

TAR RIVER BLOUNTS
AND A TRANSITIONAL MARITIME CULTURAL LANDSCAPE,

1778-1802

by

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This thesis analyzes John Gray Blount and his associates' roles in the post Revolutionary War development of North Carolina's Tar-Pamlico maritime cultural landscape. After discussing the business interests and political connections of John Gray and his brothers, it will show the relationship between these men and the Tar-Pamlico's ports and waterways. Controlling and developing these areas was vital to the Blounts' business strategy. As a result, the Blounts became major shapers of the Tar-Pamlico maritime cultural landscape, contributing to internal improvements and the growth of Washington and other ports on the trade route. The thesis focuses on Washington as the center of John Gray's "burgeoning empire" and a transitional maritime landscape, connecting eastern North Carolina with broader maritime and Atlantic communities.¹

Utilizing *The John Gray Blount Papers*, *The State and Colonial Records of North Carolina*, and other primary sources, this thesis applies Christer Westerdahl's concept of the maritime cultural landscape to a political and economic investigation. Subject matter includes

¹ David S. Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 77.

shipping, lighthouses, naval stores, tobacco, fisheries, land speculation, slavery, the United States Constitution, and Federalism.

Key Words: North Carolina, Merchants, Shipping, Maritime Cultural Landscape, Slavery

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Theoretical Base and Research Questions

This thesis explores the role of John Gray Blount and his associates in the development of North Carolina's Tar-Pamlico maritime cultural landscape in the first two decades of American independence. Maritime archaeologist Christer Westerdahl defined the maritime cultural landscape as "human utilization (economy) of maritime space by boat: settlement, fishing, hunting, shipping and its attendant subcultures, such as pilotage, lighthouse, and seamark maintenance."² Westerdahl also referred to shorelines as "transitional zones," a term perfectly suited for John Gray's center of business in Washington, North Carolina.³ John Gray Blount and his brothers established a presence at the Tar-Pamlico's major points of transition. Washington and Shell Castle, the two most important locations to the Blount shipping business, were transit ports. The *International Maritime Dictionary* defines a transit port, or transshipment port, as "a port where goods received are merely en route and from which they have to be transferred and dispatched to their ultimate destination by coasters, river craft, barges, and so on."⁴

John Gray Blount was the head of John Gray and Thomas Blount, Merchants; a mercantile firm based in Washington, an emerging port where ocean going and coasting

² Christer Westerdahl, "The Maritime Cultural Landscape," *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 21 no. 1 (1992): 5-14.

³ Christer Westerdahl, "'Horses are strong at sea': the liminal aspect of the Maritime Cultural Landscape." In *The global origins and development of seafaring*, ed. Atholl Anderson, J. Barrett, K Boyle (Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2010), 275-288.

⁴ *International Maritime Dictionary*, 2nd edition, s.v. "transit port;" Phillip Horne McGuinn, "Shell Castle, A North Carolina Entrepôt, 1789-1820: A Historical and Archaeological Investigation" (M.A. Thesis, East Carolina University, 2000), 28.

craft transferred their goods to river craft. With his brothers and business partners, he ran a shipping business, operated stores along the Tar River and Pamlico Sound, owned plantations, and engaged in land speculation. He and his brothers served in the North Carolina General Assembly and his business associates included signers of the United States Constitution and many of North Carolina's constitutional advocates. As their business expanded, these powerful men, all representing port towns and mercantile interests, influenced change in both government and the maritime cultural landscape.

Studying commerce and legislation in the wake of the American Revolution shows that both John Gray and the town of Washington were major transitional agents in antebellum North Carolina. The merchant's family had lived in the American South for over six generations, and John Gray was deeply rooted in the plantation economy of eastern North Carolina. Yet he was also economically connected to Philadelphia, the Caribbean, and Europe. These Atlantic ties and his efforts to promote growth in the Tar-Pamlico region made him both an intermediary and an influential developer of the region. Unsurprisingly, he made his home at Washington, a place of transition between agricultural and maritime economies. The town blossomed out of necessity during the American Revolution and continued to thrive afterwards under the leadership of men like the Blounts.

This thesis seeks to determine the following: to what extent did John Gray Blount and his associates alter the maritime cultural landscape of the Tar-Pamlico region? Additionally, how did Washington and John Gray act as transitional agents between eastern North Carolina and the larger maritime and Atlantic community? Localized politics, economy, and culture are just as critical to this undertaking as the national and

international events during the time period. As Beaufort County's representative in the North Carolina House of Commons, John Gray introduced numerous bills to expand Beaufort County's territory and add importance to Washington, his adopted hometown and center of business. He also introduced navigational improvement bills, financed and helped oversee construction of a "complete maritime support center" at Shell Castle, and solicited a lighthouse and fortifications at Shell Castle and Ocracoke. John Gray and his brother, Thomas, also served as town commissioners for Washington and Tarborough (the modern spelling is Tarboro).⁵

There are a series of questions necessary to understand the nature of the region's development. Did towns grow? Did legislation affect the landscape immediately, slowly, or not at all? What role did development play in the Blount's business strategy? Did prosperity extend beyond the Blounts to other merchants and tradesmen? What types of structures did these men build along the Tar-Pamlico? How did growth and maritime commerce affect the lives of slaves in eastern North Carolina? Since the Blounts and their associates supported ratification of the United States Constitution, were there any correlations with the region's development and the national Federalist movement?

The answers to these questions illustrate the contribution of John Gray Blount and his associates to the development of the Tar-Pamlico maritime cultural landscape. State and national politics, local and Atlantic commerce, human improvements to the environment, and the movement of population and economic centers were vital components of this changing landscape.

⁵ Clark, William, ed. *The State Records of North Carolina*, vols. 15-26, (Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1993-1994), 17:317, 18:314, 19:534, 24:458, 740, 25:54; McGuinn, "Shell Castle, A North Carolina Entrepôt," 78.

The Limitations of Geography in eastern North Carolina

From colonization through the mid nineteenth century, North Carolina lagged behind other states in economic development and urbanization. Alan Watson wrote that only two percent of North Carolina's population (approximately five thousand people) lived in urban areas by the dawn of the American Revolution.⁶ Unlike neighboring states Virginia and South Carolina, North Carolina lacked a reliable deep-water port and a major coastal city. The 1790 census reported Charleston as the fourth largest American city with 16,359 inhabitants. The census also ranked Norfolk twentieth with nearly 3,000 people, and Virginia contained four of the twenty-four largest cities. By 1800, Charleston ranked fifth with over 19,000 citizens, and Norfolk had risen to tenth with nearly 7,000 inhabitants. No North Carolina town made the U.S. Government's list of twenty-four urban places in 1790 or thirty-three urban places in 1800. In 1800, New Bern was North Carolina's largest town with 2,467 inhabitants. Wilmington and Edenton, the other largest coastal settlements, contained 1,656 and 1,203 people, respectively.⁷

Geography, more specifically North Carolina's Outer Banks, restricted growth, especially along the Albemarle and Pamlico Sounds. For much of colonial and early American history, only vessels drawing less than nine feet of water could enter Ocracoke Inlet, the primary entrance into the Albemarle and Pamlico sounds during the late

⁶ Alan D. Watson, *Society in Colonial North Carolina* (Raleigh: Division of Archives and History, 1996), 112.

⁷“Table 2.Population of the 24 Urban Places: 1790,” US Bureau of the Census, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab02.txt>; “Table 3. Population of the 33 Urban Places: 1800,” *ibid.*, (accessed April 7, 2014), <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab03.txt>.; Alan D. Watson, *A History of New Bern and Craven County* (New Bern: Tryon Palace Commission, 1987), 141.

eighteenth century. Twenty-five miles of water separate Ocracoke from the mainland. Early in the colonial period, these geographic barriers helped delay settlement along the Tar River, a tributary of the Pamlico Sound. The Tar River begins in present day Person County, in the piedmont near the Virginia border, and winds 180 miles to Washington. The Tar then becomes the Pamlico River and runs another thirty-nine miles before emptying into Pamlico Sound.⁸ For the purposes of this paper, the Tar- Pamlico refers to the trade route between Tarborough and Shell Castle near Ocracoke. Tarborough was often the upper limit of river traffic and Ocracoke separates the Pamlico Sound and Atlantic Ocean.⁹

When Jacob Blount and Richard Blackledge bought a store at the “Forks of the Tar” in 1761, Washington was not an incorporated town.¹⁰ Washington finally witnessed growth during and after the American Revolution, though it would never reach the size of Norfolk or Charleston.¹¹ The Blounts continued to promote Tar-Pamlico commerce even though they understood the Tar’s limitations. In 1790, William could not “see any Circumstance that can happen to bring the lands on Tar River to a good Market,”

⁸ Frank Tursi, *The Albemarle-Pamlico Sounds: Where the Rivers Meet the Sea* (Raleigh, NC: Albemarle-Pamlico Estuarine Study, N.C. Dept. of Environment, Health and Natural Resources, 1990), 24; J.Kelly Turner and Jno. L. Bridgers, Jr., *History of Edgecombe County, North Carolina* (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton Printing Co., 1920), 16-19.

⁹ William Attmore, *Journal of a Tour to North Carolina, 1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1922), 28.

¹⁰ *The John Gray Blount Papers*, ed. Alice Barnwell Keith, vol. 1, 1764-1789 (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1952), xv.

¹¹ Charles Christopher Crittenden, *The Commerce of North Carolina 1763-1789* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936), 1-15; Francois X. Martin, “A Description of Occacock Inlet,” (New Bern: Francois X. Martin, 1795). Reprint edition, D.L. Corbitt, ed., *The North Carolina Historical Review* 3 (1926): 624-633.

especially compared to the growing settlements along the Cape Fear River.¹² Hugh Williamson, familiar with both the Blounts and North Carolina transportation, summarized the Tar's shortcomings in his 1812 *History of North Carolina*. "The delays however of this tedious river navigation, which terminates in small towns, of little trade, interferes exceedingly with the objects of the planter. Hence it follows, that the greater part of the tobacco, flour, and pork from the high grounds, in the eastern part of the state, are sent to Virginia; and the produce of the western part of the state, is sent to South Carolina."¹³

Research

Research revolved around a few comprehensive collections. John Gray Blount, the unofficial leader of the family business, left detailed records and correspondence. In 1952, Alice Barnwell Keith began publishing *The John Gray Blount Papers*, an invaluable source for studying late eighteenth and early nineteenth century North Carolina commerce and politics. In addition to the easily accessible four-volume collection, the North Carolina State Archives' John Gray Blount Papers consists of additional, unpublished letters and records.

The John Gray Blount Papers include business transactions, political discussions, and descriptions of events and landscapes. Letters between John Gray and Hugh Williamson show their desire to promote the North Carolina mercantile interest abroad and the Federalist agenda locally.

¹² William Blount to John Gray Blount, January 8, 1790 in *The John Gray Blount Papers*, ed. Alice Barnwell Keith, vol. 2, 1790-1795 (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1959), 3.

¹³ Hugh Williamson, *The History of North Carolina*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1812), 218-219.



Figure 2: The State of North Carolina from the Best Authorities, 1795 (Source: State Archives of North Carolina). Significant locations are marked and Shell Castle is located between “Occracock Inl.” and Portsmouth.

John Gray also kept many letters from merchants, highlighting Washington's connections with Norfolk, Europe, the Caribbean, and Philadelphia. These letters also provide detailed information about eastern North Carolina agriculture, timber, shipping, and fishing. Correspondence between John Gray and Thomas further illustrates the Tar River trade between their stores at Tarborough and Washington. Another partner, John Wallace of Shell Castle, wrote John Gray often, requesting supplies and reporting on construction progress, business activity, shipbuilding, and lightering. Lightering involves loading the cargo from a larger vessel on to one or more smaller vessels to make the larger vessel sit higher in the water, helping them sail through shallow water. *The Blount Papers* also contain various letters from other eastern North Carolina merchants, shipbuilders, planters, and ship captains. Archival research at the State Archives in Raleigh and in Joyner Library's Manuscript Collection at East Carolina University provided additional sources. Two early maps of Washington from the State Archives have provided the best visual representation of the town during the period. The contrast between the two maps shows the town's development over the course of fifteen years.¹⁴

The State and Colonial Records of North Carolina is another important collection of primary sources. John Gray and three of his brothers served in the North Carolina House of Commons and Senate throughout the 1780s and 1790s. The bills they introduced and their voting patterns are helpful to demonstrate their contributions to the Tar-Pamlico maritime cultural landscape. Both *State Records* and *The John Gray Blount*

¹⁴ Plan of the town of Washington, comprised of the original 60 lots, ca. 1779; The plan of the town of Washington, ca. 1794, Map Collection 195, North Carolina Maps, Municipal Maps, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, NC.

Papers illustrate the connection between Federalism, maritime commerce, and the Tar River Blounts in North Carolina.

Keith's dissertation, "Three North Carolina Blount Brothers in Business and Politics, 1783-1812," obviates the need to write a biographical paper on the Blounts. Her research was broad and comprehensive and her text is a thorough account of William, John Gray, and Thomas's lives. My thesis focuses more specifically on the Blounts' use of politics and labor (often slave labor) to shape the Tar-Pamlico trade network to fit their business interests.¹⁵

David Cecelski's *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* is an innovative look at maritime labor among free and enslaved African Americans in antebellum North Carolina. Their various trades included fishing, ferrying, piloting, sailing, canal digging, and shipbuilding. Cecelski's book is an important step in understanding these voiceless and often misrepresented men and women. The Blounts owned many slaves and employed them in both agricultural and maritime endeavors.¹⁶

Phillip McGuinn's "Shell Castle, A North Carolina Entrepôt, 1789: A Historical and Archaeological Investigation" is a thorough study of Shell Castle, one of the transitional points in the Blount trade network. Located near Ocracoke, Shell Castle marked the transition from the Atlantic into North Carolina's inner coastal waters for many sailors. McGuinn acknowledged the Blounts' plan of vertical integration and the importance of location to their business strategy. Since McGuinn already investigated

¹⁵ Alice B. Keith, "Three North Carolina Blount Brothers in Business and Politics, 1783-1812," PhD diss., The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1940.

¹⁶ Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song*.

the history of Shell Castle, this thesis only covers the role of the commercial center in the Blounts' overall development of the Tar-Pamlico maritime cultural landscape.¹⁷

Christopher C. Crittenden's *The Commerce of North Carolina 1763-1789* is another valuable source. Crittenden provided detailed descriptions of North Carolina's navigational and geographic challenges, naval stores production, and commodity diversification.¹⁸ Crittenden's book is one of the few sources on the topic, though the work does not explore the early Federal Era. This historical gap further justifies studying John Gray and Thomas Blount, Merchants, one of North Carolina's largest mercantile firms of the post-colonial period.¹⁹

Two other important primary sources are Johann David Schoepf's *Travels in the Confederation, 1783-1784* and William Attmore's *Journal of a Tour to North Carolina, 1787*.²⁰ Schoepf's account describes the town of Washington directly after the American Revolution. He also describes eastern North Carolina's economy and the naval stores industry. Attmore's *Journal* is another informative outsider's perspective of Washington, Tarborough, and New Bern in the late 1780s. The Philadelphia merchant described the size, economy, and culture of eastern North Carolina river towns. The contrasts between Schoepf's and Attmore's accounts are helpful to trace Washington's growth during the 1780s.

¹⁷ McGuinn, "Shell Castle, A North Carolina Entrepôt."

¹⁸ Charles Christopher Crittenden, *The Commerce of North Carolina 1763-1789* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936).

¹⁹ Keith, 1:xv.

²⁰ Johann David Schoepf, *Travels in the Confederation, 1783-1784*. Translated and edited by Alfred J. Morrison (Philadelphia: William J. Campbell, 1911); Attmore, *Journal of a Tour to North Carolina*.

Research Limitations

The major limitation in this thesis is the reliance on the Blount perspective. Though *The Blount Papers* and Blount Collection are an expansive collection of primary sources, other comprehensive sources from Tar-Pamlico merchants or planters in the first two decades following American independence are unavailable. As a result, many of the primary sources related to the Blounts are the opinions and experiences of their friends, family, business partners, and political colleagues. For example, though John Sitgreaves wrote John Gray of his accused devotion to “The Blount Interest,” little further evidence about these accusations exists.²¹ The vastness of Blount records combined with the obscurity of contemporary accounts inevitably skews the historical record.

Even if other contemporary accounts were discovered, they would still mostly represent North Carolina’s elite. Slaves and poor whites, the individuals responsible for sailing vessels, ferrying rafts, digging canals, improving roads, and building boats, bridges, houses, wharves, and stores, are not equally represented in these records. Even if these men and women could write, no consolidated collection survives. Henry Tuley, for example, built ships for the Blounts in the Pungo area. A few of his letters, though written with poor grammar, exist in *The John Gray Blount Papers*. As much information as a collection of Tully’s letters could provide about shipbuilding in antebellum North Carolina, they have not survived (if he kept them at all). As a merchant, John Gray sent and received letters constantly. Saving documentation was a good business practice. The

²¹ John Sitgreaves to [John Gray Blount], August 12, 1787, in Keith, 1:336-339.

nature of his trade and level of education made him more likely to keep detailed records and letters than would a shipwright, carpenter, ship captain, or laborer.²²

Limitations considered, *The Blount Papers*, *State Records*, and corroborating travels accounts reveal a wealth of information about labor, life, and growth along the Tar-Pamlico following American independence from Great Britain. The three core chapters of the thesis focus on business, politics, and the maritime cultural landscape. The resulting work unfolds by subject matter and does not always follow a chronological narrative.

²² Henry Tuley to John Gray Blount, July 4, 1783, *ibid.*, 67.



Figure 1: Jacob Blount's four oldest sons. Clockwise from top left, William, John Gray, Thomas, and Reading Blount. Source: www.NCpedia.org.

CHAPTER TWO

BLOUNT BROTHERS AND AN EMERGING BUSINESS

Tar River Blounts

The Blount brothers were successful businessmen and influential politicians in the early American republic. The official partnership of John Gray and Thomas Blount, Merchants, began in late summer of 1783, the same season that the Treaty of Paris ended the American Revolutionary War. Though the brothers inherited wealth and social status from their father, Jacob Blount, they expanded their family fortune through shipping, diversification, and speculation. Their efficient partnership structure, diversification in commodities and assets, and political and commercial initiative helped the family business expand in the first two decades of the American Republic. Jacob's eldest son, William, was highly influential and vested in the interests of the company, though in an unofficial manner. William contributed to the company through his progressive entrepreneurial schemes and political presence. Undoubtedly commercial and political opportunists, the brothers were pragmatic Federalists who ultimately benefited from western expansion and a strengthened federal government to support their mercantile interests. The Blount brothers and their associates constituted a major component of the North Carolina Federalist faction that supported ratification of the United States Constitution.

Jacob Blount was a fourth generation North Carolinian. His great grandfather, James Blount, moved to the Albemarle region from Virginia in the 1660s and participated

in Culpepper's Rebellion.²³ Jacob's maternal grandfather was a prominent landholder in the Bath area. Between 1757 and 1783, Jacob accumulated nearly 6,000 acres, mostly in Craven and Pitt counties.²⁴ In 1761, he bought co-ownership in a store at Forks of the Tar River, a location that would become Washington, North Carolina.²⁵ Of Jacob's nine children who lived to adulthood, four of his sons, William, John Gray, Thomas, and, to a lesser extent, Reading, actively contributed to the family's mercantile business. Jacob maintained a plantation at Blount Hall in Pitt County until his death in 1789.²⁶ A Blount family genealogist cited tax documents to illustrate Jacob's wealth and, in 1783, he owned 4,593 acres of land, 135 head of cattle, fourteen blooded horses, and seventy-four slaves.²⁷

Jacob, William, and John Gray participated in administrative roles in the North Carolina government and colonial military throughout the war with Great Britain. Jacob served as paymaster of the Continental troops and William served as paymaster for the militia and the 3rd Regiment, Light Horse, Artillery.²⁸ John Gray served as a purchasing agent for the State of North Carolina. In 1777, John Gray attempted to purchase salt for

²³ *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 1, s.v. "Blount (Blunt), James."

²⁴ Records of Grants of Land Made to Jacob Blount in Craven and Pitt Counties in the Land Grant Office, Raleigh in *The John Gray Blount Papers*, ed. Alice Barnwell Keith, vol. 1, 1764-1789 (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1952), 562.

²⁵ Keith, 1:xv.

²⁶ *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 1, s.v. "Blount, Jacob."

²⁷ Memoirs of Jacob Blount and His Family with the Allied Families, Box 161, Folder B, William Blount Rodman Papers, East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J.Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina.

