

Genealogy and NORTH CAROLINA Counties

An ancestor blessed with longevity could have been born in Rowan County in 1753, married in Burke County in 1778, fathered children in the counties of Burke and Lincoln in the 1780s, and died in 1842 during Catawba County's formation year while living on the same land all the while. His land simply became part of the new counties as they were formed.

When we begin the quest to locate the land owned by our ancestors in some counties in North Carolina, genealogists face a formidable foe, the formation of North Carolina's counties and an understanding of how land ownership is conveyed through the transfer of title. Jo White Linn, C.G., in a lecture given to the Catawba County, NC Genealogical Society, stated. "The descent of land is the purest proof of lineage." To determine where the land lay, the researcher must know the history of the formation of the counties under consideration.

North Carolina researchers must acquaint themselves with the "metes and bounds" system used not only in surveying county lines but also in laying out the tracts of land within those counties. As the population increased on the frontier of the westernmost North Carolina counties, settlers grew disturbed with the great distance they were forced to travel in order to attend court functions in the seats of government and the natural barriers they encountered in doing so. The majority of western North Carolina's counties were formed as the result of petitions presented to the General Assembly by these disgruntled settlers.

By way of explanation, Anson County, North Carolina, was formed in 1750 from Bladen County and engulfed within its boundaries all of western North Carolina including the land which lay within the Granville Proprietary, or Granville District, north of 35° 34' north latitude and all the land lying between this line and the South Carolina line which belonged to the English Crown.

At its formation Anson's boundaries were established by the General Assembly of North Carolina.

...That Bladen County be divided by a Line. beginning at the Place where the South Line of this Province crosseth the Westermost Branch of the Little Pee-Dee River. than by a straight line to a Place where the Commissioners for running the Southern Boundary of this Province crosseth that Branch of the Little Pee-Dee River. called Drowning Creek, thence up that Branch to the Head thereof; then by a Line. to run. as near as maybe, equidistant, from Saxapahaw River, and the Great Pee-Dee River; and that the upper Part of the said County and Parish so laid off and undivided. be entered into a County and Parish. by the name of Anson County. and St. George's Parish. and that all the Inhabitants to the Westward of the aforementioned dividing line. shall belong and appertain to Anson County, ... (note 1)

Their remoteness from the Anson County Court prompted the increasing number of inhabitants to petition for the formation of a new county. In 1753 that portion of Anson County lying above the Granville line was formed into the county of Rowan.

... That Anson County be divided by a Line. to begin where Anson Line was to cross Earl Granville's Line. and from thence. in a direct Line. North. to the Virginia Line. and to the South by the Southernmost Line of Earl Granville's Land, And that the upper part of said County. so laid off and divided be erected into a County and Parish, by the Name of Rowan County. and St. Luke's Parish; and that all the Inhabitants of the Westward of the said Line. and included within the before mentioned Boundaries. shall be long and appertain to Rowan County....(note 2)

The area which was to become Catawba County lay within the bounds of Rowan County. Included among the records Catawba County researchers should check if their ancestor was in the area during the time period are the minutes of the Rowan County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, the estates records and settlements. land grants and deeds, and extant tax lists.

In 1762 Mecklenburg County was formed from the western portion of Anson County which lay below the southern line of the Granville District. Mecklenburg's boundaries were laid off as follows:

...the said County of Anson shall be. and is hereby divided into Two Distinct Counties, by a Line beginning at Lord Carteret's [Granville's] Line. Six Miles North East from Captain Charles Hart's plantation on Buffalo Creek, and to run from thence to the Mouth of Clear Creek which empties itself into Rocky River. below Captain Adam Alexander's; and from thence due South. to the Bounds of the Province of South Carolina; and that all that Part of the said County which lies to the Eastward of the said Dividing Line. shall be a distinct County. and remain and be called by the Name of Anson County; and all that Part of the said County lying to the Westward of said Dividing Line, shall be thence forth one other Distinct County. and called by the Name of Mecklenburg. (note 3)

Tryon County was formed from Mecklenburg County in 1768 with its northern boundary being the were established as follows: Granville line. Its boundaries, the said County of Mecklenburg shall be, and is hereby divided into Two distinct Counties and Parishes, by a Line beginning at Earl Granville's Line; where it Crosses the Catawba River; and the said River to be the Line to the South Carolina Line; and all that Part of the said County which lies to the Eastward of the said dividing Line shall be a Distinct County and Parish, and remain and be called by the Name of Mecklenburg County, and St. Martin's Parish; and that all that Part of the County lying to the Westward of the said dividing line shall be one other distinct County and Parish, and be and remain by the Name of Tryon County and St. Thomas's Parish. (note 4)

Because of disputes between the counties, the boundary line between Tryon and Mecklenburg was established in 1774 to be the Catawba River.

