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HISTORY

Allen

JOHN ROBINSON
of Pleasant Hill, King & Queen County, Virginia

- - -

1704 - 1766

Prepared for the Department of History of the
University of Richmond

by

Bernard Diggs Allen

1917

O-U-T-L-I-N-E

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In writing the life of most Virginians of the Colonial period one is faced with the fact that most of the early records and manuscripts relating to that time have been in various ways destroyed. Such is the case with the records relating to John Robinson. At his death his letters and correspondence, public and private, were all gathered together and transported to Richmond. Here they were used by the Chancery Court to throw light on his defalcation. Then they were thrown aside in a corner of that Old Court House, only to be destroyed along with that building on evacuation day.

The defalcation, or trouble with the treasury that Robinson was connected with, has never been written up with a sympathetic view-point towards him. Rather it has been related to glorify and emulate Richard Henry Lee, Patrick Henry and members of the popular party just coming into power about the time of Robinson's death.

In this thesis I shall take Robinson's career from a non-partisan standpoint and try to give all parties concerned their just deserts. Whether Robinson was altogether wrong or the other party altogether right we shall try to work out satisfactorily to all.

Christopher Robinson, nephew to the Bishop of London, migrated from England and settled at Huic, in Middlesex County, on the Rappahannock River. His uncle, Bishop Robinson, was a man of exceedingly great wealth, also one prominent in matters of state. He was the last Bishop to repre-

sent Great Britian as a plenipotentiary, serving his country at the conference of the belligerents at Utrecht. His name is affixed to the famous treaty drawn up at this place.. The Bishop dying without lineal descendants, bestowed his immense wealth on Chrostopher Robinson, then living in America.

Christopher Robinson seems to have been a prominent man in his day. Besides holding several important offices of trust he was one of the first vestrymen mentioned on the vestry books of Middlesex County. He married a Miss Betram. Their eldest son, John, born in 1685, inherited the Bishop of London's estate. He too was a vestryman. For a number of years he was in the Council of Virginia, serving first as a member, later as president of that body. During the absence of Governor Gooch, he for a short while served as Governor of the Colony. He married Kathoring Beverley and had seven children, one of them being John Robinson, Speaker of the House of Burgesses and Treasurer of the Colony of Virginia.

John Robinson, Speaker of the House of Burgesses and Treasurer of Virginia, was born at Huic, February 3rd, 1704. Concerning his early life little or nothing is known. He studied at William and Mary College and after graduation was probably the most influential man in Virginia. He was one of the most opulent men in the Colony. "He was the acknowledged head of the landed aristocracy. His personal influence by a tenure far superior to any that his own vast wealth or power of the crown could bestow. He possessed a strong and well informed mind, enlarged and corrected by a large experience, uniting with it a benevolence of spirit

and a courtest of manner which never failed to attach every heart that approached him. The poor drew near to him without awe or embarrassment; they came indeed with filial confidence, for they never failed to find in him a sympathetic friend and able counsellor. The rich enjoyed in him an easy, enlightened and instructive companion; and next to the Governor regarded him as the highest model of excellence."¹

John, Jr., unlike other members of his family, was educated entirely in Virginia. Bishop Robinson had in his day established a number of scholarships at Oriel College, Oxford. Naturally members of his family went there for their higher education. This was the case with Christopher, Peter and William Robinson. The Speaker's father, however, was educated at William and Mary College.² After graduation the influence of his family, his own great wealth, ability, generosity and genial manners soon brought him into prominence. He represented the County of King and Queen in the House of Burgesses from August 1736 for twenty-nine consecutive years, dying a member elect in 1766. He was the Speaker to that body from 1736 to 1766. As a presiding official he was compared³ with Richard Onlow, Speaker of the British House of Commons. As Treasurer he ably administered the finances of the Colony, but was too free in lending out the public money. At the time of his death, May 1766, it was found that he owed the public £ 100, 761 - 8 7 - 5 d.⁴ It seemed certain, however, that he expected to return this sum from payments of his creditors or from his own vast estate. This in the end was finally done and the colony suffered no loss.

