



Tryon Palace

A Resurrection in
Historic
New Bern

Tryon Palace sits behind her gilded gates, a grande dame of centuries ago and an icon in historic New Bern, the first capital of North Carolina. A young fife and drum corps practices down the street, while tourists trail period-dressed docents through the palace and gardens.

By Phyllis Speidell, Photos by John H. Sheally II



It's late December, and the temperature is 70 degrees. Fountains are splashing, apricot trees are budding pink, and camellias, daffodils and pansies bloom among the Christmas lights. An open horse-drawn carriage clip-clops through the streets and an evergreen-decked trolley rolls by on guided tours.

It's hard to imagine, especially during the Christmas holidays when the Georgian-style palace is dressed in peacock feather and shell topiaries, flowers, fruits and greens, that little more than 50 years ago the palace was nonexistent and its grounds were merely a downtown street lined with businesses and homes, many too new to be historic.

Thanks to the efforts of a few determined women working against seemingly impossible odds, the palace that played a significant, if brief, role in the state's history rose again on its original site with a panache perhaps grander than the original.

The palace complex, with more than 20 historical buildings and 14 acres of heritage gardens, is New Bern's main attraction and the heart of its tourism industry, according to Michael McMillan, who often lodges visitors at his Sail Inn Bed and Breakfast just half a block from the palace gates.

Alice Ruckart, an exhibits researcher at the palace, says "The palace really is an asset to the community, providing programming geared toward all facets of the community, from gardening to military appreciation

days." After living on the West Coast, in New England and in the Deep South, Ruckart and her husband, like many other retirees, call New Bern home.

"New Bern is a magnet for retirees who come for the golf and the water," she says. "We came for the old houses and history."

Laughing, she explains that her job at the palace is part-time and "temporary"—as it has been since 1996.

A SYMBOL OF EXCESS

To understand the affection Ruckart and other North Carolinians hold for the palace and the story of its \$3.5 million resurrection, you must go back to 1764 when William Tryon, a Londoner with ambition and a wealthy wife, was appointed the royal governor of North Carolina.

The Colony was a backwater area then, with no established capital. The Colonial Assembly records were carried by wagon to wherever the assembly was meeting, often in New Bern. Eager to shine and advance his career, Tryon aimed to establish a permanent seat of government at New Bern, advantageously situated on the North Carolina coastline. He brought an English architect, John Hawks, along with him to design an English-style palace as a house of government as well as the official residence of the royal governor.

Construction started in 1767 on the expansive brick building with walls 2-and-a-half to 3 feet thick. Laid out in true symmetrical Georgian style, the palace rose on the edge of a dense forest overlooking the Trent River. But backcountry North Carolinians, already rebelling against what they saw



Top left: Christmas decorations adorn the dining room of the George W. Dixon House, built in 1830 on land originally part of the palace gardens. Wrapped favors under the tree contain Christmas crackers, which when pulled apart reveal a small gift inside. Bottom left: One of several plots in Tryon Palace's 14 acres of gardens, this patterned garden showcases brick walkways, sculptures and flowers that bloom year-round. Its namesake, Maude Moore Latham, was a driving force behind the palace's reconstruction. Bottom right: The New Bern trolley takes visitors on a tour of the town and the palace area.

The Man Behind the Governor's Mansion

By Bill Hudgins

As governor of North Carolina and later of New York, and during the Revolution as a British officer, William Tryon earned a reputation for zealously carrying out both his instructions from England and his own sense of duty. His actions as a military leader during the Revolution actually earned some rebukes from the British high command for being too aggressive toward citizens.

Born in England, Tryon served 13 years in the British army before being appointed North Carolina lieutenant governor in 1764. When the governor died the next year, Tryon was elevated to the post.

Despite vehement opposition from the colonists, he supported the hated Stamp Act in 1765 and refused to allow the Colonial Assembly to meet while they were in effect, thus thwarting efforts to send delegates to the Stamp Act Congress. Professing his personal opposition to the act, he nonetheless felt compelled to enforce it. To ameliorate the effects of the act, he offered to pay the duty on many of the stamped items.

Tryon founded a much-needed postal service for the growing colony. He also settled the long-debated matter of where to locate the Colonial capital. However, he incurred new wrath over the scale of the governor's mansion, Tryon Palace. Much of the anger came from the western edge of North Carolina. As in other Colonies, settlers along the western frontiers often felt alienated and disenfranchised from the more populous seaboard settlements. These pioneers hated taxes, regulation and government officials in general; the group came to be known as the Regulators.