II. And whereas sundry disputes have arisen relative to the Boundary line between the said County of Tryon and the County of Mecklenburg. to prevent which for the future, Be it Enacted by the Authority aforesaid, That the River Catawba be and is hereby declared to be the Boundary line between the said Counties.

(note 5)

North of the Granville line, new counties were also being formed. Guilford County from parts of Rowan and Orange Counties in 1771; Wilkes County from parts of Surry County, North Carolina, and the District of Washington in 1771; and Iredell County from a portion of Rowan County lying east of the Catawba River in 1788. Burke County, North Carolina, was formed in 1777 from the part of Rowan County lying west of the Catawba River; its boundaries were established as follows:

...beginning at the Catawba River, on the Line between Rowan and Tryon Counties [the Granville line]; thence running up the Meanders of said River to the North End of an Island, known by the name of the Three Cornered Island; thence North to the Ridge that divides the Yadkin and Catawba Waters; then Westerly along the Ridge to the Mountain which divides the Eastern and Western Waters, commonly known by the Name of the Blue Mountain. And all that Part of the late County of Rowan which lies to the East of the said dividing Line, shall continue and remain a distinct County by the name of Rowan; and all that other Part of the said County of Rowan which lies West and South of the said dividing Line shall thenceforth be erected into a new and distinct County, by the Name of Burke. (note 6)

The Three Cornered Island cited above is located downstream from the Oxford Ford Dam where the Catawba River begins its transition from an easterly to southerly course. A major portion of the island was washed away in the flood of 1916.

In 1779 Tryon County was abolished and two new counties, Lincoln and Rutherford, were formed.

...the County of Tryon shall be divided into two distinct Counties, by a Line beginning at the South Line, near Broad River, on the dividing ridge between Buffalo Creek and Little Broad River, thence along said ridge, to the Line [Granville line] of Burke thence along said Line unto the old Cherokee line, thence a due West course into the top of a dividing ridge between the Eastering and Westering Waters, thence along said ridge unto the old line Claimed by South Carolina, and all that part of the said County which lies on the East side of the said line shall be called and known by the name of Lincoln County, and all that part of the County which lies on the other or West side thereof, shall be called and known by the name of Rutherford County.

In 1782 the southeast portion of Burke County lying above the Granville Line and comprising the southeast corner of present Catawba County was added to Lincoln County due to complaints from the inhabitants that they laboured under great hardship in attending Burke County court functions due to their remote situation from the court house. The boundaries for this portion added to Lincoln were as follows:

... That a line shall be run as follows, viz, Beginning at Sharrels [Sherrill's] ford, running with the road leading towards Henry Whitener's as far as Matthew Wilson's, thence a direct

course to Simon Horse's [Haas's], on the waters of Clark's Creek. thence a direct course to the Fish-Dam Ford of the south fork of the Catawba River, between James Wilson and David Robinson and from thence a southwest course to Earl Granville's old line, and all that part of Burke county lying southeast of the line above described shall henceforth be taken off from Burke and shall be added and remain to Lincoln county.

In 1784 the line between **Burke and Lincoln Counties** was altered to include and to add to Lincoln County all that southeast portion of Burke from which all of Catawba County would later be formed. The boundaries of this area were set as follows:

... That the boundary line between the counties of Burke and Lincoln shall hereafter be as follows, to wit: Beginning at the Horse Ford on Catawba river. running thence to John Hawson [Hawn's on] Hendry [Henry] river, then to William Orrson [Orr's on] Jacobs river and thence to the intersection of the counties of Burke, Lincoln and Rutherford, as they now stand.