1. Life and Character of Patrick Henry p. 62-63.

2. Virginia Magazine of History and Biography. Vol. 17. 0.318.

3. Edmund Randolph's History. p.110

4. Richard Bland's Report to House

The Speaker was married three times, first he married Mary Storey, of Middlesex. If there were children by this union there is no record of them, owing to the destruction of the Robinson papers and the will of the Speaker in 1863, along with all the early records of King and Queen County. Second, he married Lucy, the daughter of Augustine Moore, of Chelsea, King William County. By this union there were at least two children, John and Lucy, these two being in their grandfather's will in 1742. The son, John, certainly died young. The following epituary is found in the Virginia Gazette for January 27th, 1774:

"Death - Master John Robinson, only son of the late speaker, at the house of William Nelson, in Caroline. His corpse was brought to King and Queen and buried on a high point of land near the Mattaponi River, a small distance above Turner's Warehouse."

One favored son engaged Susannah's care,
One pious youth her chief affection crowned
In his young breast the virtues sprung so fair
Such charms displayed, such sweets diffus'd around.

But whilst gay transport in her face appears
A noxious vapor dogs the poisoned sky,
Bursts the fair crop - the mother's drowned in tears
And Scarce surviving sees her darling die.

O'er the pale corpse we saw her gently bend
Heart chilled with grief - my thread she cried is spun
If heaven had meant I should my life extend
Heaven had preserved my life's support - my son!"

The Susannah referred to above was Susannah Chiswell, daughter of Colonel John Chiswell of Williamsburg, and third wife of Speaker Robinson. By this last marriage there were several children, all daughters. One of them married a Colonel Boyd, whose descendants moved south. Other daughters married

a Colonel Boyd, whose descendants moved south. Other daughters married and left issue. Some of his descendants are living today. Mr. Valentine, a sculptor, living at present in Richmond, Virginia, married one of them.

Speaker Robinson's home, Pleasant Hill, was situated on a high point overlooking beautiful flats on the Mattaponi River. It was a large colonial house, two and a half stories high, set off by beautiful landscape. Mr. John A. Carlton a master architect and experienced carpenter says: "I had the privilege and pleasure of going over the Pleasant Hill house, the one formerly occupied by Speaker Robinson before it was burned. It was a magnificent home, situated about two miles below Little Plymouth, in King and Queen County, on the bank of the Mattaponi River. As one approached from the public driveway a noble colonnade with pilasters aloft, greeted him, and as he entered the colonnade a tessellated floor, and doors and windows wrought in imported mahogany delighted his taste and excited his wonder. On the whole, he says, it was a beautiful place even when I say it, and at the time of Speaker Robinson I have no doubt that it must have equalled or surpassed any in this country. The place was burned since the Civil War."

An amusing incident is told of Speaker Robinson, which shows us his jovial disposition. John Page, a representative from Gloucester to the House of Burgesses, one summer day figured up an eclipse of the sun, at his home in Gloucester. The Speaker heard about this and gave him as a nickname John Partridge, calling him after the famous English Almanac maker.⁵

5. William and Mary Quarterly

The confidence of his neighbors and friends towards him is shown by the fact that he was time and again named as trustee and executor of their estates by them. In studying Robinson's life we often come across such references. He was guardian of Carter Braxton and consented that he should be married in 1755 to Judith Robinson.⁶ However, the Speaker's reputation suffered to a certain extent from the fact that as treasurer he loaned to some of his friends large sums of public money. The government, however, sustained no loss as it was at his death made good out of his private estate, as above stated. In all other respects he stood high in public confidence. He was never suspected of using the public money for his own private advantage.⁷ Politically Speaker Robinson belonged to the aristocratic party or what was then called the landed aristocracy. His party was in power practically up to the time of his death, although there were many in the House of Burgesses that differed politically with him and opposed the measures brought forward by him and his friends, yet many of the Republican party were in the habit of having friendly intercourse with him,⁸ and who esteemed him highly as a man. In 1765, the country as a whole was much wrought up over the Stamp Act question. The Speaker along with other large and wealthy planters living on or near the York and James Rivers,