²⁸ Accounts of Jacob Blount and William Blount, Paymasters, in Keith, 1:530.

the state on St. Eustatius, a Dutch island.²⁹ In 1780, Governor Abner Nash appointed John Gray to “purchase” or “impress” provisions for Beaufort County’s soldiers.³⁰

While Jacob, William, and John Gray served the government in financial and administrative roles, Reading and William served in the army, as a major and lieutenant, respectively, in the North Carolina Continental Line.³¹ John Gray engaged in both shipping and privateering during the war. As early as 1776, William and John Gray sought a brigantine “to answer” their “Purpose of Privateering.”³² Joshua Howard argued that the Blount privateering operation was professional yet unsuccessful. They commissioned four vessels, the *Tyger*, the *Greyhound*, the *Hiram*, and the *Wolfe*. The *Tyger*, a galley, “capsized” and the British captured *Greyhound* and *Wolfe* (both twenty-gun brigs) in the Mediterranean in 1781 and 1782, respectively. John Gray also owned the schooner *Speedwell* with William Campbell. Though it is unclear if the Blount vessels captured any ships during the revolution, New Bern merchants reported the arrival of prizes in Washington in 1781.³³

John Gray and Thomas Blount, Merchants

Throughout the first decade of the American republic, the Blount brothers constantly expanded their markets and diversified their income. Though their letters

²⁹ Charles Christopher Crittenden, *The Commerce of North Carolina 1763-1789* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936), 127.

³⁰ Commission to John Gray Blount from Governor Abner Nash, July, 18, 1780, in Keith, 1:530.

³¹ *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 1, s.v. “Blount, Reading” and “Blount, Thomas.”

³² William Blount to John Gray Blount, June 4, 1777, in Keith, 1:3-6.

³³ Joshua B. Howard, “‘The Most Abandoned Sett of Wretches:’ North Carolina’s Privateering Efforts During the American Revolution, 1776-1783,” M.A. Thesis, East Carolina University, 2004, 116-131; James Coor to Governor Burke, July 25, 1781 in Clark, William, ed. *The State Records of North Carolina*, vols. 15-26, (Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1993-1994), 15:572-573.

never explicitly stated a command structure or business philosophy, there was a clear division of labor. William, the oldest and most visionary, travelled often throughout the 1780s, negotiating Indian treaties, attending constitutional conventions, and campaigning for land grants in Georgia and North Carolina. Correspondence between William and John Gray normally involved the elder brother's updates on political schemes and ideas for new business ventures. William's exposure to northern enterprises convinced the brothers to create a nail factory and tannery, among other endeavors. William was politically ambitious, yet his ambitions derived from a desire to promote the family's economic interests. Though William's name was not included in the Blount mercantile business, he directly influenced and benefitted from John Gray and Thomas Blount, Merchants.

Thomas Blount managed the Blount store in Tarborough, served as a diplomat for the family's business connections, and eventually served in the United States Congress. He lived in Philadelphia for a month in 1783 and Europe from 1785-1788, on separate ventures to secure business connections.³⁴

John Gray was the executive of the business. While John Gray often took advice from his imaginative older brother, business concerns involving decision and payment were usually addressed to John Gray in Washington.³⁵ Though he obviously traveled within the state to fulfill political and governmental obligations, most of his correspondence in the 1780s and 1790s came through Washington, their mercantile headquarters.

³⁴ Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, August 30, 1783; Thomas Blount to [John Gray Blount & Thomas Blount, Merchants], August 25, 1785; Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, October 9, 1788 in Keith, 1:94-96, 209-212, 428-429.

³⁵ Keith, 1:487.

John Gray was a trusted financial manager. The North Carolina government commissioned him to repay the state's debt to Martinique and to sell public tobacco to finance the repayment of the state's debt.³⁶ John Gray also managed the inheritances of young scions and William and Thomas's finances during business and political absences from their plantations.³⁷

John Gray's store and shipping business was located in Washington, a recently established town at the mouth of the Tar River in Beaufort County. John Gray was already in the area when the North Carolina General Assembly enacted the establishment of Washington in 1782. The legislature appointed John Gray as one of five original town commissioners.³⁸ A 1789 account listed Wilmington, Edenton, New Bern, and Washington as "nearly upon a level in point of size and population," although the author also commented there was "no town of any kind of consequence, in point of size in North Carolina."³⁹

The account listed both Washington and Tarborough in a list of North Carolina's twenty-five "principal towns."⁴⁰ Thomas's store was located in Tarborough, in Edgecombe County, upriver from Washington. The town was established in 1760, "principally to provide Edgecombe County with a satisfactory county seat," and grew

³⁶ John Blount to Gov. Johnson, May 18, 1788, in Clark, 21:473; William Blount to John Gray Blount, March 12th, 1787 in Keith, 1:262.

³⁷ William Blount to John Gray Blount, August 21st, 1783; William Blount to John Gray Blount, September 12, 1785; Thomas Blount to [John Gray And Thomas Blount Merchants], October 18, 1785; *ibid.*, 86-89, 215-217, 223-226.

³⁸ An Act for establishing a Town on the lands formerly belonging to Colonel James Bonner, at the Forks of Tar River, in the County of Beaufort, in Clark, 24:458-459.

³⁹ Gentleman immediately returned from a tour of the continent, *An historical review of North America: containing a geographical, political, and natural history of the British and other European settlements, the united and apocryphal states, and a general state of the laws* (Dublin, C. Brown, 1789), 110.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

slowly before the revolution.⁴¹ In addition to the store, Thomas owned land on the Neuse River. William moved to Greenville in 1788.⁴² Greenville is located on the banks of the Tar River in Pitt County, between Washington and Tarborough. In 1786, The North Carolina General Assembly changed the town of Martinsborough's name to Greenville.⁴³ The name was eventually shortened to Greenville. Both Washington and Greenville bear the names of famed Revolutionary War officers. A 1791 map sketch and description of North Carolina, used in George Washington's tour, listed Greenville as twenty-five miles east of Tarborough and sixteen miles north of Blount Hall (Figure 3). That the map includes only four locations in the Tar River area—Tarborough, Greenville, Washington, and Blount Hall—illustrates the importance of the Blount family in the Federalist perception of North Carolina and the emergence of these towns in the region.⁴⁴ Neither Washington, Blount Hall, or Greenville appear on a 1783 map found in the *State Records of North Carolina* (Figure 4).⁴⁵

⁴¹ Alan D. Watson, *Society in Colonial North Carolina* (Raleigh: Division of Archives and History, 1996), 116-117.

⁴² Keith, 1:xix-xxvi.

⁴³ An Act for Establishing an Academy at the Place Heretofore Called Martinsborough, in the County of Pitt; and for Altering the Name of Martinsborough to That of Greenville, in Clark, 24:867-869.

⁴⁴ Memorandum of Distances, in Clark, 15:379-381.

⁴⁵ Map of North Carolina in 1783, in Clark, 18:498-499.

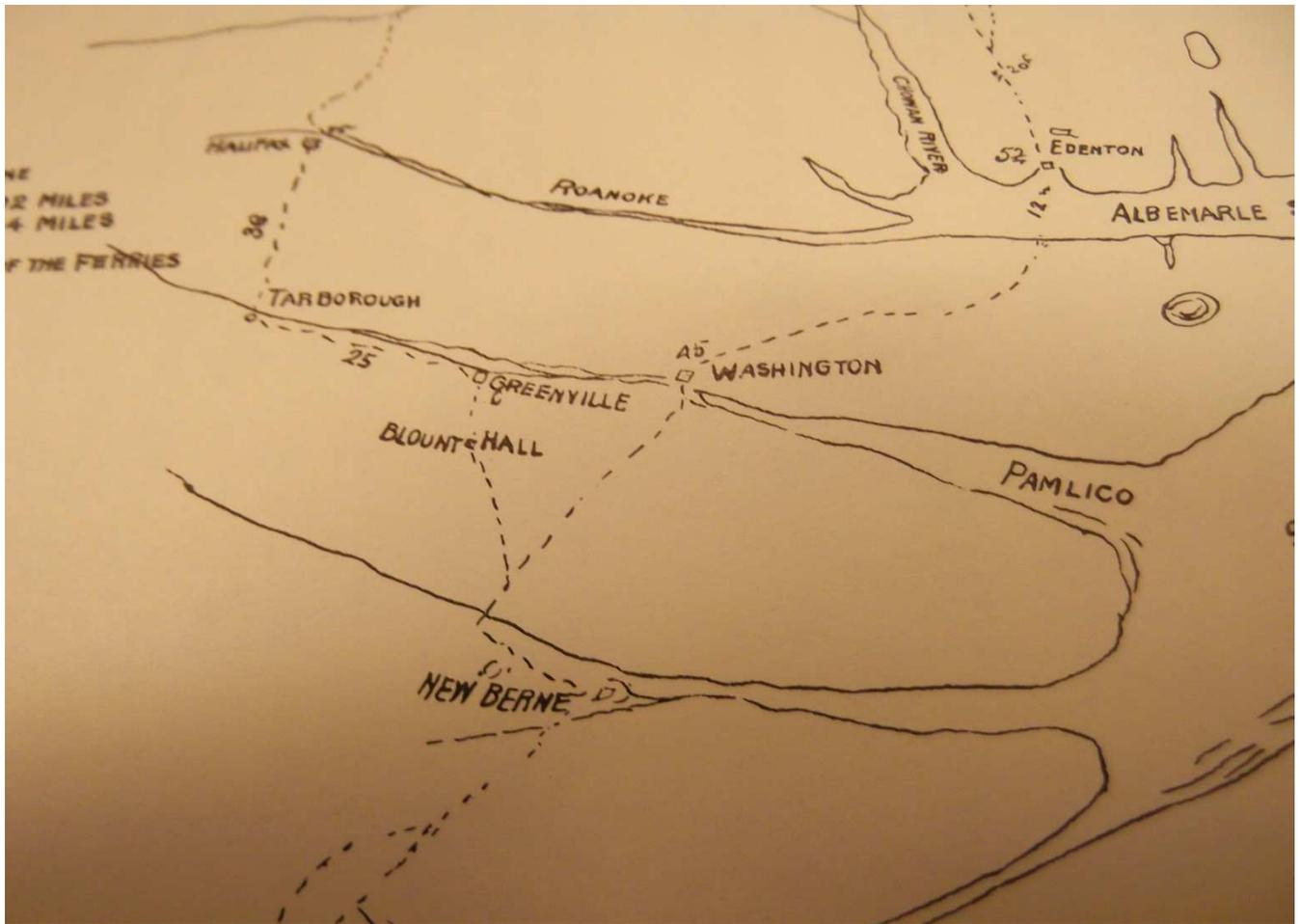


Figure 3, Portion of a map sketch used in George Washington's 1791 tour of North Carolina. Source: State Records of North Carolina, vol. 15.

In addition to agricultural commodities collected in the Tarborough and Washington stores, the Blounts' own plantations undoubtedly contributed a substantial amount of capital to their business. William, John Gray, Reading and Thomas possessed a combined total of 167 slaves in four counties along the Tar-Pamlico at the 1790 census.⁴⁹ The brothers grew tobacco, but like other North Carolina planters, likely produced naval stores, pork, corn, and other commodities. In 1783, for example, the Blounts shipped nearly one thousand bushels of sweet potatoes to New York.⁵⁰ Historian C. Christopher Crittenden argued that, while South Carolinians and Virginians specialized in one or two major crops, North Carolina planters diversified their commodities.⁵¹

Market prices from Liverpool in 1787 reveal that merchants considered North Carolina tobacco inferior to Virginia's tobacco. Only the lowest qualities of James River, Rappahanock, and York River tobacco fetched the same price as North Carolina tobacco. The Liverpool correspondent candidly stated that North Carolina tobacco was "in general esteemed inferior to Rappahanock."⁵²

Naval stores were an important commodity in North Carolina throughout the colonial period and early American republic. Large pine forests covered the eastern portion of the state. From these pines, slaves made pitch, tar, and turpentine.⁵³ In 1783, a Wilmington business partner recommended that John Gray ship turpentine in excess

⁴⁹ *Census 1790* in Clark, 26; Keith, 1:xxix.

⁵⁰ Invoice from Jos. Putnam (?), October 3, 1783, John Gray Blount Papers, Business/Legal/Land/Miscellaneous Records 1764-1799, Personal Collection 193, Box 28, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, NC.

⁵¹ Crittenden, *The Commerce of North Carolina*, 53.

⁵² Thomas, Richard & William Lake to John Gray and Thomas Blount, May 29, 1787, in Keith, 1:301-302.

⁵³ Crittenden, *The Commerce of North Carolina*, 53-58.

cargo space not filled with tobacco.⁵⁴ Also in 1783, James Barr, a Philadelphia merchant, predicted that shipping wheat, tar, turpentine, pitch, and tobacco would maximize the Blounts' profit.⁵⁵

Johann David Schoepf, a German scientist travelling through the United States immediately after the American Revolution, noted that eastern North Carolina's abundant pine trees provided "excellent timber for building" and "the opportunity for considerable gain from turpentine, tar, pitch, resin, and turpentine-oil."⁵⁶ Schoepf considered the naval stores industry so profitable because the producers relied mostly on slave labor and needed little infrastructure other than trees and slaves. Workers gathered turpentine by cutting two to four "boxes" into each tree during the winter and collecting the substance from April through September. A single worker could fill fifteen to twenty barrels on a warm, sunny day, but less in rainy or overcast weather. Schoepf also estimated that twelve to fifteen acres of forest could produce 100-120 barrels of turpentine.⁵⁷

Workers "coaled" tar from either dead or live trees (buyers preferred "green-tar" over "dead tar") during the winter. He described the method of coaling: "Tar-coaling is done in a pit lined with clay, in which the wood is covered with earth and coaled by a slow fire; the tar sweated out goes to the bottom and runs through wooden pipes into casks more deeply buried." Slaves burned tar in large iron cauldrons or pits, "6 ft. deep

⁵⁴ Peter Mallet to John Gray Blount, June 23, 1783, in Keith, 1: 64.

⁵⁵ James Barr to John Gray and Thomas Blount & Co, August 4, 1783, *ibid.*, 75.

⁵⁶ Johann David Schoepf, *Travels in the Confederation, 1783-1784*. Translated and edited by Alfred J. Morrison (Philadelphia: William J. Campbell, 1911), 140-145.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

and four and a half across” to produce pitch. Distilling turpentine produced oil of turpentine and rosin, a byproduct.⁵⁸

In addition to tobacco, naval stores, pork, and other agricultural commodities, the Blounts dealt in staves, shingles, and ship’s scantlings. Purchasers normally preferred white oak staves, but red oak staves also sold at times.⁵⁹ The Blounts also exported North Carolina fish. Though their trade failed to compete with local fish in the northern markets, the Blounts successfully sold them in the West Indies.⁶⁰ The merchants acquired fish from the Albemarle Sound’s tributaries, including Salmon Creek and the Chowan River. Correspondence between John Gray and Hugh Williamson, a North Carolina congressman and business associate, referred explicitly to herring purchases, but white perch, striped bass, trout, and mullet were also common in the Pamlico and Albemarle sounds and tributaries.⁶¹

John Gray purchased herring from Albemarle fishermen and supplied them with twine for seine nets and salt for fish preservation. In one instance, a fisherman requested 450 bushels of fine salt as well as coarse salt from Turk’s Island in January 1787. The fisherman predicted he could supply Blount with 800 to 1000 barrels of fish by May 15.⁶²

For John Gray and Thomas Blount, Merchants, to export their commodities to markets in Philadelphia, Europe, and the West Indies, their first major obstacle was geography. During colonial times, North Carolina never developed deep-water port cities

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Crittenden, *The Commerce of North Carolina*, 66; William Duncan to John Gray Blount, March 17, 1787, in Keith 1: 267-269.

⁶⁰ Stuart & Barr to John Gray & Thomas Blount, Merchants, February 23, 1785; William Duncan to John Gray Blount, March 17, 1787, *ibid.*, 188-190, 267-269.

⁶¹ Hugh Williamson to John Gray Blount, February 16, 1787, *ibid.*, 249-250; Crittenden, *The Commerce of North Carolina*, 63.

⁶² George Ryan to John Gray Blount, January 27, 1787 Keith, 1:241-242.

like Virginia and South Carolina. Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, no natural deep-water harbors with easy access to the ocean existed in the Albemarle or Pamlico areas. Only settlements along the Cape Fear River in southeastern North Carolina could benefit from Wilmington, the state's best harbor. The only natural inlet allowing large vessels to access the Pamlico and Albemarle settlements was Ocracoke inlet.⁶³

Francois Martin, a friend of the Blounts, published an account of Ocracoke inlet in 1795, describing it as the only inlet permitting "vessels of any burden" other than the Cape Fear River, Beaufort, and Swansborough. The Blounts' vessels, or any others bound for Washington, entered at Ocracoke and sailed through the Pamlico Sound, one hundred miles long and twenty to thirty miles wide. Sailing through Ocracoke Inlet's Swash was the journey's most dangerous part due to tidal surges and contrary wind and current.⁶⁴

While small vessels of six foot draft or less could sail through Teach's Hole, ships drawing between six and eight and a half feet of water were forced to sail through Ocracoke's Swash, a "sandy shoal on which vessels frequently grounded."⁶⁵ This limited the size of vessels that could sail into the Pamlico and Albemarle sounds, and often caused shipping delays. The Blounts often received correspondence from ship captains

⁶³ Crittenden, *The Commerce of North Carolina*, 1-15.

⁶⁴ Phillip Horne McGuinn, "Shell Castle, A North Carolina Entrepôt, 1789-1820: A Historical and Archaeological Investigation" (M.A. Thesis, East Carolina University, 2000), 116-117; Francois X. Martin, "A Description of Occacock Inlet," (New Bern: Francois X. Martin, 1795). Reprint edition, D.L. Corbitt, ed., *The North Carolina Historical Review* 3 (1926): 624-633.

⁶⁵ McGuinn, "Shell Castle, A North Carolina Entrepôt," 11.

stuck at Ocracoke, awaiting the proper wind or tide to allow navigation through the Swash.⁶⁶

The potential for delays and disaster at Ocracoke affected the Blounts in multiple ways. In 1783, James Barr, a Philadelphia merchant, wrote John Gray that Philadelphian sailors were reluctant to join a North Carolina venture “as all the people here are afraid of your Swash.”⁶⁷ C. Christopher Crittenden speculated that North Carolina merchants paid high insurance rates.⁶⁸ A London merchant wrote John Gray in 1790, “the Vessel and owners of your state in genl. does not stand high at Lloyds,” referring to the marine insurer, and that North Carolina “navigation is exceedingly dislik’d.”⁶⁹

The Swash and navigational difficulties may have restricted vessels of great burden from sailing into North Carolina waters, but the Blounts eventually exploited Ocracoke’s geography to their advantage. Between 1789 and 1790, John Gray Blount and John Wallace built Shell Castle at Ocracoke inlet. Wallace lived there, overseeing a warehouse, lumberyard, wharf, and lightering and piloting operations.⁷⁰

Wallace wrote John Gray in 1790 that the “South Swash is now well Stak’d and I intend keeping it so.” The same letter indicated that John Gray supplied the boards and shingles for Shell Castle’s construction as well as seine for fishing nets. Wallace used

⁶⁶ Thomas Williams to John Gray Blount, July 14, 1784 in Keith, 1: 172.

⁶⁷ James Barr to John Gray & Thomas Blount, Merchants, December 23, 1783, *ibid.*, 143.

⁶⁸ Crittenden, *The Commerce of North Carolina*, 109.

⁶⁹ William Murdock to John Gray and Thomas Blount, August 27, 1790, in Keith, 2: 99-100.

⁷⁰ Martin, “A Description of Occacock Inlet;” McGuinn, Shell Castle, A North Carolina Entrepôt.”

seine for nets and Juniper timber for vessels used in the “porpus fishery.” Wallace’s letter also expressed regrets for his inability to provide John Gray with oysters or fish.⁷¹

Blount and Wallace collaborated to dig the Swash and equip Shell Castle with additional lightering vessels. Lighters could ease a vessel’s burden by carrying a portion of its cargo through the Swash. Both schemes, digging the Swash and using lighters, were designed to increase the amount of goods entering and exiting Ocracoke Inlet.⁷²

Lighters were among the variety of vessels that the Blounts owned. By the end of 1785, the brothers owned “many vessels to employ,” including one ship, three brigantines, and numerous sloops and schooners.⁷³ The Blounts continued to purchase and sell vessels throughout the 1780s and early 1790s. Flats were used on the Tar River, carrying goods between Tarborough and Washington.⁷⁴ Later, when the Blounts dedicated the *Packet* to the Tar River route, Thomas still used flats as lighters in the event of low water.⁷⁵

Schooners and sloops served a variety of purposes for the Blounts. One of John Gray’s captains complained that much time was wasted using sloops to gather lumber in creeks.⁷⁶ These vessels were smaller than brigantines and were ideal for the Carolina sounds. Even with sloops, however, captains faced problems of clearing the Swash at Ocracoke. In 1788, Reading Blount wrote John Gray that his lumber laden sloop would

⁷¹ Jack [John] Wallace to John Gray Blount, September 6, 1790 in Keith, 2: 106-107.

⁷² John Wallace to John Gray Blount, February 12, 1792, *ibid.*, 181.

⁷³ Thomas Blount to [John Gray and Thomas Blount, Merchants], November 7, 1785 in Keith, 1: 228-229.