Catawba County was formed from the northern portion of Lincoln County in 1842. This land included the southeastern part of Burke County which was added to Lincoln in 1782 and also the portion added to Lincoln in 1784. Catawba County's southern boundary line which separated it from Lincoln County was the old Granville Line which lay one and one-half miles north of Lincolnton. Catawba's boundaries at formation were laid out as follows:

...beginning at a point on the Catawba river, and running west, so as to pass within one mile and a half north of Lincolnton, to the Cleaveland County line, and thence with the dividing line between Cleaveland and Lincoln to the Burke line; thence with the line dividing Burke and Lincoln [the old Granville Line] to the Catawba River; and thence with the meanderings of said river to the beginning be, and the same is hereby erected into a new and separate County by the name of Catawba.

Gaston County was formed from Lincoln in 1846.

.... Beginning at a point on the Cleaveland. line, six miles due south of the present dividing line of Lincoln and Catawba [the Granville Line]; thence running parallel with the line to the Catawba River.

.... That so much of the county of Catawba. as lies south of the following line, to wit: Beginning at the Catawba river. and four miles due north of the present dividing line between Lincoln and Catawba counties. and running parallel with said line to the western boundary of said county, be, and the same is hereby annexed and made part of Lincoln county.

When Gaston County was formed from Lincoln a portion of Catawba County was added to Lincoln County by moving Catawba's southern line four miles to the north.

... that as much of the county of Catawba, as lies south of the

following line, to wit, beginning at the Catawba river, and four miles due north of the present dividing line between Lincoln and Catawba counties, and running parallel with said line to the western boundary of said county, be, and the same is hereby annexed and made part of Lincoln county.

Researchers should remember that the southern portion of Old Lincoln County which lay below the Granville line was formed from Tryon County. However, the northern portion of Old Lincoln, from which Catawba was formed. was part of Burke County from the years 1777 to 1784 and was added to Lincoln County after it was formed from Tryon. For this reason, genealogists and historians should check the extant court minutes, land grants, tax lists, and surviving wills and estates records of Burke County if their Catawba ancestor was in the northern area of Lincoln County during the time period.

Many genealogists have been led astray by the Chart Showing Origin of North Carolina Counties, which was drawn by D. L. Corbitt and L. Polk Denmark in 1940 and published in David Leroy Corbitt's *The Formation of the North Carolina Counties 1663- 1943* (1950. Rpt. Raleigh, NC Department of Cultural Resources, 1987), page 295. This is an excellent study of the formation of North Carolina's counties. Although the chart correctly shows Lincoln County was formed from Tryon which was formed from Mecklenburg which was formed from Anson, it does not address the fact that the northern portion of Lincoln which became Catawba was actually the part of Burke which was added to Lincoln in 1782 and 1784.

In 1746 the southern boundary line of the Granville District lay along the southern boundary of present day Iredell County at the corner formed by the Cabarrus and Mecklenburg County line. Granville's line was never actually surveyed beyond this point. Lord Granville, John Carteret, died in 1763 and his land office for the Granville Proprietary closed. No settler in the Granville District was able to obtain title to vacant land until 1778 when the State of North Carolina opened its own land office. After Granville's land office closed, many settlers in present-day Catawba and Burke Counties entered their claims for vacant land as though it lay in Mecklenburg County thereby receiving Crown patents for land which lay in the Granville District. Researchers will find many Mecklenburg grants issued to settlers of present-day Catawba County during the years 1763-1768.

The issuance of Crown patents in the Granville District became a matter of Council at its meeting at Edenton in December 1758 when one of Lord Granville's agents, Francis Corbin, accused the Royal Governor, Arthur Dobbs, of issuing grants in the District.

Through land grant and deed research, genealogists will find that those settlers in present-day Catawba and Burke Counties who obtained Mecklenburg Crown patents were among the first to reenter their land in Burke County and obtain a patent from the State of North Carolina when its land grant office opened in 1778. They should be wary when the names of their ancestors are found in the county records of Anson, Tryon, or Mecklenburg Counties. The location of an ancestor's land can be verified by the placement of watercourses within present-day counties which are mentioned in deeds or grants. Many settlers, through confusion, attended the court sessions nearest their homesteads.