6. William and Mary Quarterly
Vol. 4, p. 119.

7. Old Churches and
Families.
Bishop Meade

8. Memoirs of Richard Henry Lee.

were somewhat afraid of taking an active part in the discussion on this important question because of the danger of British gunboats sailing up the rivers and destroying their property. This was not the case with Patrick Henry and other ardent opposers at this time. Living in the back woods of Hanover and other back countried there was no danger of the British. Thus these men were free to speak their minds while those living in the lower countries had to keep their mouths shut. So can we wonder that Speaker Robinson and his friends not only opposed the Stamp Act resolution but interrupted Patrick Henry's famous speech on them with the cry of treason.

At the time of Washington's return from Great Meadows the House of Burgesses expressed him a vote of thanks. Robinson as Speaker, of course, had to deliver it. This he did with a dignity that would have become Louis XIV in his grandest days. Washington arose blushing and stuttering to acknowledge the thanks. So embarrassed was he that he could only stammer, "Mr. Speaker ---- Mr. Speaker." John Robinson seeing his embarrassment relieved him with a stroke of the gavel, saying as he did so: "Sit down Major Washington. Your modesty is equal to your courage and that surpasses anything I can express."⁹ This incident goes to show the Speaker's quick thinking and acting. From various accounts of him as a presiding official he must have been a good one.

9. On authority of Edmund Randolph.

Edmund Randolph in his manuscript towards a History of Virginia says:-- "The Speaker's reputation was great for sound practiced knowledge and acquaintance with parliamentary forms--- when he presided the decorum of the House outshone that of the British House of Commond, even with Onslow at its head. When he propounded a question his comprehension and pertinacity brought its equally to the most humble and the most polished understanding. To Committees he nominated members best qualified. He stated to the House the contents of every bill and showed himself to be perfect master of the subject. When he pronounced the rules of order he convinced the reluctant. When on a floor of the committee of the whole House he opened the debate, he submitted resolutions and enforced them with simplicity and might. In the limited sphere of Colonial politics he was a column."¹⁰

Speaker Robinson died May 11th, 1766, at his home in King and Queen. For twenty-eight successive years the offices of Speaker to House of Burgesses and Colonial Treasuere had been united by him. Some time in April of the same year the Williamsburg Board of Trade had decided that it was best to separate these offices. This decision weighed heavily on Robinson and hastened his death. At his death an investigation of his accounts exposed an enormous defalcation in the treasury and all his property had to be sold to repay this shortage. The following advertisement is found in the Virginia Gazette for April 10th. 1777:

10. Randolph's History of Virginia (MSS)
pp. 110-111

"FOR SALE, the beautiful seat on the Mattaponi River, where the late Speaker Robinson lived. 1,381 acres of high land, 600 acres of marsh, 120 acres unused. On tract is a mill. The plantation is under good fences with a young orchard of choice fruit. Dwelling house of brick, two stories high, four large rooms and a passage in each floor and a good cellar. Brick kitchen, servants hall, wash house, granary and a garden walled with brick."

On my visit to Pleasant Hill in March, 1916, I discovered the foundation of the old mill and remains of the old garden wall. The Speaker was buried in a corner of this garden. I searched for his grave. Although I found several tombs none of them proved to be his. In further searching over the place I came to an old barn resting on a broken tombstone for a foundation. From the amount of stone I readily saw that it must have been an immense affair, made of solid marble. There was no chiseling perceptible. Without a doubt this was Speaker Robinson's tomb.

John Robinson was elected to the House of Burgesses from the County of King and Queen in August, 1736. On February the fifth of the following year came a petition to the House, complaining of his undue election to serve in that body as a representative of the aforesaid county. This petition was referred to the committee on Privileges and Elections. To save time and expense the House voted to let any two or more justices of King and Queen publicly examine witnesses, to be summoned by the Sheriff, and report their decision to the Committee.¹¹ This was done and Robinson was declared duly elected and was accorded the full privileges of a member.

