Carter's mother, Mary Carter Braxton was the daughter of Robert Carter, who served as president of the Virginia Royal Council. Robert Carter was known throughout the region as "King Carter" due to his extensive plantation holdings, which were estimated at 300,000 acres. It is also recorded that he maintained about 1,000 slaves to take care of his estate.

The Carter family owned what was called the Corotoman Estate from 1653 to 1862, which included 48 plantations, farms, and Indian Town and Hill Quarters. Robert Carter was born on the Corotoman Estate in 1663. The famous Christ Church was built by Carter on Corotoman in 1732, where he served on a vestryman committee. Robert also served in the House of Burgesses (1696-1698), as treasurer of the colony (1699-1705), a senior member and president of the king's council, and acting governor (1726-1727). Among his descendants were three signers of the Declaration of Independence; Carter Braxton, Benjamin Harrison, and Thomas Nelson.

I encourage the reader to study the life of Robert Carter III, son of "King Carter." In 1788 Robert III was investigating several religions when he came across the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. He was so moved by Swedenborg that he had an apparent religious conversion, which resulted in a change of heart regarding his slaves. In his will Robert III emancipated almost 600 men, women, and children.



On Carter Braxton's side of the family, his grandfather, George Braxton Sr. was ranked among the top 100 landowners in northern Virginia. He owned a ship that sailed to the West Indies, where he was an active participant in the slave trade. Carter experienced death many times during his early years, beginning with the loss of his grandfather when he was twelve. Carter's father George Jr. took over his father's estate, but he too passed away in 1749, when Carter and his younger brother were still adolescents.

Speaker of the House of Burgesses, John Robinson and a neighbor, Humphrey Hill stepped in as guardians of the two children. This relationship would bring Carter great understanding and advantage in his later years. Robinson and Hill made sure the two Braxton children were educated at the College of William and Mary, while learning to manage their estate.

Braxton's fortune afforded him a life of luxury among the land aristocracy of Virginia. As a result, there was no need for Carter to pursue a profession, instead he enjoyed his life as a gentleman planter. He purchased his first estate named Elsing Green around 1753, which consisted of 2,254 acres along the banks of the Pamunkey River.

After graduating from William and Marry, Carter Braxton married Judith Robinson, the daughter of a wealthy land owner, Christopher Robinson. This increased the Braxton holdings considerably. Judith passed away shortly after giving birth to their second child.

Devastated by his grief, Carter moved to England, where and remained for three years. As one can imagine, his wealth and status opened doors for Carter to glean important details regarding the English government's perspective and sentiment toward the colonies. These insights would serve him well in the fight for independence from British oppression.

In 1760, he returned to Virginia where he was elected to the House of Burgesses, as President of the King's Council, and Royal Receiver General of Customs for Virginia.

In 1761, Braxton married Elizabeth Corbin. Elizabeth, daughter of Colonel Richard and Elizabeth Tayloe Corbin, bore sixteen children, six of whom died in infancy.<sup>2, 4, 6</sup> Colonel Corbin was educated in England, where he too gained insights on the British opinion of the colonists.

Carter was known as one of the most conservative members of the Virginia house along with Benjamin Harrison, Francis Lightfoot Lee, George Wythe, Richard Henry Lee, Thomas

Jefferson, and Thomas Nelson Jr. This team of patriots faced some of the most oppressive acts of our colonial history, such as the Sugar and Currency Acts of 1764, the Stamp Act of 1765, the Quartering Act of 1765.<sup>6</sup>

Braxton was active in the 1765 house when Patrick Henry brought forth a fiery speech on the Resolutions to the Stamp Act, condemning British taxation upon the colonies. This resolution was 'a spark that lit the fire,' resulting perhaps in the most effective action to date, the passage of the non-importation agreements of 1766. This document officially rejected goods from British merchant ships creating considerable financial suffering to England's trade. It also affected the ability of custom offices to collect taxes on merchandise. This strategy initially impacted Virginia and Massachusetts sea ports, but its success made possible the passing of the Townshend Revenue Act of 1774, which became the first colony-wide proposal to pass under what was became known as The Association.<sup>5</sup>