In 1768 and again in 1771, Tryon led the militia against Regulators in the western part of the state, winning a decisive victory on May 16, 1771, at Alamance Creek against a force of 2,000 protestors. He hanged seven of the leaders and pardoned most of the other Regulators.

Two months later, Tryon was appointed governor of New York, succeeding Lord Dunmore. There he turned his attention to improving New York City's defenses and persuading the Colonial legislature to appropriate funds for a militia.

He also ran smack into another wrangle brought about by the British Parliament's attempts to extract more revenue from the Colonies. The 1772 Tea Act enraged colonists, leading to the storied Boston Tea Party in December 1772. Tryon tried but failed to allow a cargo of tea to land in New York.

He left New York for an extended visit to England in April 1774; by the time he returned in June 1775, the Colonies had revolted. His loyalties lay solidly with the Crown, and the Continental Congress attempted to arrest Tryon, but General George Washington countermanded the order.

Tryon did not return the favor. After being driven out of the city and taking refuge on a British ship in the harbor, Tryon and the mayor of New York, David Mathews, hatched a scheme to kidnap Washington in 1776.

Before they could implement the scheme, Thomas Hickey, a conspirator in the plot, was arrested for passing counterfeit money. While in jail, he bragged about the plan to his cell mate, who informed the authorities. Hickey was court-martialed, convicted of mutiny and sedition, and executed.

After the arrival of Admiral William Howe's fleet in 1776 put New York City back in British hands and Tryon was able to return to shore, he was given command of loyalist troops. He led a series of raids in Connecticut and, in 1778, was promoted to the rank of major general (in America only), and was given command of British troops on Long Island. Another series of violent raids along the Connecticut coast followed, which were so excessive that they earned a rebuke from General Henry Clinton. Tryon returned to England in 1780 and died there in 1788.

as unfair and dishonest taxation, viewed Tryon Palace as a symbol of royal excess.

ON THE BRINK OF RUIN

In spite of the protest, Tryon and his wife and young daughter moved into the palace, still under construction, in 1770 and hosted an elaborate housewarming and grand illumination in December.

Three months later, Tryon rode out of New Bern to head a military offensive against the rebellion. He returned in June to find he'd been ordered to New York to assume the royal governorship there—the more prestigious post he'd aspired to all along.

Tryon and his family lived in the palace only about a year, and his successor, the last royal governor, Josiah Martin, stayed less than four years, fleeing from the Revolution in May 1775.

No longer the symbol of British rule, the palace became North Carolina's capitol. But the turmoil of war and recovery took a toll on the structure, and by the time George Washington visited in 1791, he called the palace “a good brick building now hastening to ruins.”

Settlers pushed the North Carolina frontier westward, and the capital moved to Raleigh in 1794. A Masonic lodge rented the old palace as a meeting hall, and New Bern Academy held classes there until a mysterious midnight fire swept through four years later, devastating the structure.

Only the memories of the palace remained strong—along with stories of some of its residents. One story goes that when Martin, who built the dovecote at the palace, fled the capital, he left his belongings behind. The Patriots eagerly auctioned them off. And apparently the palace floors are all pine because Tryon admired the

“well-scrubbed look of bare pine,” Ruckart says. Another story goes that during the time of the Townshend tax acts, Tryon tried to win over a company of rebellious local militiamen with a barbecued ox and a few barrels of beer. The insulted soldiers threw the ox into the river and emptied the beer on the ground.

By the 19th century, the palace remains had vanished under George Street, a road with dozens of houses and businesses along each side and extending through the original palace property to the Trent River Bridge. According to Ruckart, one wing of the building—the stable—remained intact enough to later become a carriage maker’s facility and later a home, a chapel, a school and, finally, a stucco-covered apartment building during World War II. Reportedly

the DAR tried, unsuccessfully, to purchase the stable to use as a museum in 1926.

In the early part of the 20th century, however, interest in local history surged through the state. Restoring the palace became a popular cause in the 1930s, spurred by local historian and newspaper editor Gertrude Carraway, who was later elected President General of the NSDAR in 1953.

Her push to rebuild Tryon Palace gained momentum with the discovery of Hawks’ original architectural plans and a 1944 trust fund established by wealthy New Bern native Maude Moore Latham. Seven years later Latham left her estate, valued at more than \$1 million, to the restoration project if the state agreed to accept and maintain the completed Tryon Palace complex.