⁷⁴ Thomas Blount to [John Gray Blount], April 13, 1789, *ibid.*, 472.

⁷⁵ Thomas Blount to [John Gray Blount], November 6, 1788, *ibid.*, 433.

⁷⁶ William Duncan to John Gray Blount, March 17, 1787, *ibid.*, 267-268.

need lightering at the Swash because “she draws 9 feet aft now and 7 forward.”⁷⁷

Brigantines could make it safely to Washington, but in 1790 a brigantine full of West Indian goods could “carry about half her Cargo over the Swash” and had to “call at the Castle.”⁷⁸ Local shipbuilders built many of the Blounts’ vessels and the brothers bought twine and rope from Josiah Collins’ cordage factory in Edenton. John Gray Blount’s brother, Jacob, was married to Collins’ daughter.⁷⁹

Once through the Swash at Ocracoke, Blount vessels sailed for the British Isles, West Indies, and Philadelphia. Even before the official end of the war with Great Britain, John Gray was actively seeking to capitalize on the reopening of markets in England, Europe, and the West Indies. In April 1783, he received a letter from an Italian merchant seeking direct commerce with Americans to avoid British duties. Mainly interested in Newfoundland cod, the Italians did not maintain any long-term business correspondence with the Blounts.⁸⁰ Also, before the formal establishment of John Gray and Thomas Blount, Merchants, John Gray maintained a shipping partnership with Peter Mallet of Wilmington. Blount and Mallet shipped commodities to Holland.⁸¹ In solicitation for their business, Dutch merchants advertised manufactures from Russia, Germany, Sweden, and Flanders as well as East Indies goods.⁸²

⁷⁷ Reading Blount to John Gray Blount, December 8, 1788, *ibid.*, 441.

⁷⁸ William Blount to [John Gray Blount], April 13, 1787; George Nicolson to John Gray Blount, May 17, 1790, in Keith, 1:283-284,2:56.

⁷⁹ *The John Gray Blount Papers*, ed. William H. Masterson, vol. 3, 1796-1802 (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1965), 338.

⁸⁰ Ante. Frans. Salucci and Son to John Gray Blount, April 1, 1783, in Keith, 1:51.

⁸¹ Peter Mallet to John Gray Blount, June 23, 1783, *ibid.*, 64-65.

⁸² Bingham Ingles & Gilmer to John Gray Blount, March 20, 1783, *ibid.*, 49.

In the summer of 1785, Thomas Blount relinquished management of the Tarborough store and sailed for Ireland.⁸³ Throughout the late summer and early fall, he traveled to Liverpool, Bristol, and London in search of business opportunities. Thomas's efforts initially failed. American merchants had flooded the markets after the peace between Great Britain and America, and the "amazing number of Bankruptcies" had destroyed American credit. Thomas found tobacco prices low and naval stores in low demand. Thomas remained in Europe for three years, living on credit and accumulating a debt of £115. Changing markets and Thomas's diplomacy eventually helped him open a business line in Liverpool in 1787.⁸⁴

In addition to European connections, the Blounts maintained strong ties with Philadelphia. Thomas lived in Philadelphia for a month in 1783, helping to establish a partnership with the merchants and shippers Stuart and Barr. James Barr believed that a vessel of three to four hundred barrels should constantly run between Washington and Philadelphia. He argued that vessels small enough to clear the Swash would be more profitable in the coastal trade than sailing to Europe. Swedes, Danes, and the Dutch had the cheapest shipping rates in Philadelphia, but Barr believed northern states would eventually have vessels "sufficient enough" to compete in transatlantic shipping.⁸⁵

The Blounts engaged in a third and highly profitable market in the West Indies. The Blounts transported staves and heading to the West Indies as early as 1783.⁸⁶ In 1784, a hurricane devastated Jamaica. An acquaintance wrote John Gray and Thomas "to

⁸³ Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, June 25, 1785, *ibid.*, 200-201.

⁸⁴ Thomas Blount to John Gray & Thomas Blount, Merchants, September 26, 1785; Thomas, Richard & William Lake to John Gray & Thomas Blount, May 29, 1787, *ibid.*, 219-220, 301-303.

⁸⁵ James Barr to John Gray Blount & Company, August 7, 1783, *ibid.*, 78-81.

⁸⁶ Jacob Blount [Jr.] to John Gray Blount, June, 23, 1783, *ibid.*, 64.

advise...of so Interesting a Circumstance that you may profit by it.”⁸⁷ An additional letter in November stated that inch board and shingles remained in high demand.⁸⁸ Within one week, a Blount vessel sailed from Ocracoke to “try the Markets from Antigua to Jamaica.”⁸⁹ Throughout the 1780s and 1790s, the Blounts shipped lumber products, peas, and fish to the West Indies. In 1789, the Blounts had three vessels trading in the West Indies simultaneously.⁹⁰

Throughout the 1780s and 1790s, the Blounts paid close attention to fluctuating business conditions in Virginia, Philadelphia, Europe, and the West Indies. In response to these volatile markets, the amount and types of commodities in demand also varied throughout the decade. Shortages and glutted markets commonly appeared. In 1787, a Virginia merchant directed John Gray to quickly provide three hundred barrels of tar within a week and one thousand barrels shortly thereafter.⁹¹

Speculation: Currency, Land, and Commodities

Among other resources, the Blounts speculated in corn, currency, and land. Throughout the winter of 1790, the Blounts speculated in corn in response to European demand for the crop.⁹² Corn speculation demonstrates the competition between Virginia and North Carolina merchants over commodities grown in the Albemarle Sound and along its tributaries. In a response to John Gray’s inquiry, one Roanoke River merchant

⁸⁷ Tyler & Mumford to Thomas Blount and John Gray Blount, August 17, 1784, *ibid.*, 174-175.

⁸⁸ Tyler & Mumford to John Gray & Thomas Blount, Merchants, November 20, 1784, *ibid.*, 183.

⁸⁹ Thomas Williams to John Gray Blount, December 8, 1784, *ibid.*, 186.

⁹⁰ Abner Neale to John Gray Blount, March 10, 1789, *ibid.*, 465-466.

⁹¹ John Cowper to John Gray Blount, March 29, 1787, *ibid.*, 275.

⁹² John Cowper to John Gray and Thomas Blount, January 16, 1790, *ibid.*, 2:6.

in Martin County replied that “the Purchasors from Virginia are like Swarms of Locusts,” and he had already sold his corn.⁹³

The Blounts did not limit their speculation to commodities. When Congress approved U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton’s plan for federal assumption of state debts in 1790, Thomas quickly relayed the news to John Gray, “that you may concert your plan for such Speculation as your funds may admit of & your judgment approve.”⁹⁴ Hugh Williamson also wrote John Gray that he was willing to “take half the Risque in the Speculation.”⁹⁵

Land speculation was even more important to the Blounts than speculation in state debts or specific commodities. William possessed a keen interest in land grants following the American Revolution. He and his brothers speculated in North Carolina grants, and he petitioned the state of Georgia in the names of himself, John Gray, Reading, and eight other North Carolina citizens for land grants in 1784. William’s company, the Tennessee Company, sought to acquire 300,000 acres of land in the “Bent of Tenese,” the extensive area of land between the 1783 southern boundary of North Carolina and the Tennessee River. William’s claim of 300,000 acres was an arbitrary figure, since he did not know the exact amount of land in the area.⁹⁶ William directed his “joint adventurers,” Georgia land commissioners and members of the Tennessee Company, to secure the largest grant possible and potentially receive warrants with “any

⁹³ William McKenzie to John Gray Blount, February 12, 1790, *ibid.*, 16-17.

⁹⁴ Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, March 27, 1790, *ibid.*, 32-33.

⁹⁵ Hugh Williamson to John Gray Blount, July 29, 1790, *ibid.*, 88.

⁹⁶ William Blount to Lachlin McIntosh, John Morrell, William Downes, and Stephen Heard, May 31, 1784; John Donelson to William Blount, September 24, 1783 in Keith, 1: 169-171, 111-112.

Names fictitious one will do.”⁹⁷ William also witnessed the Treaty between United States and the Cherokee Nation, in 1785, and treaties between the United States and Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations, respectively, in 1786.⁹⁸ Arguing that western lands belonged to North Carolina citizens, he protested that the Cherokee treaty, was “a violation and infringement of her Legistialial and Constitutional rights” because it relinquished rights to lands that had “been appropriated by the State of North Carolina to the payment of the Bounties of land promised the Officers and Soldiers of the Continental line of that State.”⁹⁹

In 1790, seven years after the beginnings of Blount land speculation, the new federal government appointed William as governor of the Territory of the United States South of the River Ohio. William wrote John Gray “I rejoice at it myself for I think it of great Importance to our Western Speculations.”¹⁰⁰ William’s appointment pleased both Hugh Williamson and John Gray, driving them to action. Williamson prompted the publishing of a Territory of the United States South of the River Ohio map to increase interest in western settlement.¹⁰¹

Within a month of William’s appointment, John Gray initiated a bold plan to combine their shipping operations and land schemes. Their brigantine *Russell* sailed from Washington to Dublin with a letter of advertisement:

⁹⁷ William Blount to John Donelson, Joseph Martin, and John Sevier, May 31, 1784, *ibid.*, 167-169.

⁹⁸ Articles of Treaty Between the Comrs. U.S. and the Cherokees; Articles of a Treaty Between the Commissioners of the United States and the Choctaws at Hopewell, in Clark; Treaty Between the Commissioners of U.S. and Chickasaws, in Clark, 17:582-586, 18:799-802, 18:493-495.

⁹⁹ Wm. Blount to the Commissioners Appointed to Treat with the Southern Indians and Cherokees, November 28, 1785, in Clark, 17:579-580.

¹⁰⁰ William Blount to John Gray Blount, June 26, 1790, in Keith, 2:67-72.

¹⁰¹ Keith, 2:66.

On the Arrival of the Vessel we wish you to Advertise for freight or Passengers to this place, And as an inducement to People to come we will engage to let lease one [2] one to two Hundred Acres of wood Land of a good quality to each Passenger for seven years free of Rent except a small Land Tax of about 4/. P Annum, And we will engage to deliver to each Master of a Family that pays you one Guinea there for our use one Cow and Calf here on the Land we have in one body on them terms, which lies near plenty of Fish & Oysters to be caught at all times....Captain McDaniel has directions about them.¹⁰²

In addition, the letter advertised to any potential trans-Appalachian settlers that Washington, North Carolina, was an excellent port to start their journey west to settlements along the Holston River in present day Tennessee and Southwestern Virginia. The Blounts also offered to transport passengers to other American ports.¹⁰³

Diversification

In addition to shipping and speculation, the Blounts expanded their wealth through diversification of their slave labor. In August of 1787, William visited Robert Morris's nail factory in Trenton, New Jersey. The efficiency of nail production, massive volume of nails produced, and relatively low start up cost convinced him and John Gray to start their own nail factory. William predicted that a slave could learn the trade in a week and he planned to supplement slave labor with white apprentices.¹⁰⁴ Within three months, Stuart and Barr shipped John Gray half a ton of nail rods from Philadelphia to

¹⁰² John Gray & Thomas Blount to [Edwards Forbes], June 29, 1790, *ibid.*, 73-76.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ William Blount to John Gray Blount, August 9, 1787, in Keith, 1:331-332.

Washington. Within eight months of William's first exposure to Robert Morris's nail factory in Trenton, William and John Gray had already established a nail factory near Washington. The planned expansion would employ "from twenty to thirty two Negroes."¹⁰⁵ A month later, William offered to sell his nails to the "Trustees of the Academy," referring to Pitt Academy in Greenville.¹⁰⁶

Stuart and Barr advertised the Blounts as merchants involved in navigation and saw mills. The brothers operated both sawmills and grain mills at Piney Grove, William's plantation, and in 1789, William convinced John Gray of the profitability of a tannery. He predicted an annual income of \$250, the equivalent of \$6,720 in 2013.¹⁰⁷ John Gray was also involved in the establishment of a distillery in Washington.¹⁰⁸

The Blounts recognized government contracts as an additional source of income. In 1784, the North Carolina government granted John Gray and Thomas Blount, Merchants, the contract to supply £2,500 worth of goods for Indian treaties.¹⁰⁹ Governor Martin requested that the Blounts purchase various quantities and types of cloth, shirts, blankets, knives, combs, coarse calicos, and other commodities.¹¹⁰ John Gray also served as Washington's postmaster and obtained a contract for carrying the mail.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵ William Blount to John Gray Blount, May 28, 1788, *ibid.*, 397-398.

¹⁰⁶ William Blount to John Gray Blount, June 22, 1788, *ibid.*, 405.

¹⁰⁷ William Blount to John Gray Blount, August 21, 1783;

William Blount to John Gray Blount, June 12, 1789, *ibid.*, 86-89, 486-487; Samuel H. Williamson, "Seven Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount, 1774 to present," *Measuring Worth*, April 2013, www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/

¹⁰⁸ John Evans to Colln. Gorham, July 26, 1790, *ibid.*, 2:85-87.

¹⁰⁹ Governor Martin to the Honorable Richd. Beresford, Esq. Chairman of Committee for Indian Affairs, June 4, 1784, in Clark, 17:76-77.

¹¹⁰ List of Goods to be purchased for the Use of the Cherokee Indians, in Keith, 1:542-543.

¹¹¹ Keith, 2:130.

In June 1787, William attempted to obtain, for John Gray and Thomas Blount, Merchants, a contract to supply the French Navy with naval stores.¹¹² Living in London, Thomas wrote to John Gray in October 1787 about a potential war between the French and British. He believed that American neutrality would create free trade in the French and British West Indies, and more importantly, create the possibility for a British naval stores contract.¹¹³ Though neither enterprise materialized, both instances display the Blount family's speculative spirit and keen sense for profitable opportunities.

The Blounts diversified their wealth through a variety of means. Their agricultural commodities consisted of tobacco, pork, corn, wheat, and peas. They also dealt extensively in naval stores and timber products. They imported salt, sugar, coffee, rum, molasses, and luxury goods that they sold through Tarborough, Washington, and Shell Castle. They implemented slave labor beyond agriculture and naval stores, establishing a nail factory, mills, and a tannery. They also invested their wealth through currency and land speculation, and accumulated additional wealth through government contracts. William was visionary in his adoption of new business practices. John Gray possessed initiative to capitalize on changing markets and the ingenuity to contribute to the establishment and expansion of Shell Castle.

Conclusion

Though they perceived handicaps under the weak federal government, the Blounts experienced economic advancement in the 1780s. They purchased ships and established business connections in Europe and Philadelphia, built a nail factory, grain mills, and saw mills, exported goods to the West Indies, British Isles, and Philadelphia, and obtained

¹¹² William Blount to [John Gray Blount], June 3, 1787, in Keith, 1: 304-305.

¹¹³ Thomas Blount to John Gray & Thomas Blount, October 4, 1787, *ibid.*, 347-349.

extensive amounts of western lands. The Blount correspondence reveals an effective and structured family business. William's travels helped him further the Blounts' business interests through the political sphere and exposed him to new business ventures. Thomas ran a store responsible for purchasing commodities and selling imported goods in Tarborough. This store expanded the family business's markets and resources. Thomas also served as an emissary, establishing trade links for John Gray and Thomas Blount, Merchants, in Europe and Philadelphia. Thomas reported to John Gray, the business executive responsible for managing finances and making final decisions. Though William, unlike Thomas, did not seek permission from John Gray, he depended on him as financier and executor during his absences from North Carolina.

Their mercantile business exported nearly every substantial agricultural commodity and natural resource available in eastern North Carolina—tobacco, naval stores, timber products, pork, wheat, fish and others. There was even one instance of a Guilford County planter desiring to ship his crops through the Blounts.¹¹⁴

As planters, merchants, shippers, and timber producers, the Blounts integrated their business. In addition to using their own slave labor to supply the commodities of timber, tobacco, naval stores, and nails, they collected additional commodities through suppliers dependent on the Blounts. Planters and shipbuilders sought rum, sugar, salt, and other imports from the Blounts. Fishermen depended on the Blounts for seine and salt to catch and preserve the fish that the merchants exported to the West Indies.

Integration, diversification, political support of business interests, and an effective family business structure made the Blounts financially prosperous and politically

¹¹⁴ Thomas Henderson to John Gray & Thomas Blount, Merchants, September 29, 1783, *ibid.*, 114-115.

influential throughout the 1780s and 1790s. Thomas and William's travels, political participation, and relationships within Philadelphia and North Carolina helped the Blounts establish themselves as leading businessmen and a powerful political faction in North Carolina. The next chapter will analyze Blount political decisions, since politics often facilitated development of the Tar-Pamlico maritime cultural landscape. This development was a major aspect of the Blount business strategy.

CHAPTER THREE

TAR RIVER BLOUNTS AND THE POLITICS OF CHANGE

Introduction

Politics contributed an important dynamic to the Blounts' business progression. The brothers served in state and national legislatures throughout the first two decades of the American republic, promoting change and order through their own legislation and political connections. They supported active government, both locally and nationally. The Blounts and their associates' names appeared frequently on bills related to navigational and internal improvements and they were among the leading Federalists in North Carolina, a largely Anti-Federalist state. Examining the Blounts' participation in state and national politics is necessary to fully understand their role in the Tar-Pamlico's development during the last twenty years of the eighteenth century.

State Politics

To the Blount brothers, business and politics were inseparable. Their father, Jacob, exposed his sons to both business and state politics in their teenage years. He served in the North Carolina General Assembly in 1766 and 1768-1771 and was a member of the Provincial Congress at New Bern and Third Provincial Congress at Hillsborough. Throughout the 1780s and 1790s, Jacob's sons sought public office while expanding their business concerns; often presenting legislation that directly or indirectly benefited their business. Though the brothers promoted legislation supporting their land speculation and commercial interests, they also introduced legislation that directly

facilitated maritime activity and the development of the Tar-Pamlico region, especially in the towns of Washington, Greenville, and Tarborough.¹¹⁵

John Gray represented Beaufort County in the House of Commons from 1782-1793. He also served in the North Carolina Senate in 1791, 1793, and 1795. William served in the North Carolina House and Senate, Continental Congress, and Constitutional Convention. He was active in North Carolina politics from 1781 until President Washington appointed him Governor of the Territory of the United States South of the River Ohio, obliging his move to Knoxville in the future state of Tennessee. Thomas represented Edgecombe County in the General Assembly and North Carolina in the United States Congress from 1793-1798, 1805-1808, and 1811-1812. A fourth brother, Reading, operated mills at Pungo and later Tranters Creek and represented Pitt County in the General Assembly from 1786-1787.¹¹⁶

Living and conducting business in Washington, John Gray had every reason to promote its growth. Jacob had purchased a store at the “Forks of the Tar” (future location of Washington) with Richard Blackledge in 1761, and John Gray was heavily involved in the town’s tobacco trade during the American Revolution. Blackledge’s son, also named Richard, eventually married Jacob’s daughter, Louisa. Brothers-in-law John Gray Blount and the younger Richard Blackledge played major roles in Washington’s commercial development. “A number of persons” purchased thirty acres on the north side

¹¹⁵ *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 1, s.v. “Blount, Jacob;” *The State Records of North Carolina*, ed. Walter Clark, vols. 15-26 (Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1993-1994).

¹¹⁶ *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 1, s.v. “Blount, John Gray,” “Blount, William;” Keith, 2: 67; “Blount, Thomas,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, (accessed April 15, 2014), <http://bioguide.congress.gov/biosearch/biosearch1.asp>; House Journal—1786, in Clark 18:312.

of the Pamlico River in 1776 and the North Carolina General Assembly formally established the town in 1783. John Gray and Richard Blackledge were among the commissioners appointed for “designing, building and carrying on said town.”¹¹⁷

In 1784 and 1785, John Gray introduced legislation to increase Washington’s size and importance. One bill annexed additional lands to the town and empowered commissioners to tax the town’s inhabitants and another altered “the place of holding the County Court of Beaufort County from Bath to the Town of Washington.” The act listed Richard Blackledge as one of the commissioners to build the courthouse, prison, pillory, and stocks. The courthouse was to be at least forty by twenty five feet. John Gray’s bill was actually the second attempt to move the courthouse from Bath (North Carolina’s oldest incorporated town). An earlier plan in 1755 had tried to move the courthouse to Thomas Bonner Jr.’s farm, the future site of Washington, but ultimately failed.¹¹⁸

The success of the 1785 courthouse legislation indicated Washington’s growth and Bath’s stagnation. The act mentioned Bath’s location as inconvenient to the majority of county residents and the courthouse as in “ruinous condition.” Washington provided a more accessible location for county residences. Bath’s subsequent decline in commerce and residence convinced historian Alan D. Watson to write “The meteoric rise of Washington as a port and county seat relegated Bath to the small community that it was

¹¹⁷ *The John Gray Blount Papers*, ed. Alice Barnwell Keith, vol. 1, 1764-1789 (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1952), xv, 339; Indenture and Marriage Settlement of Louisa Blount, October 16, 1785, *ibid.*, 543-546; An Act for establishing a Town on the lands formerly belonging to Colonel James Bonner, at the Forks of Tar River, in the County of Beaufort, in Clark, 24: 458.