11. Journals of House of Burgesses.

As a member Robinson served on many committees, the most important being to examine the engrossed bills and rectify such mistakes as seemed advisable, and later to revise all laws of the colony and report changes to the House.

By the death of John Randolph in 1738 it became necessary to elect a Speaker. John Robinson was elevated to that position and conducted to the chair by two members, from which place he made a speech of thanks to the House. Later he was by act of the assembly made treasurer of the colony. The history of the Colonial treasurer proves very interesting. At the time of Robinson it was an unique office, being the only one in the colony filled by the General Assembly. Before 1624 the treasurer was appointed by the London Company, and from 1624 to 1691 by the crown, his commission being the Royal Sign Manual.¹² From April, 1691, he was appointed by the Assembly. Prior to 1699 the treasurer was usually a member of the Council but after this date his interests were with the House of Burgesses and the representatives of the people were very jealous of keeping entire control of this office. He was independent of the Auditor and Receiver General, who were appointed by the Crown. For the period of fourteen years (1677-91) however the office of treasurer was, from motives of economy, united with that of Auditor by the Governor. This we see was during the period of Royalist reaction following the Cromwellian period. In the earlier part of the seventeenth century and even so late as 1664, the duties afterwards assigned the Receiver General, such as receiving quit rents (an assessment each land owner was required to pay the crown due to the fact that the crown

claimed ownership to all land in the colony. The assessment was one shilling for every fifty acres), and other royal fees and profits, were performed by the treasurer in addition to the other usual services rendered by him. From 1691 he was appointed by the House of Burgesses and for sixty-seven years (1699-66) the duties of treasurer were performed by the Speaker of that body. The usual duties of the treasurer were to receive the revenues arising from the duties on liquors, servants and slaves imported, from the public levy, and any special levy raised by act of the Assembly, and to borrow money on the authority of that body. Before 1691 he was dependent upon Royal order in disposition of funds entrusted to him and paid out of that body by its order, or by warrant issued by the government. After being approved by the Assembly his account had to be signed by the Governor. Then it was sent to the Auditor General of the colonies. On certain occasions he was empowered to emit treasury notes. A good instance of this was at the time of preparation for the French and Indian War, when extra funds were needed. The Treasurer was directed to prosecute anyone refusing to pay the duties imposed, usually received by him, and to enforce payment of duties on liquors and slaves by compounding the penalties inflicted for duty or neglect.

An act of the Assembly in November 1645 provided that the quit rents were to be applied as the first payment of the treasurer's salary of £ 500 per annum, the surplus to be disposed of by the Assembly. This was done with the approval of the British Government, as the treasurer was then

a royal officer. After 1691, when the treasurer was appointed by the House of Burgesses he was paid six (6%) per cent of the money passing through his offices. This was later reduced to five (5%) per cent. By 1734 he was also being paid L 50 which was gradually being raised to L 150 for auditing and settling the accounts of tobacco inspectors. He was to furnish a bond of L 5,000 sterling, which was later increased to L 100,000. The Governor was to state his approval of the security furnished by the treasurer and administer the oath of office to him.

Thus it was to this important office that John Robinson was appointed as long as he should remain Speaker of the House. At the time of his entry into office all the colonial accounts were in order and no money was short, and a shortage of the treasury was not suspected until about 1763, when it began to be whispered about that all was not right with the accounts.

On motion of Richard Henry Lee a committee was appointed to go over the treasurer's accounts and see that they balanced. Robinson, as Speaker, appointed his very enemies on this committee.¹³ This committee brought in a favorable report but it was afterwards proven that the search did not go far enough. Robinson dying the next year the defalcation was exposed.