Keep in mind that Carter Braxton had been appointed to oversee commerce as a member of The Committee of Trade and the Committee of Propositions and Grievances, wherein he could effectively address issues regarding taxation, rights of redress, and the right to petition the king, or his governor.<sup>7</sup>

This brings me to the nature and disposition of royal governor, Lord Botetourt who served as Virginia's Royal Governor from 1768-1770. He has been described as calm and agreeable, at least up until May 1769. This date is when the house delegates brought forth resolutions addressing British taxation. Lord Botetourt became so angry he dissolved the body. His action did not slow their resolve and the whole body assembled in a private house in Williamsburg. At their first meeting in November 1769, every representative was reinstated including Carter Braxton. The emotional impact of this pivotal moment could be felt as I read it.<sup>2, 5</sup>

Carter Braxton like many a patriot sacrificed so much for the independence of the colonies. As a result of his steadfast work his health suffered. On December 10, 1769, the House of Burgesses ordered that Braxton to take leave for his health. Even with this directive, Braxton presented a proposal that day to lease the lands of the Pamunkey Indians.<sup>7</sup>

In 1770, Lord Botetourt passed away and Lord Dunmore was appointed as royal governor. Unlike his predecessor, Dunmore was arrogant and immovable. He immediately issued a proclamation, dissolving the latter assembly and established a new body of eighty-nine persons. Carter Braxton was serving as the high sheriff of King County, making him ineligible for a seat in the new house. However, this association immediately recommended that the counties of Virginia meet in Williamsburg. In the 1774, the King County delegates once again elected Braxton and he took his seat in Virginia's first convention. It was as if God breathed life into a seed and its fruit was about to spring forth.<sup>5</sup>

I wonder how many of the royal governors could have predicted the outcome of that August 1774 meeting? The delegates from Williamsburg and Boston voted to break off all commercial ties with mother England. Men of character and conviction were present in that meeting including Randolph, Nicholas, Bland, Cary, Carter Braxton, Lee, Washington, Henry, Jefferson, and Nelson. The convention then moved to Richmond, where its members passed a series of resolutions to increase colonial production of all essential foods, textiles, metals, and gunpower for the preservation and defense of their futures.<sup>3</sup>

As noted above, tensions between Virginia's Lord Dunmore and members of the convention were escalating. April of 1775, conditions escalated when the royal governor removed gun power belonging to the Williamsburg magazine to a war ship moored on the James River. Several Virginia counties assembled at the news. Threats were rising on both sides and when war ship's captain threatened the city with the ship's cannon, Carter Braxton stepped in to quell the situation. He called for the disbanding of six to seven hundred militia who were prepared to march. All but two groups of volunteers heeded the call to go home. The first were the Hanover volunteers, the second were those under Patrick Henry.

Henry's volunteers numbered about one hundred fifty and had marched as far as Doncastle's. Unlike Randolph and Braxton, Henry was ready to fight if the powder or its value was not restored in full. Braxton used his relationship with father-in-law, Colonel Corbin to negotiate the acquisition of a bill of exchange for the powder. Henry believed there was no way to avoid a fight without being dishonored. Although he understood the inevitability of a

violent conflict with the British, his actions were ill-timed and would have been devastating to the unprepared citizens of Williamsburg.<sup>2</sup>

The wisdom and skill of Braxton's manners brought a peaceful solution and two months later the resignation of Lord Dunmore in June of 1774. This meant that the power would revert to the people. The members of the convention took the opportunity to establish a Provincial Government. Peyton, Nicholas, Braxton, and others played an important role in these critical stages of our colonial history.

Peyton Randolph, Thomas Jefferson's cousin became the president of the first Continental Congress. While residing over congress in Philadelphia on October 22, 1775, Peyton died of a stroke. On December 15, 1775, Carter Braxton was elected to succeed Peyton, had oversight of that body, and the privilege of signing his name to the Declaration of Independence as a delegate of Virginia.