¹¹⁸ House Journal—1785; An Act to Alter the Place of Holding the County Court of Beaufort County, from Bath to the Town of Washington in Said County, and to Erect a New Court House, Prison, Pillory and Stocks in Said County, in Clark 17:317, 24:769; Alan D. Watson, *Bath: The First Town in North Carolina* (Raleigh: Office of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 2005), 34-35.

destined to remain.”¹¹⁹

William and John Gray also introduced bills to alter previous county boundaries. In 1784, John Gray introduced a bill to extend the dividing line between Hyde, Beaufort, and Tyrell counties and William introduced a bill to add part of Pitt County to Beaufort County. Despite the opposition of some Blount allies (Abner Neale, Richard Dobbs Spaight, and John Sitgreaves of New Bern would be accused of devotion to the “Blount Interest” in 1787), John Gray presented a bill “annexing a part of the County of Craven to Pitt County” in 1786. The Blounts were influential in Pitt County as well as Beaufort and Edgecombe—Blount Hall, Jacob’s plantation, was located sixteen miles southwest of Greenville in Pitt County. The opposition from New Bern and Craven County’s representatives highlights the importance of county boundaries during the colonial and early American period. Boundaries distinguished a citizen’s destination for legal proceedings and recording deeds, which in turn determined the potential population for courthouse business.¹²⁰

Washington’s designation as the Beaufort County seat was also an important distinction. Alan Watson wrote that county seats brought in large amounts of people on court days.¹²¹ These days were lively in North Carolina. James Ross remembered court days from his youth in early nineteenth century Williamston (Martin County’s principal

¹¹⁹ An Act to Alter the Place of Holding the County Court of Beaufort County, from Bath to the Town of Washington in Said County, and to Erect a New Court House, Prison, Pillory and Stocks in Said County, in Clark 24:769; Watson, *Bath: The First Town in North Carolina*, 110.

¹²⁰ House Journal—1783; House Journal—1784; An Act for Annexing part of the County of Craven to Pitt County, in Clark, 18: 259, 19:517, 24:825-826; “Blount Hall,” NCpedia, <http://ncpedia.org/blount-hall> (accessed April 17, 2014).

¹²¹ Alan D. Watson, *Society in Colonial North Carolina* (Raleigh: Division of Archives and History, 1996), 126.

town, approximately twenty five miles north of Washington and located on the Roanoke River) as a “kind of Saturnalia” and “everybody seemed to be there buying or selling rum, beer, cider, oysters, or gingerbread.” The influx of population in Washington on court days likely increased the local commerce and helped elevate Washington from a simple port town to the county’s political and social center.¹²²

The Blounts were often involved in both Pitt and Beaufort County courts, meeting in Greenville and Washington, respectively. In 1790, John Gray wrote William “you know we are all bustle at Pitt court.”¹²³ The family viewed Greenville as a promising Tar River town. William lived there from the late 1780s until his appointment as Governor of the Southwest Territory in 1790. In 1786, John Gray introduced a bill to establish an academy in Greenville. Once passed, the act named Hugh Williamson (a close Blount ally), William Blount, and Reading Blount among the thirteen trustees of Pitt Academy. The act also changed the name of the town from Martinsborough to “Greensville.” The name change was likely to honor Nathaniel Greene- he died in June of 1786. Williamson considered moving to Greenville to establish manufactures after his retirement from public office in the 1790s.¹²⁴

In addition to Greenville and Washington, the Blounts also focused on Tarborough, the location of their upriver store. Thomas lived in Tarborough and Louisa Blount Blackledge owned two lots there. In 1784, John Gray presented a bill “for the

¹²² James Ross, *Life and Times of Elder Reuben Ross* (Philadelphia: Grant, Faires, & Rodgers, 1882?), 21, 85-87.

¹²³ John Gray Blount to William Blount, October 26, 1790, in Keith, 1:128.

¹²⁴ House Journal—1786; An Act for Establishing an Academy at the Place Heretofore Called Martinsborough, in the County of Pitt; and for Altering the Name of Martinsborough to That of Greenville, in Clark, 18:259, 24:867-869; Hugh Williamson to John Gray Blount, December 29, 1791, in Keith, 2:178.

better regulation” of the town. Passed in 1785, the act stated that current laws were “found to be insufficient,” and the General Assembly named Thomas Blount and four other residents as commissioners. The act gave them authority to compel the town’s inhabitants to work up to twelve days a year to improve the town, keep it in “good order,” and work on roads. They were also given the authority to control construction of “piazzas, porches, and other buildings.” They were also authorized to tax residents and use the money for “repairing the streets” and “making good the public landing.”¹²⁵

Just as the Blounts sought to improve and grow Tar River towns, they and other assemblymen worked to improve navigation in North Carolina’s coastal waterways and establish order in the state’s ports. Because “the commerce of this state has been greatly injured by the imposition, extortion, insufficiency and negligence of pilots, and for want of staking out the channels within the ports of Bath-Town, Roanoke, Beaufort and Brunswick” the General Assembly passed a law for “facilitating navigation, and regulating the pilotage of several ports of this State” in 1783. The act named John Gray and Richard Blackledge among the commissioners for Port Bath. The law authorized the commissioners to examine pilots and grant them certificates and also obligated the commissioners to routinely examine the Swash, stake out channels from Ocracoke to Washington, Edenton, and New Bern, and “erect beacons at Ocracoke, Beacon Island, and Coor [Core?] Banks.” John Gray used his positions as commissioner and legislator simultaneously—in 1784, he presented a bill granting Ports Bath, Roanoke, and Beaufort

¹²⁵ House Journal—1784; An Act for the Better Regulation of the Town of Tarborough, in Clark 19:767, 24:740; Indenture and Marriage Settlement of Louisa Blount, October 16, 1785, in Keith, 1:543-546.

commissioners the power to remove and replace any pilots that refused to remove branches from public grounds on Ocracoke Island.¹²⁶

The port navigation act also established set payments for pilotage fees and guaranteed payment in case of a master's refusal or extended employment (if a pilot was blown to sea while piloting a vessel, the law required masters to pay pilots a daily wage). The law also entitled African Americans to piloting certificates if they passed examination and their masters gave bond. Vessels entering Ocracoke Inlet and the Pamlico Sound needed skilled pilots to navigate North Carolina's shallow waters and this law attempted to regulate pilotage qualifications and payment among freemen and slaves. Slave pilots proved valuable to their owners—John Gray hired “Dick the Pilot” for one year, paying Josiah Collins forty-five pounds and agreeing to return him “sufficiently clothed.”¹²⁷ In 1785, both Collins (an Edenton merchant) and John Gray were among the five men appointed as “commissioners for improving the coasting navigation.” Their responsibility involved surveying the coast and appropriately marking beacons for the “information and safety of vessels coming on the coast.”¹²⁸

In December of 1786, John Gray introduced two maritime bills, one “for erecting Bogue Barr and New River Inlets into a distinct Port by the Name of Swannsborough” and the other for “improving the Navigation to New Bern.” The first bill combined Bogue Bar and New River inlet to “prevent disputes” and “conduce to the more regular collection of the revenue from the impost on imported merchandize.” The second bill authorized trustees to “cut a canal across a certain point of marsh from Turnagin-Bay to

¹²⁶ House Journal—1784; An Act for facilitating the navigation, and regulating the pilotage of the several ports of this State, in Clark, 19:767, 24:502.

¹²⁷ Ibid.; Josiah Collins to John Gray Blount, January 8, 1789, in Keith, 1:453.

¹²⁸ An Act for the Regulation of Commerce, Clark, 24:718-719.

Long Bay” to facilitate “the navigation for small vessels from New Bern to Ocracock Bar and Beaufort.” The proposed canal ran through Richard Blackledge and Abner Neale’s marsh. Both Neale and Blackledge were John Gray’s brothers-in law.¹²⁹

John Gray also presented a “Bill to encourage Enoch Ward and Company to cut a Canal from Club-Foot’s Creek to Harloe’s Creek,” designed to “open a Communication between Neuse River and old Topsail Inlet.”¹³⁰ Historian Alexander Crosby Brown stated that North Carolinians had originally proposed the Club-Foot’s Creek canal as early as 1766 and that a general “interest in canals revived in 1783, after independence had been gained.” Over forty years would pass, however, before vessels finally used the canal in 1827.¹³¹ The state also named John Gray as a receiver of subscriptions for the Pungo-Roanoke canal in 1796. The proposed canal would have connected the Roanoke, a tributary of the Albemarle Sound, directly with the Pamlico Sound via the Pungo River. Though John Gray corresponded with a surveyor about the canal as late as 1799, the venture seems to have dissolved.¹³²

Though John Gray supported internal improvements to the Tar-Pamlico region, he opposed construction of the Dismal Swamp Canal. Richard Caswell, North Carolina’s governor, agreed to present Virginia’s plan to connect Virginia’s Elizabeth River with North Carolina’s Pasquotank River, a means to connect Albemarle farmers with Norfolk’s markets. Though Caswell wrote cordially to Governor Patrick Henry about the

¹²⁹ House Journal—1786; An Act for Improving the Navigation to New Bern, Clark, 18:295, 24:825, 850-851; Keith, 1:339.

¹³⁰ House Journal—1784, in Clark, 19:569.

¹³¹ Alexander Crosby Brown, *Juniper Waterway* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1972), 115.

¹³² North Carolina General Assembly, *The Laws of North Carolina, 1796*, <http://www.archive.org/details/lawsfnorthcarol1796nort> (accessed January 9, 2015); Masterson, 3: 33, 116, 311.

request, he perceived the canal as “a means of making our neighbors our Carriers, and giving them advantage of exporting our produce.”¹³³

Prior to the canal’s completion, Albemarle vessels had to travel through the Pamlico Sound and Ocracoke to reach markets in Virginia, Philadelphia, and abroad. Though this route was time consuming and dangerous, it made Ocracoke a profitable place. Opening the Albemarle Sound to Virginia merchants would not only hurt commerce through Ocracoke, it would increase competition for North Carolina merchants. One of Virginia’s canal commissioners, John Cowper, wrote John Gray in 1787 “you see we still differ in opinion respecting this business.”¹³⁴ William voted against the bill in 1788 (John Gray appears not to have attended this session) and when the canal bill appeared again in 1791, Thomas wrote John Gray that a colleague had “opposed it with great ability & shines conspicuous on all occasions.”¹³⁵ Clearly, the Blount brothers did not want to lose Albemarle commerce to Virginia merchants. They were not alone. A group of North Carolina assemblymen subscribed a petition calling the law unconstitutional and a step towards confederacy with Virginia. The assemblymen predicted the eventual stagnation of North Carolina’s own navigation and coastal economy, fearing the canal would “aggrandize a neighbouring nation, and impoverish our own—Norfolk from its situation will rise to be the emporium of commerce of the Southern States, while the eastern sea ports of North Carolina will dwindle into fishing

¹³³ Richard Caswell to Patrick Henry, February 22, 1786; Richard Caswell to Abner Nash, in Clark, 18: 536, 571.

¹³⁴ Brown, *Juniper Waterway*, 19; John Cowper to John Gray Blount, January 13, 1787, in Keith, 1:238-239.

¹³⁵ House Journal—1788, in Clark 20:523; Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, November 16, 1790, in Keith, 2:140-142.

towns.”¹³⁶ The bill eventually passed in 1790 and construction began in 1793, progressing slowly. Though opened in 1805, the canal permitted mostly shingle flats and lumber rafts until 1814, when cargo vessels could finally navigate the canal. John Gray maintained his opposition for over thirty years—William Shepherd wrote, in 1817, that “Capt. Wallace and J[ohn] G[ray] Blount and all others concerned in the prosperity of Occacoke and Shell Castle will be opposed to [improving the navigation of Albemarle], tooth and nail.”¹³⁷

The long delays accompanying the Dismal Swamp and Clubfoot Canal’s construction exemplify North Carolina’s inability to foster internal improvements. Though officials devised many of the improvements after the revolution, the early navigation companies were mostly unsuccessful. The companies answered to county courts and the Assembly often commissioned them to clear rivers with “local labor.” For thirty years, the state relied primarily on private funds to build the canals, only supplementing the companies with public funds after 1815. Prior to that, the companies used subscriptions and tolls. Their early attempts at improving the Tar failed. The state’s inability to implement internal improvements was a long-term and statewide problem that eventually earned North Carolina the nickname “Rip Van Winkle state,” a reference to the fictional character that slept for years while the world changed around him.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ John Cowper to John Gray Blount, January 13, 1787; Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, November 16, 1790, in Keith 1:238-239, 2:140-142; House Journal---1786; House Journal---1790 in Clark, 18:348, 21:1082.

¹³⁷ Brown, Juniper Waterway, 20-21; William Shepard to Ebenezer Pettigrew, July 1, 1817, in *The Pettigrew Papers*, ed. Sarah McCulloh Lemmon, vol. 1, 1685-1818, (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1971), 572-573.

¹³⁸ Clifford Reginald Hinshaw, Jr., “North Carolina Canals Before 1860,” *The North Carolina Historical Review* 25, no. 1 (1948): 1-56; Alan Watson, *Internal Improvements*

Constitutional Politics

As the Blounts developed their Tar River towns and North Carolina's maritime infrastructure, they expanded their shipping business and extensively speculated in western lands. Though the brothers owned slaves and plantations, their mercantile interests distinguished them from North Carolina's inland planters. As merchants, they regularly dealt with a lack of hard money and suffered from the federal government's inability to regulate trade. As national mercantile interests advocated a strengthened federal government, it is no coincidence that the three North Carolina signers of the Constitution, William Blount, Hugh Williamson, and Richard Dobbs Spaight, had strong ties to Philadelphia and the North Carolina port towns of Washington, Edenton, and New Bern, respectively.

The Blounts supported the national movement for constitutional reform because a strengthened federal government benefited them in multiple ways. In *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, historian Frank Beard identified the major economic forces behind the Constitutional movement of the late 1780s. He argued that four major interests, shipping and manufacturing, public creditors, public securities holders, and land speculators influenced the shift from the weak "league of friendship" under the Articles of Confederation to the strong Federal government. The Blounts held shipping ties, western lands, and would eventually speculate heavily in public securities.¹³⁹

in Antebellum North Carolina (Raleigh: Office of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 2002) 2-3.

¹³⁹ Frank Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1925), 19-51; *The Articles of Confederation*.

Like many American merchants, the Blounts felt that their shipping interests remained in a disadvantage under the Articles of Confederation. In October 1787, Thomas expressed pleasure at John Gray's "determination to quit merchandizing till we have better times which must come with the first change—for worse, in point of commerce, cannot be." Though Thomas did not specify the change, he wrote the letter in the wake of the Constitutional Convention and before ratification.¹⁴⁰

The Blount shipping business shared economic successes and woes with their northern counterparts. They also tended to share political beliefs. Historian Alice B. Keith annotated in *The John Gray Blount Papers* that Stuart and Barr, a Philadelphia mercantile firm, was "the most important single house in the Blounts' trade."¹⁴¹ The firm wrote John Gray in early 1787 "Trade Here is Truly Discouraging," as an explanation for their inability to sell the Blount's brigantine *John* for Blount's desired price.¹⁴² Historian Thomas Doerflinger wrote that the depressed economy of the mid 1780s contributed to the Philadelphia mercantile push for a strengthened federal government. The Pennsylvania economy witnessed a drastic increase in bankruptcies as merchants suffered from high rates of exchange, a reduction in imports, low prices of commodities, and a "contraction of credit." Exports and shipbuilding also declined in the mid 1780s.¹⁴³

Doerflinger argued that the strengthened federal government under the Constitution encouraged American and international confidence in business and

¹⁴⁰ Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, September 11, 1787, in Keith, 1: 345-347.

¹⁴¹ Keith, 1:74.

¹⁴² Stuart & Barr to John Gray & Thomas Blount, February 14, 1787, in Keith, 1:247-248.

¹⁴³ Thomas Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 261-267.

ultimately influenced expansion in trade and prosperity in the late 1780s and early 1790s. The Blounts clearly prospered— three Blount vessels simultaneously conducted trade in the West Indies in 1789.¹⁴⁴

Though the non-maritime related interests of land speculation, paper money opposition, and securities speculation enticed the Blounts and other North Carolinians to support the new federal government, the promotion of shipping also played a considerable role. The connection between the changing maritime cultural landscape and the Federalist movement was simply economics, more specifically maritime commerce. John Gray's correspondence with Hugh Williamson and other American merchants illustrates the mercantile push for constitutional reform and national unity. Judge Nash Pendleton, of Savannah, Georgia, wrote John Gray that he was "very glad to hear you are to have a Convention in November. I hope you will leave Rhode Island without a Companion."¹⁴⁵ In North Carolina, many of the constitutional advocates also supported navigational improvements and maritime commerce.

Hugh Williamson, one of the state's most influential Federalists and ardent supporters of internal improvements, was a voice for the North Carolina mercantile interest during the 1780s and early 1790s. A native Pennsylvanian, Williamson moved to Edenton, North Carolina after failing to obtain a commission in the Continental Army during the American Revolution. He engaged in maritime trade and practiced medicine in

¹⁴⁴ Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise*, 267; Abner Neale to John Gray Blount, March 10, 1789, in Keith, 1:465-466.

¹⁴⁵ Hugh Williamson to John Gray & Thomas Blount, Merchants, February 16, 1784; Constable, Rucker & Co. to John Gray & Thomas Blount, November 30, 1787, *ibid.*, 1:150-151. 360; Nash Pendleton to John Gray Blount, September 26, 1789, Box 1, Folder E, William Blount Rodman Papers, East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J.Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina.

Edenton during the war, vaccinating American soldiers against smallpox. He eventually received appointment as North Carolina's Surgeon General, treating wounded soldiers after the Battle of Camden. Following the war, he began a decade of public service in the Continental Congress, North Carolina House of Commons, the Constitutional Convention, and eventually U.S. Congress. Alice Keith wrote that Williamson's "loyalty to the Blounts was very strong."¹⁴⁶

Williamson's correspondence with John Gray began as early as 1783, in a letter that advocated the establishment of North Carolina mercantile representatives in Europe following the peace with Great Britain.¹⁴⁷ Working on behalf of John Gray, Hugh also appealed the seizure of the *Industry*, a vessel "seized for sailing contrary to the grain embargo."¹⁴⁸ Their extensive correspondence throughout the 1780s and early 1790s reveals a friendship based on mutual business and political interests.

In a 1784 letter to John Gray, Williamson expressed a tenet of mercantile Federalist ideology. "With respect to the British West India Trade we now have measures in Hands for the Cure of those People. The States seem now disposed to impower Congress to regulate Trade. If we can get that Power our Trade & our Merchants must flourish."¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ David Hosack, *Biographical Memoir of Hugh Williamson, M.D., LL.D.* (New York: New York Historical Society, 1820), 10-57; George J. Sheldon, *Hugh Williamson: Physician, Patriot, and Founding Father* (New York: Humanity Books, 2010); *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 6, s.v. "Williamson, Hugh," 216-218; House Journal from April 16, 1782, to May 18, 1782, in Clark, 18:2; Keith, 2:218.

¹⁴⁷ Hugh Williamson to John Gray Blount, June 7, 1783, *ibid.*, 1:61.

¹⁴⁸ Keith, 1:76.

¹⁴⁹ Hugh Williamson to John Gray & Thomas Blount, Merchants, February 16, 1784 *ibid.*, 1:150-151.

Williamson speculated that the election of the Pitt administration in the British Parliament “will greatly promote our Plans of mercantile Treaties.”¹⁵⁰ Williamson also schemed with the Blounts in land speculation. He strongly advocated the publication of a map of western territories to increase interest and settlement of their western lands. Williamson and John Gray Blount also opposed paper money legislation. John Gray presented a “Petition of the Merchants, traders, and others in the Town of Washington praying against a further emission of paper money.” Both Williamson and John Gray voted against a North Carolina law to “emit one thousand pounds in paper currency.” They lost in a twenty-one to fifty-two minority, and the two men were among eight assemblymen that petitioned the law, arguing that paper money would depreciate currency and increase the shortage of gold and silver.¹⁵¹

Just as Williamson represented Edenton and Chowan County, many of John Gray’s allies in the North Carolina constitutional movement represented port towns and possessed ties to the Philadelphia merchant community. John Gray held strong ties to three of North Carolina’s four delegates to the Constitutional Convention, William Blount, Hugh Williamson, and, to a lesser extent, Richard Dobbs Spaight. William was his brother and business partner and Hugh was a close confidant. Though Spaight’s ties to the Blounts are less obvious, some North Carolinians accused him and other assembly members of devotion to the “Blount Interest.” The great grand nephew of North Carolina Royal Governor Arthur Dobbs, Spaight was born in New Bern in 1758. Following the death of his parents, Spaight spent much of his youth in Europe. He then returned to

¹⁵⁰ Hugh Williamson to John Gray Blount, May 21, 1784, *ibid.*, 166-167.