The heiress also designated a large collection of furniture, art, silver and chandeliers to start furnishing the mansion.

The next year North Carolina created the Tryon Palace Commission that was, after Latham’s 1951 death, led by her daughter, May Gordon Latham Kellenberger, also a New Bern native and, at that time, an active DAR member. She faced the challenges of rerouting the Trent River Bridge and Route 70 that ran through the original palace site (archaeologists unearthed the original palace foundation directly under the highway) and buying up 50 parcels of private property to recreate the Palace Square.

It was an overwhelming task, but by 1959 the main structure of the palace and its kitchen wing were rebuilt, the stable restored to its 18th-century grandeur, and the palace gates opened to the public. Ironically, according to Ruckart, the sentry gates, while appropriate to the period, were not part of original plan.

Over the last half century, New Bern and North Carolina have benefited from Tryon Palace’s popularity as a tourist attraction that draws up to 100,000 visitors a year.

“Mrs. Kellenberger and her fellow DAR ladies were good stewards of the history of New Bern,” Ruckart says.



Left: In the council chambers of Tryon Palace, King George III’s coat of arms overlooks a traditional Colonial holiday display of fresh fruit and greenery.

Below: The garden behind the historic Stanley House at the palace complex includes reproductions of twin summer houses, both of which appear in an 1862 rendering of the house. Like contemporary garden gazebos, these buildings offered a shady retreat on hot summer days. The house moved to its current site in 1966 and opened as a museum in 1971.



RECOVERING TRYON'S HISTORY

The long-buried original foundation and original footprint, along with Hawks' plans (found in the New York Historical Society archive and later in London), facilitated a fairly accurate "new" palace.

"There wasn't much guesswork," Ruckart says.

But Tryon Palace continues to evolve as new research about its past surfaces, occasionally from unexpected sources.

William Tryon's inventory of belongings listed the furnishings found in a well-to-do home of the 18th century. One of the reconstruction committees took a shopping trip to England armed with a 25-page wish list based on the inventories and sought out everything from marble mantels to trim molding. Even the door locks were made in England.

In 1783, a Venezuelan, Francisco de Miranda, visited the original palace and raved about its beauty. That same year Hawks wrote a letter to Miranda detailing the interior's architectural trim and how the basement rooms were used as apartments for senior servants and storage.

After the letter was found in the Venezuelan National Archives in the early 1990s, some of the palace rooms were reworked to better match Hawks' description, the parlor

and dining rooms were switched, and the front and rear attic dormers removed since apparently they were not authentic to the original construction.

Tryon Palace will continue to evolve, according to Philippe Lafargue, deputy director of the historic site. A new 60,000-square-foot History Education Center is due to open in July on the Trent River shore, coinciding with New Bern's 300th birthday. The facility will replace the current visitor center—housed in a recycled service station—and add a new classroom and gift shop, performance hall and a traveling exhibit space.

The new center will focus on regional history and the integral link between the region and its waters.

A new family-focused display area, sponsored by Pepsi, will include interactive, hands-on electronic exhibits including a time machine.

"It's aimed for kids," Lafargue says. "But I think once they're there, the parents will enjoy it, too."

Not only is the property constantly evolving, but its caretakers place a high value on enlivening history for visitors.

"Tryon Palace is not static," Lafargue says. "It continues to move along, helping visitors learn more about the history they're walking through." 🍷

Phyllis Speidell and John Sheally's story on St. Mary's City, Md., appeared in the March/April 2009 issue.



Clockwise from top: An arch of apples and greenery is a typical 18th-century holiday decoration found throughout historic New Bern and the Tryon Palace complex. A hand-knit stocking hangs from the chimney in the George Dixon House. A tower of cream puffs draped with spun sugar offers a feast for the eyes in the Tryon Palace dining room.



Stand and Face the Morning tells the story of the Musick and Lewis families of Colonial Virginia, who followed the migration down the Great Wagon Road into the backcountry of the Carolinas. The narrative follows them through the trials of hewing homesteads from the wilderness, wrestling with the choices of allegiance at the onset of the Revolutionary War, and struggling for survival as they are caught up in the bitter civil war engulfing their homeland.

An avid student of history, Helen Owens has written a compelling story of life on the frontier. She has shared her passion for history and literature with her students on both secondary and college levels for more than 25 years.



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