In May 1776, William Aylett and Richard S. Taylor were elected as delegates to the convention from King and Queen County. On May 22, Aylett resigned to accept a military commission leaving a vacancy. The people elected Carter Braxton to fill this vacancy and he took his seat in the house.

On June 20, 1776, a resolution passed by the convention reduced the number of Virginia delegates required at the general congress to any three of five members being sufficient. Benjamin Harrison and Carter Braxton's names were omitted. Some historians believe this resulted from Braxton's Address to The Convention of the Colony and Ancient Dominion of Virginia on the Subject of Government in General, and Recommending a Particular Form to Their Attention, dated 1776. Some concluded that Braxton and his friend Harrison were soft on the necessities for independence. However, if Mr. Braxton offended some in congress as presupposed, he did not likewise offend his constituents.<sup>8</sup>

During the month of October 1776, the first general assembly met in Williamsburg, where Carter Braxton was a member. It is noteworthy to mention that on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1776, he was present to receive the "expression of the public thanks" was awarded to Carter Braxton and Thomas Jefferson dated Saturday, October 12th, 1776, which reads; *"Resolved, unanimously, that the thanks of this house are justify due to Thomas Jefferson and Carter*

*Braxton, Esquires, for the diligence, ability, and integrity, with which they executed the important trust reposed in them, as two of the delegates for this county in the general congress."*<sup>2</sup>

Braxton faithfully served Virginia as a member of the house for several years where he was a zealous representative of civil and religious liberty. Braxton was very active during the first session of the Virginia Legislature, residing as chairman of the Committee on Religion, vigilant on the Committee of Propositions and Grievances, and likely acting chairman of the Committee on Trade. He also sat on various committees including chair of the Committee of the Whole.<sup>8</sup>

The people's faith in Mr. Braxton continued as he served as a delegate in 1777-1785. An example of his concern for religious freedom was evident by his support of Jefferson's act for establishing religious freedom, which was considered the greatest legislation in the fight for religious and civil liberties in Virginia's history to date.

In 1786, Mr. Braxton was appointed a member of the Privy Council, an eight-member team which aided the royal governor in making decisions of support of the laws of the colony. Braxton continued to serve on that board until March 13, 1791. In 1786, Carter moved his family to Henrico County where he was elected as a delegate to the house. During the winter session of 1793, Braxton was reelected to the general assembly. He remained active in government up to October 6, 1797. Four days later Carter Braxton passed away.

He was known as rich in family, experience great contentment while spending time with his wife and children. A man with historic roots in gentle manners and respectable talents. Perhaps not as eloquent as Patrick Henry or Francis Lightfoot Lee, yet remaining polite and hospitable through the adversity he faced during his life.

From the onset of this writing, we know that Mr. Braxton had acquired considerable wealth, plantations, slaves, ships, etc. That prosperity grew exponentially over the years, some reports to over 12,000 acres. Unlike Robert Carter III, I found no record of him having emancipated his slaves. His love for country moved him to borrow large amounts of silver to the war effort, which he would never see return. He released his fleet of ships to the fight, only to hear that they were sunk or captured by the British. Excessive commerce speculations, along

with the depreciated value of currency caused him to lose nearly all his holdings. His lands were confiscated by the sheriff, sold along with furniture and slaves to satisfy his debt. Records indicate that Braxton enticed some friends and two of his sons to back some of his financial ventures, they too lost much of their fortunes.<sup>2,5</sup>

The physical toll of Carter Braxton's political service and the weight of his financial ruin crushed him at the end. He barely secured enough to care for his wife until her death.

**This has been Redeeming the Fathers of America.**

#### References:

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- 8) Address to the Convention of the Colony and Ancient Dominion of Virginia on the Subject of Government in General, and Recommending a Particular Form to Their Attention, dated 1776, Constitution of Virginia, and <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/government/constitution1776.html>