¹⁵¹ Hugh Williamson to John Blount, May 25, 1789, *ibid.*, 482-483; House Journal—1785, in Clark, 17:364-412.

North Carolina in 1778, immersing himself in the rebellious state's military and politics. He represented New Bern in the General Assembly from 1781-1783, served in the Continental Congress from 1783-1785, and represented Craven County in the House of Commons prior to attending and signing the Constitution in 1787.¹⁵² On at least one occasion, James Barr of Stuart and Barr, the Blount's Philadelphia connection, wrote William Blount concerning Richard Spaight's indigo. Either Spaight shipped through the Blounts or at least shared a mutual Philadelphia mercantile contact.¹⁵³

Despite the efforts of the Blounts, their associates, and other Federalists, North Carolina initially rejected ratification of the Constitution. The state's representatives approved it at a second convention, however, and North Carolina entered the United States in November of 1789.¹⁵⁴ John Gray attended both conventions, voting Federalist. Hugh Williamson and Thomas and William Blount were able to attend the second convention, all voting Federalist.¹⁵⁵ In the wake of the Constitution's ratification, the Blounts prospered. William received appointment as governor of the United States South of the River Ohio, a territory where the Blounts and Williamson held large tracts of land. The merchants also increased shipments to the West Indies, mirroring the Philadelphia economic boom of the late 1780s and early 1790s. The construction of Shell Castle at Ocracoke Inlet and the purchase of additional lighter vessels also illustrate Blount prosperity following Constitutional ratification.

¹⁵²House Journal---1785, in Clark, 17:364-366, 406, 410-412.

¹⁵³ *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 5, s.v. "Spaight, Richard Dobbs," 403-404; James Barr to William Blount, December 16, 1783, John Sitgreaves to [John Gray Blount], August 12, 1787, in Keith1:140-141; 336-339.

¹⁵⁴ Clark, 22:1-53.

¹⁵⁵ Stephen E. Massengill, *North Carolina Votes on the Constitution: A Roster of Delegates to the State Ratification Conventions of 1788 and 1789* (Raleigh: Division of Archives and History, 1988).

Federal Politics and Maritime Development

Just as the Blounts utilized state politics to advance their business, they looked to the newly formed Union to support their business interests and maritime development. John Gray did not enter into federal politics himself, but maintained strong relationships with U.S. Congressmen. These included both Hugh Williamson and his brothers William and Thomas.

Among all of John Gray Blount's partnerships, none affected the Tar-Pamlico maritime cultural landscape greater than his relationship with John Wallace. The two men may have met in Washington—William Attmore hunted with John Gray Blount and “Captain Wallace” near the town in 1787.¹⁵⁶ John Gray's brother-in-law, Abner Neale, met “Jack Wallace above the Swash” in 1788.¹⁵⁷ By 1789, Blount and Wallace began building Shell Castle at Ocracoke inlet.¹⁵⁸

Beyond business and development, the two men supported each other in politics. Like many of John Gray's associates, Wallace served in the House of Commons, first appearing in 1789 as a representative from Carteret County. He introduced one piece of legislation, a “Bill to erect a light House on Ocracoke Island.” Once passed, the bill listed John Wallace and Abner Neale as two of the seven lighthouse commissioners. Wallace also attended North Carolina's second constitutional convention, voting for ratification.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ William Attmore, *Journal of a Tour to North Carolina, 1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1922), 24.

¹⁵⁷ Abner Neale to John Gray Blount, November 28, 1788, in Keith, 1:437.

¹⁵⁸ House Journal---1786; An Act for Improving the Navigation to New Bern; An Act to Erect a Light-House on Ocacock Island, in Clark, 18:295, 24:825, 25:54; Description of Occacock Inlet, 624-633; McGuinn, “Shell Castle, A North Carolina Entrepôt.

¹⁵⁹ House Journal—1789 in Clark, 21:193-411, 22:36-48.

In 1790, Wallace promised John Gray that he would “say all I can in favour of [Hugh] Williamson which will insure his Election in this [Carteret] County.”¹⁶⁰

Williamson, John Gray, and John Wallace maintained a reciprocal relationship. Blount and Wallace helped keep him elected, and Hugh Williamson promoted Ocracoke’s interest and facilitated the Blount’s business connections in Philadelphia.¹⁶¹

North Carolina redrew congressional districts in 1790, separating Chowan, Williamson’s home county, from Beaufort and Edgecombe. Alice Keith speculated that the loss of the Blounts’ political presence contributed to Williamson’s loss in the 1792 election. Also, Williamson’s birth in Pennsylvania, mid-Atlantic accent, and residence in New York made some North Carolinians consider him a “foreigner.”¹⁶² Williamson resented his political defeat and the North Carolina legislature’s apathy towards development, though he continued promoting Ocracoke till the end of his final term in Congress.¹⁶³ Following the election, he wrote John Gray from Philadelphia:

That I may not absolutely spend a Life of Idleness which I dislike, I have been thinking of making a [2] Survey of Roanoke & perhaps some other River in Order to determine the practicability & Expence of making them navigable in Boats. Perhaps our next Assembly not having much jobbing work to do may agreed to devote some Time to considering of Improvements. The Exertions of other States in making Roads & Canal & opening Rivers should make our People ashamed.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ Jack [John] Wallace to John Gray Blount, September 6, 1790, in Keith, 2:106-107.

¹⁶¹ Keith, vols. 1-2.

¹⁶² John Alderson to John Blount, September 23, 1790, in Keith, 2: 121-122.

¹⁶³ Keith, 2:229.

¹⁶⁴ Hugh Williamson to John Gray Blount, March 3, 1793, in Keith, 2:244-245.

Attentive to the Requests of our Pilots and Mariners I have obtained a Promise that Contracts for keeping up the Stakes [marking the swash, at Ocracoke]...I have only to wish that my Successor may be able to serve his Constituents more effectually than I have done.¹⁶⁵

Though the Blounts lost a congressional ally after Williamson's loss, they gained another with Thomas's election in 1793. Thomas Blount served in Congress from 1793 until 1799 and then, intermittently, from 1805 until his death in 1812. He initially belonged to the Anti-Administration faction and became a Republican after the development of the two-party system. As Thomas prepared to leave for Philadelphia (still the U.S. capital), he asked John Gray to write him often and keep him informed of "the Interests of the River." Thomas made no attempt to hide his interest in Washington and the Tar River trade. In fact, he opposed congressional districting that would have placed Washington and New Bern in the same voting district, for "it is well known that between every two Sea Ports there is a natural competition which makes the Representative of either the most improper person in the world to represent the other." He also opposed placing Ocracoke in the Wilmington district on the same principle. He argued that Ocracoke's representative "would not in the smallest degree have depended on the people of Carteret County [for election]."¹⁶⁶

William Blount wanted Thomas appointed to North Carolina's senate seat in 1794, calling the appointment an "object to the family that T.B. should be elected since in so large a family of active men as ours it essential to have some one [of] them in the

¹⁶⁵ Hugh Williamson to John Gray Blount, March 15, 1793, *ibid.*, 2:246.

¹⁶⁶ "Blount, Thomas," *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*; Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, November 6, 1793; *Protests of Thomas Blount*, January 1, 1793, in Keith, 2: 329-331, 643.

Public Councils.” He asked for John Gray’s cooperation in the scheme and, though the plan failed, William’s thinking shows the importance of politics to Blount business interest. His appeal to John Gray, calling him “the Man who must have it done,” also suggests John Gray’s persuasive influence in North Carolina politics.¹⁶⁷ William eventually obtained a senate seat for himself, serving as one of Tennessee’s inaugural senators. He had served as Governor of the Southwest Territory from 1790 until 1796, when Tennessee became a state. William joined Thomas and the Anti-Administration faction for a short time, but his involvement in a conspiracy to invade Spanish territory with the British (hoping to obtain American access to the Mississippi) forced his dismissal from the Senate. Though the Senate did not officially impeach him, the “Blount Conspiracy” ended William’s involvement in Federal politics.¹⁶⁸

Though the family may have lacked a direct voice in the senate, Thomas promoted the Blount maritime interest in the House of Representatives. Following North Carolina’s ineffectual Ocracoke lighthouse legislation, the Blounts aggressively championed a federally funded lighthouse. Thomas and Williamson helped present “The Representation of the Pilots of Occacok Barr & the Masters of Vessels, Merchants & owners of Vessels trading in & out at the same relative to Light House.” These petitioners requested that the government place the light for Ocracoke Inlet on Shell Castle instead of Ocracoke Island. The petition stated a beacon at Shell Castle would be a “good mark” for vessels coming over the bar, that builders could land their materials cheaper at Shell Castle than anywhere else, and that Shell Castle offered the best site for

¹⁶⁷ William Blount to John Gray Blount, July 1, 1794, in Keith, 2:413.

¹⁶⁸ William H. Masterson, *William Blount* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1954), 292-347.

future fortifications. Thomas planned to “urge every reason I can think of in its favor; at the same time I shall not forget to throw cold water on Hatteras,” a site in competition with Ocracoke Inlet for the light house. After Congress eventually passed a bill to erect a lighthouse on Cape Hatteras and a lighted beacon on Shell Castle Island, John Wallace used Thomas’ inside information in an attempt to buy land on Hatteras. Wallace planned to “have a man try to Buy or bargain for it. At Same time tell the people that I am Shore the Light house will never be built as it may come more Cheap.” Wallace also wrote “I hope your Brother [Thomas] is Elected that we may have one friend in Congress.”¹⁶⁹

The federal government eventually built a lighthouse on Cape Hatteras, though not on Wallace and Blount’s property. The Blounts were able to sell a 70 by 140 foot lot on Shell Castle to the government for two hundred dollars, however. This price was highly profitable compared to the four acres of Hatteras lighthouse land that sold for fifty dollars. The government placed a lighted beacon on their Shell Castle lot. In exchange for the land, Blount and Wallace stipulated that the government could not store goods, keep a tavern, sell merchandise, or use the lot to pilot or lighter vessels.¹⁷⁰

Congress authorized the beacon’s construction on May 13, 1794. Between 1798 and 1803, builders finished the light, a “pyramid-shaped wood tower” with a stone base (Figure 5). It was fifty-four feet tall and had a diameter of “fifty feet at the base and twenty feet at the top.” The lighthouse aided mariners for nearly twenty years until lightning destroyed the structure in 1818. By then, the inlet had shifted (and commerce

¹⁶⁹ Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, February 27, 1794; Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, May 22, 1794; John Wallace to John Gray Blount, March 7, 1795 in Keith, 2:369-371, 394-395, 511-512; Ellen Fulcher Cloud, *Ocracoke Lighthouse* (Spartanburg, SC: The Reprint Company, 1993), 2, 69.

¹⁷⁰ McGuinn, “Shell Castle, A North Carolina Entrepôt,” 148-163; Cloud, *Ocracoke Lighthouse*, 1-4.

with it), and locals chose not to rebuild the Shell Castle light. Instead, the government approved the Ocracoke Lighthouse in 1822.¹⁷¹



Figure 5, Close-up of lighted beacon at Shell Castle from Shell Castle Pitcher. Source: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources.

The lighthouse legislation and Thomas’s early congressional service occurred during a formative and contentious period of American foreign policy and spending. Ian W. Toll wrote in *Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the U. S. Navy* that the rising political parties saw the navy as “a hard ideological line to define them.”¹⁷² Federalists tended to support the navy and Republicans opposed the organization’s growth. As a southern Republican, Thomas Blount’s mercantile and maritime interests occasionally conflicted with his politics. He voted against a “Naval force, to consist of

¹⁷¹Ibid.; Terrance Zepke, *Lighthouses of the Carolinas: A Short History and Guide* (Sarasota, FL: Pineapple Press, 1998), 42-45.

¹⁷² Ian W. Toll, *Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the U. S. Navy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 40-44.

four ships of forty-four, and two ships of twenty guns each, be provided for the protection of the commerce of the United States against Algerine cruisers,” yet he sympathized with John Gray’s “damnable state of fear & Suspense” over a vessel thought to be captured by Algerian pirates.¹⁷³ In this instance, Thomas chose to vote with the North Carolina republican block. Nine of ten North Carolina representatives voted against the bill (the tenth was not present), which passed by a vote of 50-39. Despite voting against the naval armament bill, Thomas wrote John Gray favorably about coastal fortifications. A congressional committee recommended the fortification of Portland, Maine; Portsmouth, New Hampshire; Cape Anne, Salem, Marblehead, and Boston in Massachusetts; New Port, Rhode Island; New London, Connecticut; New York; Philadelphia; and Baltimore. They also named the southern ports of Norfolk, Wilmington, Charleston, Savannah, and Ocracoke. An amendment further recommended fortifying Penobscot, Machias, Newburyport, Annapolis, and Georgetown, South Carolina.¹⁷⁴

The Blounts were certainly interested in Ocracoke’s selection. Fortifications offered both financial gain from government contracts and protection for Blount and Wallace’s commercial operations at Shell Castle (Wallace had asked John Gray for a claim form “to go to Corte [court] about the Pirats” in 1792).¹⁷⁵ Thomas reported “There will be a Battery of 8 Guns at Ocracoke if the plan of fortifying the Sea ports & harbours...should be adopted—what sum of Money will erect it?”¹⁷⁶ Thomas also successfully increased the proposed budget from 573 dollars to 1500 dollars. The

¹⁷³ Annals of Congress, 3rd Cong., 1st sess. (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1855), 459; Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, March 20, 1794 in Keith, 2:378.

¹⁷⁴ Annals of Congress, 3rd Cong., 1st Session, 480.

¹⁷⁵ John Wallace to John Gray Blount, September 22, 1792 in Keith, 2:210-211.

¹⁷⁶ Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, March 7, 1794 *ibid.*, 372-374.

progress of coastal fortifications was slow and subject to the volatile political climate of the federal era, however. The government prolonged the process over half a decade through the presidencies of Washington, Adams, and Jefferson. Though Blount and Wallace did not receive the contract to build fortifications, they did supply shells for the fort on Beacon Island. James Taylor, Inspector of the Revenue and Surveyor of Beacon Island, paid John Wallace 1800 dollars for shells. Taylor also contemplated buying two vessels from Blount and Wallace to transport the shells. The election of Thomas Jefferson in 1800 and the end of the Quasi War with France, however, prompted a “massive naval demobilization” and, by 1802, the Secretary of War decided to abandon the Beacon Island fortification.¹⁷⁷

Conclusion

The 1780s and 1790s were a period of drastic change in the nation and along the Tar-Pamlico trade network. The United States achieved independence from Great Britain and nationally minded Americans replaced the Articles of Confederation with a strengthened and centralized federal government. Though North Carolina remained a rural and independent state, trailing its neighbors in urbanization and internal improvements, the Tar River Blounts and their associates were able to initiate limited change and development through politics and enterprise. The highlights of their achievement were the two key economic centers of Washington and Shell Castle at Ocracoke Island. These two locations rose from obscurity with the help of John Gray’s political networking and keen business sense. The Blounts and their associates

¹⁷⁷ Toll, *Six Frigates*, 157-158; Richard Dobbs Spaight to John Gray Blount, November 6, 1800; John Wallace to John Gray Blount, November 20, 1800; Richard Dobbs Spaight to John Gray Blount, December 22, 1800; Richard Dobbs Spaight to John Gray Blount, January 8, 1802, in Masterson 3:440-441, 448-449, 464, 488-489.

developed Washington along with Tarborough and Greenville, two other Tar River port towns; establishing academies, altering county boundaries, and relocating the Beaufort County courthouse to Washington. Further to the east, the Blounts attempted to establish order in North Carolina's coastal ports through legislation. They supported the constitutional movement of the late 1780s and maintained inside connections within the new federal government. In cooperation with Hugh Williamson and Thomas Blount, John Gray advocated lighthouses and fortifications to support their shipping and other maritime ventures. Though their development and internal improvements also presented potential benefits to their constituents, state records and private letters reveal that the Blount's primary motives were financial gain and facilitation of their own maritime commerce.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE TAR-PAMLICO:
A TRANSITIONAL MARITIME CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

The Emergence of Washington, North Carolina

Despite his far-flung financial interests, John Gray Blount primarily resided in Washington, North Carolina. He traded and communicated with merchants in Philadelphia, England, and the West Indies and owned land west of the Appalachian Mountains, but the heart of his business was in Washington. The Tar River widens and becomes the Pamlico River near Washington's waterfront and Blount capitalized on the town's strategic location.

Bath, the Pamlico River's main colonial port, was incorporated in 1706 and permanent settlement spread along the river after colonial victories in the Tuscarora War. Aquila Sugg of Edgecombe County built the first commercial buildings of present day Washington in 1758 when he constructed a wharf and warehouses on a lot he bought from James Bonner. Three years later, Jacob Blount and Richard Blackledge bought a store at the growing community called "Forks of the Tar River."¹⁷⁸

Historian Michael Hill called Washington a "crucial source for the Continental Army."¹⁷⁹ Major southern ports of Wilmington, Savannah, and Charleston were closed during the war, while Washington remained open. In 1778, North Carolina Governor Richard Caswell wrote Colonel William Aylett that North Carolina could supply the army with six hundred barrels of pork from New Bern and 350 barrels from "a place

¹⁷⁸ Hill, Michael, "Historical Research Report: The Waterfront Area of Washington, North Carolina," *Historical Research Reports* 2, no. 34 (Raleigh, N.C: Division of Archives and History, Archives and Records Section, 1984).

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

called Washington.”¹⁸⁰ It is unclear when John Gray Blount began living in the town, but by 1778 he had married and established a home there. He and Richard Blackledge headed the town’s tobacco trade throughout the later years of the American Revolution.¹⁸¹

Washington did not slide back into obscurity after the war when other ports reopened, but continued to grow. As mentioned in chapter three, John Gray initiated legislation that spurred Washington’s growth in the 1780s. Within two years of the Treaty of Paris, he introduced bills to annex additional lands for the town and move the Beaufort County courthouse from Bath to Washington.

When Johann David Schoepf stopped in Washington in 1783, he noticed that travellers heading south from Edenton now preferred travelling through Washington, whereas a former post road went through Bath. Though Bath was a straighter journey, the town was a “place of hardly a dozen houses, affording scant accommodation for travelers.” In addition, the road through Bath involved an eight to nine mile ferriage over the Pamlico Sound. Travelers were “repaid for going the long road” to Washington by avoiding such obstacles.¹⁸²

According to Schoepf, Washington was already twice the size of Bath when he passed through. He called Washington a “new settled little place of perhaps 30 houses” but trade was “as yet trifling.” He called shipbuilding the town’s primary occupation,

¹⁸⁰ Governor Caswell to Colonel William Aylett, October 25, 1778, in Clark, William, ed. *The State Records of North Carolina*, vols. 15-26, (Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1993-1994), 13:253.

¹⁸¹ “Reading Blount,” NCpedia, <http://ncpedia.org/biography/blount-reading> (accessed October 22, 2014); Robert Bignall to Thomas Burke, September 11, 1781; Robert Bignall to Alex Martin, November 2, 178 in Clark, 22:596-598.

¹⁸² Johann David Schoepf, *Travels in the Confederation, 1783-1784*. Translated and edited by Alfred J. Morrison (Philadelphia: William J. Campbell, 1911), 126.

though the vessels were small, “put together entirely of pine timber and sold very cheap.” He mentioned that these vessels’ pine construction caused them to rot quickly under the waterline. Though town residents built vessels, shipping was still largely the domain of New Englanders. As in other small southern towns, New England vessels brought “cyder, cheese, apples, gingerbread, rum, sugar, iron-ware, and trinkets.” They exchanged these goods for pelts, pitch, and tar and returned to New England in the spring. These trading relationships existed well into the 1790s—William Rhodes, Jr. wrote John Gray that he would soon sail from Providence to Washington “with a Yankee Cargo, (as usual)” in the fall of 1793.¹⁸³

Schoepf also noted that the heavy concentration of New England trade in North Carolina existed because many New Englanders had settled in the southern state. Nathan Keais, a native of Rhode Island, was among the five original Washington commissioners.¹⁸⁴ Two of the commissioners, James and John Bonner, hailed from Beaufort County. Like Richard Blackledge and John Gray Blount (the other two commissioners), Keais was not a native of Washington or Beaufort County. Blount and Blackledge, however, were the sons of eastern North Carolina planters and businessmen whereas Keais was the only New Englander. After the Revolution, Keais became Customs Collector at Port Bath. He also engaged in a degree of private commerce—the

¹⁸³ William Rhodes, Jr., to John Gray Blount, October 15, 1793 in *The John Gray Blount Papers*, ed. Alice Barnwell Keith, vol. 2, 1790-1795 (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1959), 322.

¹⁸⁴ “An Act for establishing a Town on the land formerly belonging to Colonel James Bonner, at the Forks of Tar River, in the county of Beaufort” in Clark, 24:458; Gravestone of Nathan Keais, St. Peter’s Episcopal Church, Washington, North Carolina.