Aside from the Stamp Act nothing affected the condition of the colony as did this condition in the treasury. It will be remembered that the colony had from time to time issued paper notes to raise money sufficient to carry through various enterprises. As these notes came due it was required that the treasurer meet them with funds raised from special taxes laid

by the Assembly. Furthermore he was required to keep them until a committee of the House should come and destroy them. Prior to the time of Robinson's defalcation notes redeemed were quickly followed by a new series of paper money which was at once put into circulation. This made it not difficult to meet demands made upon the colony for money, especially when a tax more than sufficient in itself to redeem the entire output of notes was levied. Virginia was experiencing a financial panic in 1765, brought on by her vast contributions to the French and Indian Wars of the past ten years. Many of the leading financiers made heavy demands upon the treasurer for financial aid. Not having the currency on hand and Great Britian¹⁴ having forbidden the issuing of treasury notes, neither the colony or treasurer after leanding his own private fortune, could do anything for them in response to their needs in an official way. However, the treasurer had in his possession a large number of treasury notes that had been redeemed, which he held pending the order of the committee to destroy. Seeing an opportunity to prevent further financial distress, he caused these notes to be re-emitted accepting as security the papers of various individuals when properly endorsed. This might technically be called correct for there was at this time no law against the treasurer re-emitting these notes if the thought proper to do so. These notes re-emitted were made payable before the date set for destroying them and the bonds of the individuals filed with the records of the treasurer.

Very unfortunately Speaker Robinson died May 13th, 1766, some time before the notes were due. About this same time his political enemies came into power. These notes were discovered and the whole colony immediately became divided as to innocence or guilt of the treasurer's irregularities. Many claimed he was justified under the circumstances just named. The securities by him as treasurer and his own¹⁵ vast estate more than met the demands of the colony, and the report of the investigating committee indicated his purpose as being anything but an attempt to defraud.¹⁶ Referring to Henning's Statutes of Virginia we find that Robinson was appointed treasurer of Virginia in 1738. He succeeded Richard Randolph, who had been appointed by Governor Gooch to fill the unexpired term of John Randolph (dec'd.) The records of the House show that fact that from 1751-65 eight committees were appointed to examine the treasurer's accounts during that time. These examinations were purely matters of form and prior to '63 the report simply consisted of a statement that the books balanced, and certified to the correctness of the treasurer's report. In 1763 the committee had been reduced to three and Richard Bland, chairman, reported the correctness of the accounts. He set forth in detail the notes emitted since 1757, also several taxes imposed by law for sinking them.

In the Virginia Gazette for August 1st, 1766, Robert Carter Nicholas came out with an article that some took to be a reflection of "Robinson's good name." An honest Buckskin, so judging it, published the following:

15. Randolph's History of Virginia (MSS) p. 110

16. Journals of the House of Burgesses 1776-69 Preface

"The proper period for inquiry might then have protected his memory from the slur of embezzlement by a discovery that this mismanagement proceeded from nothing fraudulent in the gentleman, but from that humane disposition - charity, so much recommended by christinaity to be concealed from vain ostentation, for although charity, or any such species of benovolence is certainly commendable when extended out of any office of trust, yet it must be allowed that it is a virtue of that aimable dignity which will require the most decent tendencies in any reprehension of it"---

Robert Carter Nicholas hastening to reply to this disclaims any reflection upon the name of Robinson, and exonerates him from any intention of doing other than the best of motives dictated. He says:

" --- The insinuations thrown out of my designing to reflect upon the gentleman as if I thought he had embezzled the public money, or upon his debtors as security, as if there was any danger of the money's being entirely lost to the country, were all equally of ill nature as they were groundless; with respect to the first, I declare upon my honor that I never had the least doubt of his intention to charge himself with every shilling which came to his hands, or for which he ought to have accounted, and I cannot discover the least hint, in which I wrote to the contrary. I know I have always declared my opinion quite the reverse, and it has given my pain to hear anything like a percolation suggested." 17.

After Robinson's death some tried to claim he was the originator of the Loan Office scheme to hide his own defalcation. This was a scheme by which the treasurer was to be a kind of banker, lending out State money to private individuals or corporations. This scheme actually passed the House but was killed in the council. Undoubtedly some of Robinson's friends were connected with it. The idea of the accusers was that Robinson wished to transfer the debts due

him to the public and thus to hide the shortage in the treasury. However, there is nothing in the literature of the day that identifies Robinson with the scheme and it is probable that this was devised merely as a pretext by the populists to down the aristocrats.

For some years the advisability of separating the offices of Speaker of House of Burgesses and Treasurer of the colony had been much discussed and was considered to be of great moment at the time. The Williamsburg Board of Trade had passed resolutions and requested Governor Fauquier to have the offices separated and in a letter to them, dated at Williamsburg the 7th. of April, 1766, he promises to do all in his power to get them divided. The missing treasury notes at the time of Robinson's death brought the matter to a head. A warm debate in the House resulted in the division of the offices. A salary was for the first time affixed to the office of Speaker, and breach of trust by the treasurer made a crime.

All of Robinson's estate was sold to regain the money due the colony. His estate, according to committees appointed to examine into defalcation, consisted of about 4,000 acres in King and Queen County; about 3,200 acres on Marcosick Creek in Caroline County; about 6,500 acres in Spottsylvania County; about 4,250 acres in the County of Hanover, 1,200 acres in King William County, some houses and lots in Williamsburg and about 400 acres of land in James City County. All of which land might be reasonably valued at £ 11,000.

Besides this he had a third interest in some land and slaves employed in working a lead mine in Augusta County. The whole of land and slaves were bound to bring the L 8,000 advanced for carrying on the work. He was also interested in one share in the Dismal Swamp and some slaves employed in draining the same. He also possessed about 400 slaves and considerable personal estate. The whole estate at the lowest figure was worth at least L 105,000 and as the defalcation amounted to only L 100,761 S 7 . 5 D it is readily seen that the State could lose no money, and after several years the total amount of indebtedness was turned into the colony out of this estate.

While Robinson was Speaker of the House a bill was introduced to remove the capital from Williamsburg to Newcastle, then a tobacco port on the Pamunkey River. Robinson not only was an ardent supporter of the measure but made the opening speech on the question. So forcefully did he speak that John Blair, as he arose to fight the motion, pointed to the Speaker and exclaimed "there sits the man that is at the bottom of this hellish plot." The House became indignant at such conduct towards their Speaker and forced Blair to apologize,¹⁸ which apology Robinson readily accepted. When the bill was presented the motion was lost.

The death of Robinson caused general sorrow and great agitation throughout the colony. Faquier writing to the Board of Trade at this time says:

"This event would have been a sensible loss at any time, but more particularly so now, as I had promised myself a great assistance from him in the next session of the Assembly, to quiet the minds of the people and bring them to just and proper sense of their duty. He was a man of integrity and ability and one of whom I had entertained a great esteem."

As a fitting conclusion to Robinson's life and works
I need only to quote the inscription on his tomb:

"Beneath this place lieth all that could die of the late worthy John Robinson, Esq., who was a representative of the County of King and Queen, and Spoke to the House of Burgesses above twenty eight years. How eminently he supplied that dignified office, and with what fidelity he acted as treasurer to the country, besides is well known to us, and it is not unlikely future ages will relate, 'He was a tender husband, a loving father, a kind master, a sincere friend, a generous benefactor, and a solid christian. Go, reader, and to the utmost of your power imitate his virtues.'" 19.

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Conclusion

What I have given in the preceding pages is by no means an adequate view of the man and politician, Thomas Staples Martin. It is but a glimpse, an impression, an attempt at a true picture through the medium of the few and difficult perspectives afforded me.

But this I think can truthfully be said, in conclusion: Martin was , above all, a conservative and too much of a party man to be a great statesman; and due to this conservatism, the state of Virginia made little progress under his control. Whatever of progress was made came under the banner of revolt, as we have seen.

B-I-B-L-I-O-G-R-A-P-H-Y

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