Blounts sold rum belonging to Keais in 1787. He held his office in Washington by 1786 and the state officially changed Port Bath to Port Washington in 1790.¹⁸⁵

The Blounts looked out for Keais and his family. In February of 1795, Thomas Blount expected Congress to raise Keais's commissions to two percent and add 150 dollars to his salary. Thomas had "endeavored to obtain more for him but could not."¹⁸⁶ When Keais died later that year, Thomas promised he would "use every means in my power" to appoint Keais's son William as his successor. Thomas was successful and William became the new Customs Collector.¹⁸⁷

Another New Englander, James Gorham of Barnstable, Massachusetts, settled in Pitt County prior to the American Revolution. It is unknown when Gorham came to North Carolina, but John Lawrence suggests that Gorham was possibly "raised to the sea" since his father and "extended family" were sailors and merchants. After the revolution, Gorham "prospered" as a planter and merchant, shipping out of New Bern and Washington. James's son William continued the maritime tradition, captaining the brigantine *Tooley* for the Blounts for several years beginning in 1795.¹⁸⁸

Washington appears to have doubled from Schoepf's visit in 1783 to 1787. William Attmore, a travelling merchant, estimated that sixty families lived there in 1787. Attmore witnessed "near 20 sail of Sea Vessels" anchored near the town. The town

¹⁸⁵ Charles Gerrard to John Gray Blount, June 12, 1787 in Keith, 1:310; Bradley A. Rogers and Nathan Richards, *The Castle Island Ships' Graveyard: The History and Archaeology of Eleven Wrecked and Abandoned Watercraft* (Greenville, NC: East Carolina University, 2006), 14.

¹⁸⁶ Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, February 6, 1795 in Keith, 2:489-490.

¹⁸⁷ Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, October 19, 1795 *ibid.*, 601-602; Masterson, 3:112.

¹⁸⁸ John Raynor Moore Lawrence, 1998, "The Family and Ancestry of Sellers Mark and Annie Gorham Crisp,"⁴²; William Gorham to John Gray Blount, May 16, 1795 in Keith, 2:546-547.

contained “several convenient” wharves, and riverfront lots of with 100 feet of frontage per lot. The river was three fourths of a mile wide but with a narrow channel. Vessels of seven to seven and a half feet of burden could make it to Washington in low water and the river could accommodate even larger vessels when freshes, influxes of water occurring after heavy rains, raised the water level.¹⁸⁹

Maritime and agricultural commerce met in Washington, which acted as the end of the journey for many vessels. Sloops, schooners, and brigantines did not normally sail beyond Washington. Instead, they transferred goods at a wharf near or in the town. John Gray and Thomas first built warehouses in the town and on Castle Island, a small island directly south of the town’s waterfront, during the Revolutionary War. Tar river vessels, mostly flats and scows, also ended their voyage in Washington.¹⁹⁰ It is no wonder then, that John Gray managed his tremendous financial interests from Washington, since the port was an emerging center of trade between the region and the broader Atlantic. The river town allowed him direct access to local resources and close control of his shipping business.

Tar River Trade

Blount dealt with a number of Tar River merchants from Tarborough, Greenville, and smaller landings in between. Attmore said the Tar River trade went as high as Tarborough, the “head of the Navigation,” fifty miles above Washington. In 1787, Tarborough contained approximately twenty families. Attmore called Tarborough the “highest Town on the River.” He also noted that boats rarely traveled above Tarborough.

¹⁸⁹ William Attmore, *Journal of a Tour to North Carolina, 1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1922), 28.

¹⁹⁰ Rogers and Richards, *The Castle Island Ships’ Graveyard*, 14; Attmore, *Journal of a Tour to North Carolina*, 28.

The inspection house allegedly received and examined 14,000 hogsheads of tobacco each year. Planters from as far as one hundred miles away would come to Tarborough's inspection house, rolling their hogsheads of tobacco or pulling them behind a wagon. Planters then paid five shillings for examination and storage in a warehouse on the riverbank. The building was a wooden structure, 160 feet long by fifty feet wide.¹⁹¹

President George Washington passed through Tarborough and Greenville on his southern tour in 1791. He noted that Tarborough was smaller than Halifax, but more lively and thriving. He called Greenville a "trifling place." Both towns primarily exported corn, pork, and tar, though Greenville exported a "greater proportion of Tar." He also observed that tar makers became more plentiful the further down the Tar River he went. Attmore described the river's width as ninety to one hundred yards wide when the river was low and nearly a mile wide during the freshes at Greenville. The river's depth at Greenville was ten feet. He thought the town of fifteen families stood "high and pleasant" and local planters brought their produce to the town's landing, making Greenville a "place of some trade."¹⁹²

Attmore's journal makes no mention of Thomas Blount because the latter merchant was in Europe during Attmore's visit. Thomas was often absent from Tarborough, whether in Europe for business or in Philadelphia for politics. Nevertheless, his wealth and political stature made him an important citizen in the town. The Blounts' Tarborough store was constantly in communication with Washington, sending down tobacco, pork, and other commodities and requesting West Indian goods like sugar and

¹⁹¹ Attmore, *Journal of a Tour to North Carolina*, 28-34.

¹⁹² *Diary of George Washington, From 1789 to 1791*, ed. Benson J. Lossing (New York: Charles B. Richardson & Co., 1860), 172; Attmore, *Journal of a Tour to North Carolina*, 31.

rum. Tarborough's relatively inland location gave Thomas and other merchants access to the agriculturally productive areas of Edgecombe, Halifax, and Warren counties. By 1800, Halifax and Warren counties both contained majority slave populations.¹⁹³

Tarborough's location on the southeast side of the Tar River made a reliable bridge necessary for the town's commerce. Thomas oversaw the construction of a new bridge in late 1790 because the old bridge was "in such condition that people on the other side are afraid to bring their produce over it to market by which means that town suffers." Thomas asked John Gray to send up "the Machine for raising," suggesting that a canoe might carry the necessary apparatus all the way to Tarborough in low water. Thomas also feared that "advantage will be taken of my failure" if the bridge was not completed by the appointed day.¹⁹⁴ This fear was likely political, since the state legislature had named Thomas a town commissioner in 1785. His two decades of intermittent public service in the North Carolina General Assembly and U.S. Congress also began shortly after the bridge venture.

As the Blounts expanded their shipping firm, they also shipped goods for other Tar River merchants. Merchants sent goods out of Tarborough, Greenville and other small landings like Bensborough, Dupree's landing, and Toole's landing.¹⁹⁵ John Gray's firm would receive these goods in Washington and have them loaded in Atlantic bound vessels anchored there.¹⁹⁶ Even when the Blounts were not personally shipping the

¹⁹³ Charles Gerrard to John Gray Blount, June 12, 1787 in Keith, 1:310; The University of Virginia Library, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, "Historical Census Browser," <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/>.

¹⁹⁴ Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, September 19, 1790, December 18, 1790 in Keith, 2:113-114, 154-155.

¹⁹⁵ Keith, vols. 1 and 2; Masterson, 3.

¹⁹⁶ Hall & Gerrard to John Gray Blount, June 11, 1793 in Keith, 2:271.

goods, they shipped for other Tar River merchants like Benjamin Atkinson. Atkinson shipped corn, peas, and tallow through the Blounts as early as 1789. His produce often came down river in flats from his landing at Bensborough, present day Falkland, on the north side of the Tar above Greenville in Pitt County.¹⁹⁷ On at least one occasion, he sent a slave with his naval stores, telling John Gray to “make my Negroe put it in good Shiping order.”¹⁹⁸ A Benjamin Adkerson (likely Atkinson) owned twenty-three slaves in the 1790 Pitt County census.¹⁹⁹

Atkinson often had specific instructions for his cargo sent to Washington. In February 1795, he directed John Gray to send a “Vessel or two to load Naval Stores & Pork unto Norfolk.” Atkinson depended on one flat and had to wait until the boat returned from Washington before he could send an additional three hundred barrels of naval stores to Washington. He kept up with markets in Norfolk by post and tried to get his tar to market while the goods remained in high demand. Atkinson could have sold his tar in Washington but preferred that John Gray coordinate freight to Norfolk because Atkinson had made engagements to sell in Norfolk. In addition to shipping Atkinson’s produce, John Gray also supplied the planter and merchant with salt, smith’s tools, iron, rum and other goods to sell at his store. Atkinson expressed his loyalty to the Blounts in 1796, stating that he would “rather purchase from Mr. Blount than any other person,” including John Gray’s neighbors. Atkinson also relied on John Gray to find him freight

¹⁹⁷ *The North Carolina Gazetteer*, s.v. “Falkland.”

¹⁹⁸ Benjamin Atkinson to John Gray Blount, March 25, 1793 in Keith, 2:249.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*; *1790 Census*, in Clark, 26.

to Maryland that year and asked him to procure a vessel capable of carrying to 250 to one thousand barrels of provisions to the West Indies in 1799.²⁰⁰

Though commerce and communication were inherently slow before the steamboat and telegraph, the Blounts and their associates along the river knew the importance of timely transactions. These merchants tried to manage changing markets, fluctuating river conditions, and the severity of the seasons. Atkinson asked John Gray to ship his naval stores to Europe in April because the summer months were “dreadfull bad for to keep tar.”²⁰¹ Another time, a fresh overflowed Atkinson’s naval stores, putting them in “bad order” that reduced their quality.²⁰² Merchants occasionally complained about North Carolina’s poor quality naval stores. On one occasion “the pitch was much adulterated with dirt & the Turpentine Very foule.”²⁰³

Merchants also based their shipments on the level of the river. An agent for North Carolina during the revolution complained to the governor that “tobacco cannot be taken away for want of water in the river,” which was “not more than Twelve inches deep” for several miles below Tarborough.²⁰⁴ At another time, Thomas wrote favorably of a “considerable swell in the river” that facilitated commerce.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁰ Benjamin Atkinson to John Gray Blount, March 16, 1791, July 25, 1791, February 17, 1795; February 23, 1795; March 21, 1796; October 29, 1799; Benjamin Atkinson to Benjamin Blackledge, December 7, 1796 in Keith 2:167, 172,492-493, 500-501, Masterson 3:37-38, 116-117, 322.

²⁰¹ Benjamin Atkinson to John Gray Blount, January 9, 1796 *ibid.*, 5.

²⁰² Benjamin Atkinson to John Gray Blount, July 7, 1796 *ibid.*,78-79.

²⁰³ Stuart & Barr to John Gray & Thomas Blount, Merchants, February 23, 1785 in Keith, 1:188-190.

²⁰⁴ Robert Bignall to Governor Burke, September 3, 1781 in Clark, 22: 588-589.

²⁰⁵ Thomas Blount to [John Gray Blount], June 13, 1789, in Keith 1:487.

Watermen often captained these vessels, though sometimes men with the title of captain brought vessels as far as Tarborough.²⁰⁶ In addition to flats, the Blounts also operated *Tarborough Packet*, a vessel that ran regularly between Tarborough and Washington as early as 1788. The type of craft is unclear, but it was large for the Tar River trade, since Thomas used a flat to lighten the packet down to Greenville in a period of low water.²⁰⁷ There were often a limited number of vessels on the river, and when a surplus of produce came into market, goods could sit in Tarborough or at other landings while merchants waited for flats to come back up the river. Just as Atkinson delayed shipping naval stores while waiting for the return of his flat, Thomas commented from Tarborough, in March of 1783, “all the boats belonging to this place are down the river therefore I fear it is impracticable to send you any more Tobo. [Tobacco] until your own boat arrives.”²⁰⁸

Maritime Slavery on the Tar-Pamlico

The watermen that guided flats down the river were often African American slaves. David Cecelski argues in *The Waterman’s Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* that planters delegated the navigation of flats to slaves because free labor was expensive and the upriver journey was often difficult. Watermen would use poles to travel back upriver, though high water after a fresh would force them to “warp up by Ropes fastened to the Trees on the bank.”²⁰⁹ The water also offered other

²⁰⁶ Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, November 8, 1783; Benjamin Atkinson to John Gray Blount, March 1, 1791 in Keith, 1: 128-129, 2:166-168.

²⁰⁷ Thomas Blount to [John Gray Blount], November 6, 1788 in Keith, 1:433.

²⁰⁸ Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, March 2, 1783 *ibid.*, 41-42.

²⁰⁹ David S. Cecelski, *The Waterman’s Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 32-46; Attmore, *Journal of a Tour to North Carolina*, 28.

means of employment for slaves and free blacks in antebellum North Carolina. In 1800, Washington's Customs Collector William Keais owned four slaves and William Gorham, a Blount ship captain, owned twelve slaves. Cecelski named fishing, ferrying, piloting, sailing, canal digging, and shipbuilding among the maritime trades that slaves and free blacks engaged in.²¹⁰

The Blounts employed their slaves in both the agricultural and maritime economies. William Attmore ended his return trip from Tarborough on "Mr. Blount's Ferry." "Two Negroes" rowed Attmore from the south side of the Tar River to Washington's shore. Attmore learned that one of the ferrymen had been born free in Guinea, captured while attacking a town, and sold into slavery.²¹¹ Despite owning at least one African born slave, John Gray sought to limit the slave trade coming into North Carolina. In 1786, he introduced a bill to "impose a duty on all Slaves brought into the State by Land or Water." The act placed a "duty of fifty shillings per head on all slaves under seven and over forty years of age, and a duty of five pounds per head on all slaves between the ages of seven and twelve years, and between the ages of thirty and forty years, and a duty of ten pounds per head on all slaves of twelve years and upwards to the age of thirty years." The legislation ironically stated that slave importation was "productive of evil consequences, and highly impolitic."²¹²

Despite his attempt to curb slave importation, John Gray continued to expand his slave holdings. He bought twenty-eight slaves from Ann Harvey and fifteen slaves from

²¹⁰ U.S. Bureau of Census, *1800 Census, North Carolina* (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, Microfilm Publications, 1985); Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song*.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² House Journal, 1786; An Act to Impose a Duty on all Slaves Brought Into This State by Land or Water Clark, 18:321, 24: 792-794.

his brother Willie Blount in 1797. The large purchase coincided with cattle to send to a farm at Parched Corn Bay in present day Dare County. An inventory listing ten slaves sent to Parched Corn notes that two drowned, highlighting the increased dangers of slavery in a coastal environment.²¹³

The two slaves who drowned at Parched Corn Bay very likely could have died while canal digging. Canals were critical to the draining of the land and they facilitated navigation. As mentioned in Chapter three, John Gray helped push legislation to cut various canals in the region. Cecelski called canal digging the “nightmare of maritime slave life” and the “cruellest, most dangerous, unhealthy, and exhausting labor in the American South.”²¹⁴ Though slaves often performed this labor, planters and businessmen also experimented with Irish immigrants and other out of state free labor.²¹⁵ The Blounts used Irish labor for ditch digging on at least one occasion, for Richard Dobbs Spaight asked John Gray “how has your Irish ditcher behaved? Has he done your ditch or runaway?”²¹⁶

Cecelski cited Charles Janson’s account of a timber camp owned by John Gray Blount to portray the hardships associated with canal digging. When Janson’s sailboat sought shelter from a storm in a creek near Mattamuskeet on the Pamlico Sound, the men visited a “new negro quarter belonging to a congressman, Mr. Blount of Newburn.” Janson may have confused Thomas with John Gray and their residence with New Bern, since Thomas served in Congress at the time of the account’s 1807 publication. Janson wrote that approximately sixty slaves had cut a canal between the head of the creek and

²¹³ Jay Gray Blount Notebook, in Masterson, 3:577-580.

²¹⁴ Cecelski, *The Waterman’s Song*, 101-116.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Richard Dobbs Spaight to John Gray Blount, June 11, 1793 in Keith, 2: 269-270.

the Alligator River to access and transport lumber to the coast. The slaves labored “in water, often up to the middle, and constantly knee-deep.” On Saturday, each slave received a weekly allowance of “inferior quality” salt herring and a peck of “Indian, corn in the cob.” The slaves spent much of their Saturday grinding their corn. Janson also wrote that the overseer maintained discipline in the remote timber camp through threats, flogging, and communal punishment.²¹⁷

Like their father Jacob, the Blount brothers had relatively large slaveholdings. According to the 1790 census, John Gray owned seventy-four slaves in Beaufort County, Thomas owned twenty-seven slaves in Edgecombe County, William owned thirty slaves in Pitt County, and Reading owned thirty-six slaves in Hyde County. Sharpe Blount, half brother to the merchants through Jacob’s second marriage, owned forty-seven slaves in Pitt County.²¹⁸ The 1789 death of Jacob Blount may have distorted these figures, but John Gray was the second largest slave owner in Beaufort County by 1790, and only thirty North Carolinians owned more slaves than he.²¹⁹

John Gray’s slaves were dispersed throughout at least two counties. In 1800 he owned forty-five slaves in Washington; in 1810 he owned twenty-eight slaves in the town. This apparent drop is due to reallocation, not reduction, since John Gray and Thomas Satterwaite owned thirty-six slaves at a shared plantation in Beaufort County. John Gray also owned forty-four slaves under overseer Ira Hollowell near Lake

²¹⁷ Charles Janson, *The stranger in America: containing observations made during a long residence in that country...*, (London: J. Cundee, 1807), 373-376.

²¹⁸ *Census 1790*, in Clark, 26.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Mattamuskeet in Hyde County. In twenty years, John Gray had increased his total holdings from seventy-six slaves, in 1790, to 108 slaves in 1810.²²⁰

John Gray's increased slave ownership parallels trends throughout the region. Christopher P. McCabe wrote that that the free population of Edgecombe, Pitt, and Beaufort only grew one percent from 1790 to 1800 while the slave population increased by 20 percent.²²¹ The slave population's proportional increase in the region mirrored a long-term trend in the state. Clayton Jewett and John Allen found that North Carolina's slave population increased from twenty five percent of the population in 1790 to one third of the population in 1820.²²² Beaufort, Hyde, Edgecombe, and Pitt's slave populations remained higher than the statewide percentage, though lower than some inland counties like Warren and Halifax.

Slaves were a major presence in Washington, slightly outnumbering whites in the town by 1800. Over the next decade, the free population grew at a slightly higher rate than the slave population and free persons barely outnumbered slaves in 1810. Though the town's slave population grew at a similar rate to the town's free population, Washington still had a higher concentration of slaves than the county as a whole. By 1810, slaves constituted thirty-five percent of the county's population and forty-seven percent of Washington's population. Though many of the town's slaves may have

²²⁰ Ibid.; U.S. Bureau of Census, *1800 Census, 1810 Census, North Carolina*.

²²¹ Christopher P. McCabe, "The Development and Decline of Tar-Pamlico River Maritime Commerce and Its Impact Upon Regional Settlement Patterns," (M.A. Thesis, East Carolina University, 2007), 86.

²²² Clayton E. Jewett and John O. Allen, *Slavery in the South: A State-by-State History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 192.

worked on plantations, others worked in the maritime sector and in other skilled, non-agricultural labor. By 1810, for example, five slaves worked at a barbershop in town.²²³

County	Free 1790	Slave 1790	Free 1800	Slave 1800	Free 1810	Slave 1810
Beaufort	3783	1622 30 %	4198	2044 32.7%	4635	2568 35 %
Edgecombe	7098	3167 30.8%	6516	3905 37%	7316	5107 41%
Hyde	3061	1143 27%	3425	1404 29%	4177	1852 30.7%
Pitt	5906	2364 28%	6199	2885 31.7 %	5580	3589 39 %

Table 1: Free and Slave Populations of Beaufort, Edgecombe, Hyde, and Pitt Counties, 1790-1810.²²⁴

²²³ U.S. Bureau of Census, *1800 Census, 1810 Census, North Carolina*.

²²⁴ University of Virginia Library, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, “Historical Census Browser,” <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/>.

Town	Free 1800	Slave 1800	Free 1810	Slave 1810
Washington	296	305	614	558
		50%		47 %

Table 2: Free and Slave Populations of Washington, North Carolina.²²⁵

Historians have contributed slavery’s rise in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century to Eli Whitney’s cotton gin. Prior to Whitney’s 1793 invention, cotton was difficult to clean. The Blounts had shipped cotton to Philadelphia in 1788 but Stuart and Barr rejected the crop and returned the cargo to Washington, since no one had cleaned the cotton from the seed. The gin made cotton cultivation highly profitable, and John Gray and Thomas both owned cotton gins by 1802.²²⁶

John Gray’s slaves worked on boats, plantations, and timber camps, and the type of labor often determined a slave’s standard of living. Writing about the colonial era, Watson wrote that slaves experienced a relatively independent life style and a “perceptible degree of liberty” in the bigger North Carolina towns.²²⁷ Less rigid patterns of slave life in the state’s river towns had long worried slave-owners, however. In 1785, the North Carolina General Assembly passed a complex and restricting act “to Regulate and Restrain the Conduct of Slaves and Others” in Wilmington, Washington, Edenton, and Fayetteville. First, the law prohibited slaves from hiring themselves out in those

²²⁵ U.S. Bureau of Census, *1800 Census, 1810 Census, North Carolina*.

²²⁶ *Stuart & Barr to John Gray & Thomas Blount, December 12, 1788* in Keith, 2:444-445; *Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, February 22, 1802, December 18, 1802* in Masterson, 3:499, 565-566; C. Duncan Rice, *The Rise and Fall of Black Slavery* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975), 289-290.

²²⁷ Alan D. Watson, *Society in Colonial North Carolina* (Raleigh: Division of Archives and History, 1996), 39.

towns without written permission from their owner. The law obligated owners to register hired out slaves and forced them to wear a “leaden or pewter badge.” The law also taxed those slaves, sixteen shillings per male tradesman, ten shillings per males that were not tradesmen, and eight shillings for all females. The law’s wording highlights the concerns of slave-owners in areas with large numbers of slaves and free African Americans: “there are many slaves in the said towns, who contrary to law have houses of their own, or are permitted to reside in the outhouses or kitchens of divers of the inhabitants, or in the houses of the free negroes, mulattoes, persons of mixed blood and others, and work and labour for themselves in several trades and occupations...by reason of which robberies and frauds frequently happen, servants are corrupted, and the poor white inhabitants are deprived of the means of earning their subsistence by labour.” The law also denied compensation to owners if their slave committed a crime while hired out. Additionally, the law attempted to curb relationships between slaves and free colored people. Free blacks and mulattoes were required to register and wear cloth badges identifying them as free and the new law instated punishments for free colored citizens if they engaged in unauthorized commerce with slaves, committed crimes with slaves, or aided in their escape. Finally, the law imposed a successive series of punishments for anyone that housed or hid slaves. The first offense resulted in a ten-pound fine, the second offense netted twenty pounds, and the third offense resulted in thirty-nine lashes.²²⁸

As a major slave-owner in a town where slaves slightly outnumbered whites, John Gray was familiar with anxiety over fights and runaways. William Kennedy wrote to

²²⁸ An Additional Act to Amend the Several Acts for Regulating the Town of Wilmington, and to Regulate and Restrain the Conduct of Slaves and Others in the Said Town, and in the Towns of Washington, Edenton and Fayetteville, in Clark, 24:725-729.

John Gray about an “unjustifiable battle” between their slaves, expecting John Gray to punish his slave, “the first aggressor.” Kennedy ensured his slave was also “chastised” to ensure “good order among Slaves.”²²⁹

Another planter, Micaj Thomas, of Edgecombe County, appealed to John Gray after “the negro wench” he purchased from him ran away. Thomas assumed she had headed to Washington to “call for her husband.” Thomas offered to pay any expense necessary to bring her back.²³⁰

The river itself was a popular avenue of escape for slaves. Cecelski argued that the relative freedom of maritime slavery increased the desire and opportunities for slaves to seek real freedom, outside of the south. Blake Baker complained to John Gray in 1795: “My man Bob having fancied to himself much pleasure from the enjoyment of freedom has taken it into his head to leave me this morning” to likely “Ship himself for some land of liberty on board of the first convenient Vessel at your place.” Bob was likely a waterman working between Tarborough and Washington and possibly abroad, since he was well known to one of Blount’s sea captains. Bob was “a handy fellow in the house” and a skilled barber and saddler. Baker instructed John Gray to sell Bob, if he found him, for Jamaican Rum.²³¹ Five years later, Baker asked for John Gray’s assistance apprehending Jim Johnston. As in the case of Bob’s escape, Baker assumed that Johnston was bound for Washington. William Masterson, editor of the third volume

²²⁹ William Kennedy to John Gray Blount, June 29, 1795 in Keith, 2:558.

²³⁰ Cecelski, *The Waterman’s Song*, 121-151; Micaj Thomas to Thomas Blount, August 31, 1783 in Keith, 1:99.

²³¹ Blake Baker to John Gray Blount, June 19, 1795 in Keith, 2:554.

of *The John Gray Blount Papers*, suggested that Johnston's surname indicated he was likely an apprentice, not a slave.²³²

The Privilege of Wealth and Mercantile Connections

The presence of African American slaves was already becoming a defining distinction between the southern and northern United States, and the schism deepened as some northern states began initiating gradual emancipation. As a merchant and shipper, John Gray was at a central point of exchange between southern and northern commodities, customs, and beliefs. Leaders in Pennsylvania passed An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery in 1780, with an amendment in 1788 to “explain and enforce” the original law.²³³ Edward Turner stated that some Pennsylvania masters sold their slaves outside of the state and, in 1788, a Philadelphia man asked John Gray to hold and, if possible, sell his friend's slave because the owner could not keep him in Philadelphia.²³⁴

Northern merchants that visited eastern North Carolina noticed the emerging cultural differences between north and south. William Attmore curiously watched a horse race in New Bern and a “dance of Negroes to the banjo” in Tarborough. He also noticed language differences: “It sounds strange to my ear, to hear the people in Carolina, instead of the word carry or carried commonly say, toat or toated.”²³⁵ Hosting northern merchants and travelling abroad themselves, the Blounts were deeply rooted in North

²³² Blake Baker to John Gray Blount, July 6, 1800 in Masterson, 3:397.

²³³ “Pennsylvania – An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery, 1780,” The Avalon Project, Yale Law School, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/pennst01.asp (accessed October 20, 2014); Raymond Turner, “Slavery in Pennsylvania,” PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1911.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, Charles Kirby to John Gray Blount, June 28, 1788 in Keith 1: 405-406.

²³⁵ Attmore, *Journal of a Tour to North Carolina*, 17-43.

Carolina yet connected to the wider Atlantic community. Their direct contact with Philadelphia and other places in the northeast granted them access to governmental insight, foreign markets, and luxury goods. Thomas spent ample time in Philadelphia, initially on business and later as a congressman. Not surprisingly, Thomas's political service in Philadelphia facilitated the brothers' business interests there, granting John Gray a close confidant in a major American port. Thomas also used the opportunity to ship luxury items back to North Carolina. On one occasion he shipped a set of china for himself and another for his brother Sharpe. He also shipped maps to Blake Baker, the North Carolina Attorney General, a saddle and bridle to his brother Reading, and a tea tray and gown pattern of silk to John Gray's wife, Polly. Rural North Carolinians without these social and mercantile connections would not have had easy access to these items.²³⁶

Slaves and poor whites in the lowland south labored and suffered through the summers while the Blounts, as members of the wealthy elite, were able to escape these oppressive conditions. Though Thomas lived in Tarborough and John Gray in Washington, both sought relief from the heat, humidity, and sickliness that persisted through the late summer and early fall months along the Tar. Thomas decided to "go up the country" to "Avoid sickness which I am sure I shall get if I stay here" in 1794 and John Gray brought his wife and children to Shell Castle on the coast in the summer of 1797 "to avoid if possible the fevers so frequent at" Washington.²³⁷ Two years later,

²³⁶ Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, May 16, 1794 in Keith, 2:392-393; "Baker, Blake, Jr.," NCPedia, <http://ncpedia.org/biography/baker-blake-jr> (accessed October 22, 2014).

²³⁷ Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, July 24, 1794 in Keith, 2:418; John Gray Blount to John Sommerville, July 11, 1797 in Masterson, 3:153.

Atkinson expressed his hope that John Gray's family had escaped the fever.²³⁸ Schoepf identified sickness with "the entire low-lying coast" that he visited from Virginia to South Carolina, noticing a "pale, decayed, and prematurely old look" among the inhabitants."²³⁹

John Gray also sent his family away for education, even though Washington contained a schoolhouse as early as 1787. John Gray's son, Thomas Harvey Blount, attended Warrenton Academy in 1794. Thomas was observant enough to speculate he would "learn Faster here than I Should at Washington." He also remarked on the people of Warrenton as "very healthy."²⁴⁰ The contrasts in health and education between Washington in the lowlands and Warrenton in the piedmont were apparently significant. In 1801, John Gray may have sent sons John Gray Jr. and William Augustus to the newly opened Edenton Academy.²⁴¹

Though John Gray used his wealth to advance his children's education and escape to the coast during hot months, he never indulged in a large manor house so often associated with wealthy antebellum southern planters. Hugh Williamson once alluded to John Gray's frugality, commenting that "you don't like great Expence in Coats or Houses."²⁴² Alice Keith noted that John Gray considered "building a home in keeping with his wealth and social position, but the opportune time never came."²⁴³ His house's modesty was a reflection of Washington at the time of its construction; when John Gray

²³⁸ Benjamin Atkinson to John Gray Blount, October 29, 1799 in Masterson, 3:322-323.

²³⁹ Schoepf, *Travels in the Confederation*, 114.

²⁴⁰ Attmore, *Journal of a Tour to North Carolina*, 28; Thomas H. Blount to John Gray Blount, May 20, 1794 in Keith, 2:393.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Jacob Blount to John Gray Blount, December 23, 1800 in Keith 3:465.

²⁴² Hugh Williamson to John Gray Blount, December 12, 1792 in Keith, 2:221.

²⁴³ Keith, 2:294.

built his home there in 1778, it was the town's "sixth dwelling."²⁴⁴ Though John Gray's home was demolished in 1923, his brothers Reading and Thomas left behind houses (Bellefont Plantation and The Blount-Bridgers House, Figures 6 and 7, respectively) that survive today as architectural remnants of antebellum North Carolina. In March of 1796, Reading had "commenced building at Tranters Creek" and the family used the name "Bellafount" by September of that year. Tranters Creek flows into the Tar River just upriver from Washington.²⁴⁵



Figure 6, Bellefont Plantation House, Beaufort County, NC. Photograph by the author.

²⁴⁴ "Reading Blount," NCpedia, <http://ncpedia.org/biography/blount-reading> (accessed October 22, 2014).

²⁴⁵ John Gray Blount to Thomas Blount, March 14, 1796; Mary Blount to Susannah Harvey, September 26, [1796?] in Masterson, 3:32-34, 96-97.



Figure 7, Blount- Bridgers House, Tarboro, NC. Photograph by the author.

Growth and Maritime Industry in Washington and the Pamlico

A surviving map of early Washington (Figure 8), circa 1779, does not show John Gray Blount as the owner of any waterfront lots. A 1794 map (Figure 9), however, shows him as a prominent feature on the Washington waterfront. In the later map, John Gray owned two of the sixteen waterfront lots. A comparison of the two maps highlights Washington's economic growth between 1779 and 1794. In 1779, Colonel James Bonner, a local landowner, owned six of the ten lots on the waterfront. The 1794 map shows at least eight different merchants owning sixteen waterfront lots. Only three of the map's waterfront lots lack initials, and ten of the lots show structures extending into the

river, suggesting piers or other maritime infrastructure. A road through the middle of the 1794 map reads “Lane Between the Towns” and the 1779 map only contains lots east of the lane. So within fifteen years, locals had involved nearly all of the waterfront lots in commerce and doubled the size of their town. As the owner of two waterfront lots and the legislator who introduced bills to annex additional lands and relocate the county seat from Bath, John Gray was a significant driver of Washington’s growth. The variety of waterfront lot owners suggest a competitive market in the town and show that John Gray was not the only businessman attracted to Washington’s location and thriving waterfront.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁶ Plan of the town of Washington, comprised of the original 60 lots, ca. 1779; The plan of the town of Washington, ca. 1794, Map Collection 195, North Carolina Maps, Municipal Maps, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, NC; Benjamin Atkinson to Benjamin Blackledge, December 7, 1796 in Masterson, 3:116-117.

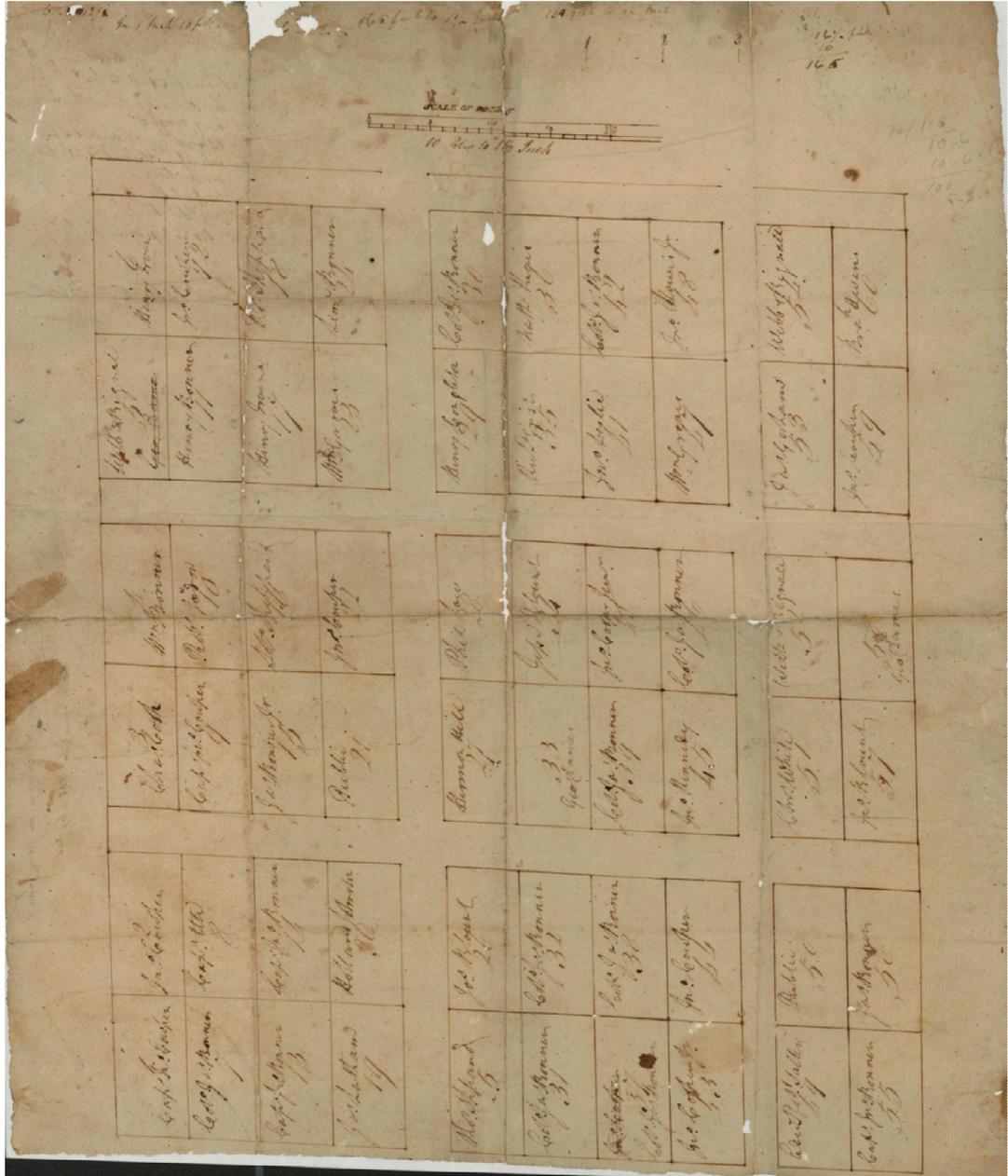


Figure 8, The Plan of the town of Washington, comprised of the original 60 lots, ca. 1779. Source: State Archives of North Carolina.

Shipping was the primary catalyst for Washington's emergence and John Gray's interest in the town. As mentioned in chapter two, John Gray exported tobacco, naval stores, pork, fish, and timber—the mainstays of North Carolina produce. He also imported West Indian goods like sugar, salt, and rum. Inventories and invoices further show that he imported and sold a variety of goods at his store in Washington. In the early 1780s, for example, the Blounts' Washington store sold silk purses, linens, black satins, calico, flannel, bear skins, carpets, beaver gloves, padlocks, buttons, buckskin gloves, butcher knives, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, paper, felt hats, pint mugs, crockery, smith's tools, shoemaker's tools, carpenter's tools, flour, penknives, hatchets, axes, adzes, and hunting whips among other goods.²⁴⁷

The Blounts invested in shipbuilding to support their merchandising and shipping. Though numerous ships were built in or near the town, the Blount's primary shipbuilder, Henry Tuley, built his vessels at Slade Creek and Bells Bay on the Pungo River.²⁴⁸ The Pungo flows into the Pamlico River before the latter empties into the Pamlico Sound. The last name Tuley does not appear in the 1790 North Carolina Census, but Hyde County listed several Tooleys, including Henry Tooley. Given that Alice Keith considered him “almost illiterate,” Tuley and Tooley are likely the same person.²⁴⁹ Henry Tooley owned eight slaves in the 1790 census yet complained, three years later,

²⁴⁷ John Gray Blount, Daybook, 1783-1798, Box 172, William Blount Rodman Papers, East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J.Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina.

²⁴⁸ Henry Tuley to John Gray Blount, March 3, 1796, August 9, 1796, in Keith 3: 30, 66; William N. Still, “The Shipbuilding Industry in Washington, North Carolina,” in *Of Tar Heel Towns, Shipbuilders, Reconstructionists and Alliancemen: Papers in North Carolina History*, ed. by Joseph F. Steelman, 26-50 (Greenville, NC: East Carolina University Publications, 1981), 29-30.

²⁴⁹ Keith, 2:290, *Census 1790*, in Clark, 26.

that it was “almost imposable to git hands to work in the woods at this season of the year [summer] without money to pay down.”²⁵⁰ In 1800, he owned ten slaves and, by 1810, he owned eighteen.²⁵¹ Nevertheless, it seems he relied on free labor to cut timber, which he needed for framing a vessel. Assuming the shipwright is the same Henry Tooley as appears in the Hyde census, he must have employed his own slaves in other ventures like agriculture or producing naval stores. In 1796, he employed two slaves, Polepris and Dick, in the construction of *Grampus*. Tooley sent the slaves back to John Gray after finishing the vessel. William Still stated that Tooley built numerous Blount vessels over the course of fifteen years, from 1783-1798. These vessels included *Grampus*, a lightering vessel, the schooner *William*, and brigs *John*, *Richard*, and *Tooley* (merchants and captains spelled the name interchangeably as *Tuley* and *Tooley*, further suggesting that Tuley and Tooley were the same man).²⁵²

John Gray wrote to Philadelphia when he decided to furnish *Tooley* with a figurehead. Thomas handled the matter since he was in the city serving in Congress. Thomas recommended that John Gray purchase a fiddlehead instead of a human figure, since a figurehead would cost thirty to fifty dollars and they were becoming less common in Philadelphia. John Gray persisted in his desire for a head, and Thomas obtained a female figurehead, recommending that they change the vessel’s name to a female name like “Rebecca.” John Gray was not pleased and Thomas apologized for not understanding his “aversion to women” on the vessel’s figurehead. Nevertheless, they

²⁵⁰ Henry Tuley to John Gray Blount, July 23, 1793, in Keith, 2:290.

²⁵¹ U.S. Bureau of Census, *1800 Census, 1810 Census, North Carolina*.

²⁵² Henry Tuley to John Gray Blount, August 9, 1796; Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, June 6, 1794, in Keith, 2:404, 3:30; William N. Still, “The Shipbuilding Industry in Washington, North Carolina.”

settled on the female figurehead but kept the name *Tooley*. Though seemingly petty, John Gray's refusal to violate a "promise," shows a loyal and respectful relationship between the merchant and shipbuilder. When two brigs from Washington, North Carolina arrived in Liverpool in 1796, David Allison assumed the one "with an ill looking head to her" was the *Tooley*.²⁵³ The Blounts named two other vessels, *Russell* and *Young*, after shipwrights.²⁵⁴

The *Tooley*'s maiden voyage to Liverpool met with some difficulties. Captain John Smith complained about the vessel's construction: "D[Dam] Carolina for shipbuilding, for the Tuley kept us well Employd. at the pump & at Tar."²⁵⁵ Smith's next transatlantic voyage sailed directly from Liverpool to Philadelphia. When Smith met Thomas Blount in the city, he was "more extravagant in praise of the Tuley" than John Gray, calling the vessel "without exception the finest Vessel he ever had his foot on."²⁵⁶ The change in Smith's perception is open to interpretation—possibly Smith oversaw improvements in Liverpool, Smith wanted to make up for his previous negative comments, or Thomas exaggerated to encourage his brother.

Invoices from the *Tooley*'s early voyages show the variety of goods imported into Washington. William Gorham sailed from Liverpool on August 23, 1795 and *Tooley*'s cargo included blanketing, hats, "Chinas," hoes, adzes, hatchets, frying pans, ivory combs, buttons, needles, calico, pen knives, Scotch thread, one cask of white lead, one cask of red lead, one cask of yellow oker, several crates of dishes, tea pots, chamber pots,

²⁵³ David Allison to John Gray Blount, October 21, 1796 in Keith, 2: 103.

²⁵⁴ Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, March 20, March 27, June 6, June 25 1794, *ibid.*, 379, 381, 404, 410; McGuinn, "Shell Castle, A North Carolina Entrepôt," 100.

²⁵⁵ John Smith to John Gray Blount, November 8, 1794 in Keith, 2:456-457.

²⁵⁶ Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, March 5, 1795, *ibid.*, 508-510.

wash basins, four smith's anvils, and 8000 bushells of salt. In September of 1796, just one year later, Gorham sailed from Liverpool to Washington again with a similar cargo.²⁵⁷ Merchants also advertised in Liverpool that the *Tooley* offered freight or charter to "any port in the U.S."²⁵⁸

Though Henry Tooley built many of the Blounts' vessels for them on the Pungo, the Blounts were also involved with ship construction in the town of Washington. The Blounts supervised construction of *Diamingo* for Christopher Deshon, an Edenton based ship captain, in 1799. Though Deshon referred to the Ship *Diamingo*, ships were uncommon in Washington and he may have used the term generically. Nevertheless, their correspondence shows that ship joiners, carpenters, and blacksmiths were active in the town. Deshon's impatience to send the vessel to Baltimore may have contributed to *Diamingo's* problems on its maiden voyage, which forced him to "put hooks in forward and aft" because the "Stern was not well Secured" after only a five day trip from Ocracoke to Baltimore. Deshon predicted spending at least two thousand dollars on the ship while in the Maryland city.²⁵⁹

In addition to supervising ship construction for his firm and others, John Gray conducted a variety of maritime related services in Washington. Tarborough merchant Edward Hall sent his boat to Washington "hoping thro'" John Gray's "interest to have her graved [cleaned], or any other thing done to her that be thought necessary."²⁶⁰ Keith stated that the Blounts also coopered barrels sent to them from upriver landings before

²⁵⁷ John Gray Blount, Daybook, 1783-1798, Box 172, William Blount Rodman Papers.

²⁵⁸ David Allison to John Gray Blount, October 23, 1795 in Keith, 2:602-604.

²⁵⁹ Christopher Deshon to John Gray Blount, May 14, May 20, August 26, 1799, in Masterson, 3: 292-293, 319.

²⁶⁰ Edward Hall to John Gray Blount, no date, in Keith, 2:161.

they loaded the goods for shipment abroad. In 1795, for example, Benjamin Atkinson asked John Gray to cooper eighty-seven barrels of tar and ninety-six barrels of turpentine.²⁶¹

John Gray's involvement in shipping and maritime industries in Washington made him a sought out employer in the region. In 1793, at least three different parents negotiated apprenticeships for their sons, "to become navigators or merchants."²⁶² Requests came from New Bern and Windsor, acknowledging that John Gray's "Castle and Shipping" enabled him "to furnish employment for a Number of Young Men."²⁶³ A year later, Thomas Blount obtained a "birth [berth] before the mast" for Mr. Francis Hall, nephew of Edward Hall, a Tarborough merchant, aboard the *Tooley*. Hall was "destitute of property & dependent wholly on his own industry for the means of subsistence." Hall received no special treatment, however, receiving a common "Landsmen's" wages. If Hall continued to work for the Blounts and received a good report from the captain, he had the opportunity to gain promotion in accordance with his "abilities and merit." Hall came from the middle to upper class, however, since he had received a "tolerable education, having been intended for the Bar." Thomas predicted he would gain "Nautical Knowledge."²⁶⁴

As a leading employer and promoter of Washington, John Gray experimented with other profitable schemes in the town as early as the end of the Revolutionary War. William Attmore wrote in 1787, "Lately there has been a Rum Distillery established at

²⁶¹ Benjamin Atkinson to John Gray Blount, October 11, 1795, in Keith 2:601.

²⁶² Keith, 2:247.

²⁶³ Edward Bryan to John Gray Blount, March 16, 1793; Zedekiah Stone to John Gray Blount, March 24, 1793 in Keith, 2:247-248.

²⁶⁴ Keith, 2:425.

this place—This is not likely to render the place more healthy.”²⁶⁵ John Gray had began erecting a distillery in 1783. Samuel Cary, who “had the care of my fathers distillery in Charlestown till it was destroyed by the British Troops,” appealed to Hugh Williamson for a job as distiller for John Gray in Washington.²⁶⁶

The river affected aspects of life in Washington that were unrelated to commerce, including the local method for deer hunting. William Attmore was able to go on a hunting trip with some of Washington’s most affluent citizens, including John Gray Blount and John Wallace. Two unnamed sailors rowed Wallace, Attmore, and five other gentlemen across the Tar River. John Gray traveled in a canoe to meet them at his farm. As the hunt started, some of the men found deer tracks and placed hounds on a scent. Others in the party stationed themselves at known crossing points along the river. If these men failed to shoot the deer before it reached the river, a third party waited in a canoe to chase the deer down. The hunters in the canoe would then attempt to grab the deer’s tail and drown it. Attmore described this as the general hunting method in the area.²⁶⁷

Carrying the mail also involved the water in late eighteenth century eastern North Carolina. As Washington’s postmaster, John Gray contracted with a carrier to transport mail from “Washington, by Bath & Woodstock, to germainton” [Germantown in Hyde County] for two hundred dollars a year. Captain John Alderson bid for the contract on condition that the government extend his allotted transportation time. Alderson argued that making the trip from Washington to Germantown in one day (as the job’s initial

²⁶⁵ Attmore, *Journal of a Tour to North Carolina*, 29.

²⁶⁶ Samuel Cary to Hugh Williamson, November 15, 1783 in Keith, 1:129-130.

²⁶⁷ Attmore, *Journal of a Tour to North Carolina* 24-25.

advertisement had proposed) was extremely difficult and “often impossible by reason of a ferry of five miles width” between Woodstock and Germantown. Alderson added that the trip was especially difficult during the winter season. The Pungo River flows between Woodstock and Germantown.²⁶⁸

This mail route involved the waterways east of Washington, and John Gray was interested in them and the surrounding land. As previously mentioned, the family looked to the inner coastal regions along the Pamlico River and Pamlico Sound for their ship construction and timber business. Despite a century of settlement, much of eastern North Carolina remained uninhabited. Schoepf’s party did not encounter a single person and saw a “few dwellings on the road from Edenton to Washington.” He mentioned that the forty miles from Washington to New Bern were “quite as lonesome.”²⁶⁹ Though farmers would eventually find the land fertile, much of the acreage was still unimproved swampland and forest after the Revolutionary War. As a man already interested in trans-Appalachian land speculation, John Gray quickly joined the rush to buy North Carolina swampland. John Gray worked with Philadelphia businessmen who believed North Carolina swampland would become valuable, “abounding as the[y] are in Timber & luxuriant soil.”²⁷⁰ Many of John Gray Blount’s land grants were with partners John Wallace or Richard Blackledge. Blount and Wallace obtained Beacon Island in 1789 and two hundred acres on Cedar Island in 1795. Also in 1795, the state granted fifteen square miles of land in Carteret County to “John Gray Blount, assignee of Richard

²⁶⁸ Abraham Bradley, Jr. to John Gray Blount [with enclosure], September 28, 1800 in Masterson, 3:431.

²⁶⁹ Schoepf, *Travels in the Confederation*, 126-127.

²⁷⁰ William Shannon to John Gray Blount, December 27, 1800 in Masterson, 3:466-467.

Blackledge.”²⁷¹ By 1798, John Gray owned 377,057 acres in Onslow, Carteret, Jones, and Craven counties. Deeds show that John Gray also bought large amounts of land in Beaufort and Hyde counties and Cecelski wrote that Blount eventually owned over one million acres of land.²⁷²

Timber was a major part of the Blounts’ trade, closely linked with land speculation and maritime commerce. Williamson wrote that North Carolina was blessed with White Oak trees, “for making pipe and hogshead staves...thick extensive forests of juniper and cypress for making shingles, can hardly be exhausted. The large tracts of sandy barren land, that in other countries would be deemed worthless, are covered in Carolina with trees of pitch pine, fit for boards, or trees of a smaller size, that yield a plentiful crop of tar.”²⁷³

The Blounts used a variety of craft to gather and transport lumber from many of the Pamlico’s tributaries. In 1783, Jacob Blount Jr. acquired thousands of staves and heading in South Dividing Creek, on the south side of the river, and sent a flat for more staves up Broad Creek, on the north side of the river. John Gray eventually owned 12,160 acres between South Dividing Creek and Goose Creek.²⁷⁴ Before establishing a mill and plantation at Tranters Creek, Reading operated them near the Pungo River in Hyde County. After Reading’s decision to move to Tranters Creek, “a place more convenient

²⁷¹ Land Grants to John Gray Blount and John Wallace, November 27, 1789, July 20, 1795; Land Grants to John Gray Blount, assignee of said Richard Blackledge, November 20, 1795, December 20, 1795, John Gray Blount Papers, Grants, Carteret County, Grants and Deeds, Beaufort-Wayne Counties, Private Collection 193, Box 25, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh NC.

²⁷² Cecelski, *The Waterman’s Song*, 77.

²⁷³ Williamson, *History of North Carolina*, vol. 2, 211-212.

²⁷⁴ Jacob Blount [Jr.] to John Gray Blount, June 23, 1783 in Keith, 1:64; Map of Sand Creek Sands, John Gray Blount’s Patent 12.160 Acres, Copy made 9 October 1867, Box 2, Folder A, William Blount Rodman Papers.

to” Washington “and of course more to the satisfaction of his wife,” John Gray advertised a large tract of his swamp land combined with Reading’s mill for sale. The mill was “across Broad Creek, a large branch of Pungo River.” Vessels drawing eight feet of water could travel as far as Man of War Point, and rafts and small craft could reach the mill. John Gray believed the mill and swampland would “make the most valuable property in the hand of a Company or one able man.” If drained, John Gray predicted the swampland would annually produce 5000 bushells of rice. He also added that owners could access valuable cypress, juniper, and oak if they cleared out waterways.²⁷⁵

Shell Castle: A Profitable Transit Point

As a leading figure in Washington’s rise as a Tar River port, John Gray understood the value of location. Though he placed himself at the center of his business in Washington, John Gray invested time and resources at another major transit port, Shell Castle near Ocracoke. Phillip McGuinn’s “Shell Castle, A North Carolina Entrepôt, 1789: A Historical and Archaeological Investigation” is a comprehensive study of the Shell Castle operation, so this thesis will only briefly cover the venture. McGuinn called the establishment of operations at Shell Castle “a rational business response to the Blounts’ desire to command all aspects of their mercantile business.”²⁷⁶

Though communities existed at nearby Ocracoke and Portsmouth, Wallace and Blount chose the twenty-five acre tract of “Old Rock,” or Shell Castle, for their business location because of the island’s accessibility, availability, and solid foundation. Also,

²⁷⁵ John Gray Blount to Thomas Blount [with enclosure], March 14, 1796 in Masterson, 3:32-34.

²⁷⁶ McGuinn, “Shell Castle, A North Carolina Entrepôt,” 13.

lightering and warehousing required a harbor deeper than the Portsmouth harbor. The two men engaged in lightering, piloting, and fishing out of Shell Castle.²⁷⁷

McGuinn called Shell Castle a “complete maritime support center” and a “central collection point” where heavier draft vessels would “break bulk” onto lighters. Sometimes, the original vessels would reload the goods once inside the shoals. Other times, lighters would accompany these vessels to their final destination.²⁷⁸ McGuinn stated that lightering was the most important business at Shell Castle and grew over time. The partners initially only employed one lighter at Shell Castle, and James Cole Mountflorencia, a land agent headed to Europe on behalf of the Blounts, wrote John Gray in early 1792 that he was “losing daily tho’ a great deal, for want of another Lighter.”²⁷⁹ By this point, John Gray was contemplating building another lighter. Mountflorencia’s observations may have convinced John Gray to proceed with construction, for John Young had the new lighter, *Beaver*, nearly complete eight months later. Wallace was eventually employing five lighters by 1800. Lightering took an average of five days, though some vessels often did it in two and others, in bad weather, took much longer. Strong winds could temporarily stop the lightering. Weather was a major issue for Wallace, especially during Hurricane Season. He remained “married fast to the Castle until the fifteenth of October” in 1790 because “there [has been] never a gale known after that.”²⁸⁰

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 12-13, 33, 77-78.

²⁷⁸ Ibid, 28.

²⁷⁹ Keith, 2:173; James Cole Mountflorencia to John Gray Blount, January 22, 1792 in Keith, 2:179.

²⁸⁰ McGuinn, “Shell Castle, A North Carolina Entrepôt,” 61-78; George Nicolson to John Gray Bount, April 22, 1790; Jack [John] Wallace to John Gray Blount, September 6, 1790 in Keith, 2: 46-47, 106-107.

Mountflorencé's letter had also suggested that Blount and Wallace would profit from a ship chandler's shop. Wallace began running the store in 1792, selling rum, candles, nails, soap, lard, whetstones, and molasses. Initially, vessels brought merchandise into Washington before Blount shipped them back to Shell Castle. The two men soon decided to have goods shipped directly to Shell Castle from New York City in order to save freight costs. Blount and Wallace developed the island gradually and intermittently between 1790 and 1800 and McGuinn found no evidence of new construction after 1800.²⁸¹

Wallace employed slave labor at the Castle and he expanded his ownership from three slaves in 1790 to fifteen slaves in 1800.²⁸² Slave life was hard at the Castle, and many slaves attempted to run away. Just a few months after John Gray hired "Dick the Pilot" from Josiah Collins, Jacob Blount (Collins's son in law and John Gray's brother) captured Dick in Edenton after giving "a Negro five pounds to betray him." Jacob had him shackled and sent back to the Castle, noting that the slave complained about Wallace's "very hard usage." Dick's relocation to Shell Castle had also separated him from his "mistress," convincing Jacob that Dick would runaway again if he found the opportunity.²⁸³ Four years later, four hired slaves from Cove Sound stole Wallace's boat and fled from the Castle. Within a week, Wallace recaptured the boat and one of the slaves. In addition to Wallace's "hard usage," slaves faced the hazards of the sea at Shell Castle—one of Blount and Wallace's slaves drowned during a gale in 1795.²⁸⁴

²⁸¹ McGuinn, "Shell Castle, A North Carolina Entrepôt," 48-57, 86-89.

²⁸² *Census, 1790*, in Clark, 26; *1800 Census, North Carolina*.

²⁸³ Jacob Blount to John Gray Blount, May 18, 1789 in Keith, 1:480.

²⁸⁴ John Wallace to John Gray Blount, July 17, 1793, April 26, 1795 in Keith, 2:288, 536-537.

John Gray marketed Shell Castle through maps, “word of mouth,” and a small number of pitchers (Figure 10).²⁸⁵ G. Melvin Herndon wrote that the Blounts “encouraged” surveyors and cartographers to map the Outer Banks in the 1790s, hoping their maps would “stimulate” trade near Shell Castle.²⁸⁶ In 1797, John Gray was “desirous” to see a coastal chart completed. He planned to send about twenty of the charts to various European seaports to “give an idea of the importance of Shell Castle.”²⁸⁷

²⁸⁵ McGuinn, “Shell Castle, A North Carolina Entrepôt,” 115-119.

²⁸⁶ G. Melvin Herndon, “The 1806 Survey of the North Carolina Coast, Cape Hatteras to Cape Fear” *The North Carolina Historical Review* XLIX No. 1 January 1972, 244

²⁸⁷ John Gray Blount to Jonathan Price, May 11, 1797 in Masterson, 3:147.



Figure 10, Shell Castle Pitcher. Lighted beacon is on the far right of the image. Source: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources.

Shell Castle was primarily a business venture but also provided John Gray access to coastal-specific commodities. John Haywood wrote John Gray from Hillsborough, a piedmont town, asking him to “procure for me as many Feathers from about the Barr which had never been used as would be sufficient for two Beds.”²⁸⁸ John Wallace also supplied John Gray with fish and clams throughout the year.²⁸⁹ As previously mentioned, Shell Castle also provided John Gray’s family refuge from the hot, humid, and fever ridden eastern North Carolina summers. In the summer of 1794, Richard Dobbs Spaight declined an invitation to visit the Blounts at the coast. Though he wished John Gray and his wife a “pleasant time at the Castle,” Spaight’s family headed to Swansboro, a coastal town closer to New Bern. Spaight wanted “to change the air, & eat salt water fish, ” to “put some flesh on” his “bones.”²⁹⁰

John Gray used his stays at Shell Castle to attend to business there, and by 1800 the site included an improved office with a “good piazza.”²⁹¹ When fears of a slave insurrection spread over eastern North Carolina in 1802, the Blounts looked to Shell Castle for refuge. Thomas’s wife, Jackey, believed “that there is no place of Safety in this State but Shell Castle.” Richard Dobbs Spaight also considered sending his family to Shell Castle, but Spaight worried about a lack of medical aid for his wife there. Thomas also admitted that his wife feared “the dangers of the sea,” and neither family actually

²⁸⁸ John Haywood to John Gray Blount, March 18, 1790 in Keith, 2:29-30.

²⁸⁹ John Wallace to John Gray Blount, September 6, 1790, July 17, 1793 in Keith, 2:106-107, 288.

²⁹⁰ Richard Dobbs Spaight to John Gray Blount, August 26, 1794 in Keith, 2:426-427.

²⁹¹ John Wallace to John Gray Blount, May 22, 1800 in Masterson, 3:382-383.

retreated to Shell Castle during the panic. Nevertheless, the incident shows Shell Castle's isolation from mainland eastern North Carolina.²⁹²

²⁹² Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, June 28, 1802; Richard Dobbs Spaight to John Gray Blount, July 1, 1802; Thomas Blount to John Gray Blount, July 24, 1802, in Masterson, 3:516-519, 526.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

From Thomas Blount's store in Tarborough to Shell Castle at Ocracoke, the Blounts held considerable influence over the major stops on the Tar-Pamlico trade network. John Gray oversaw their shipping business from his central location in Washington and the brothers used politics and development to shape the trade network around their best interests. Not that they controlled or monopolized the region—letters and maps suggest a competitive market—instead they worked to control factors affecting business at key locations on the river and inlets connecting them with the wider Atlantic community. They placed themselves at the key transit points between their resources (the farms and forests of eastern North Carolina) and their markets. As a part of their greater plan of vertical integration, they developed these key locations to support their business. The growth of towns, regulation of ports, and construction of infrastructure are among the methods the Blounts used to support their mercantile business. When the mere investment of capital could not create the desired change, the men resorted to politics.²⁹³

McGuinn called the Blount Family “generalists” who enacted “vertical integration,” naming “lightering, warehousing, shipbuilding, fishing, porpoise oil supply, and navigation aid servicing” as their diversified business ventures.²⁹⁴ The Oxford Dictionary defines vertical integration as “the combination in one company of two or more stages of production normally operated by separate companies.”²⁹⁵ Vertical

²⁹³ McGuinn, “Shell Castle, A North Carolina Entrepôt,” 60.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Oxford Dictionary, s.v. “vertical integration,” http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/vertical-integration?q=vertical+integration&searchDictCode=all (accessed January 2, 2015).

integration allowed the Blounts to save shipping costs. Their Shell Castle ventures not only saved some of the costs of warehousing, lightering, and piloting; conducting the operations themselves turned cost into profit. Additionally, John Gray relied on local shipbuilders, supplying them with timber and slave labor, practices that undoubtedly reduced his cost. The Blounts also used their own slave labor to produce or obtain a portion of the goods they exported, including tobacco, naval stores, timber, and eventually cotton. Their investments in a nail factory, a tannery, steam mills, saw mills, and cotton gins were also attempts to maximize control of their business conditions

All of these business ventures depended on location. Washington, Ocracoke, and Tarborough were the major points of transition in the Tar-Pamlico maritime trade. Ocracoke marked the transition from ocean to sound, Washington the transition from schooner, brigantine, or sloop to flat. For many, the river trade ended in Tarborough. The Blounts stationed branches of their business at all of these critical points, facilitating their growth and development through political influence.

State records shed light on John Gray's political role in Washington's development. Comparing the 1779 and 1794 maps show that John Gray helped double Washington's footprint when he initiated legislation to annex additional lands to the town. His courthouse bill, successfully relocating the county seat from Bath to Washington, increased the latter town's importance and helped make Washington the economic and political center of Beaufort County.

The emerging port town experienced both short-term growth in the 1780s and long-term growth throughout the two decades following American independence. The contrasts between Schoepf and Attmore's travel accounts suggest that Washington

doubled in size from 1783 to 1787. By 1800, Washington contained approximately 600 persons and the population would nearly double again over the next decade. As Washington grew, the increasing population inevitably supported the businessmen. Becoming the county seat, for example, brought more people into the town throughout the year. Growth provided a larger labor pool, customer base, and supply of produce. The development of Washington was a boon to the family business—the brothers continued to build ships and buy slaves as the town expanded.

The Blounts also invested their growing capital into Shell Castle, and the “maritime support center” was the pinnacle of their maritime development.²⁹⁶ As they did in Washington, the Blounts used political influence to support their business, obtaining a lighted beacon near Shell Castle. They also promoted Shell Castle through their marketing schemes and maps; and, with John Wallace, expanded their services to further capitalize on ships that passed through the inlet.

The Blounts were not as directly influential in Tarborough’s growth as they were in Washington and Shell Castle. Founded two decades before John Gray and Thomas began their partnership, Tarborough was already firmly established when Thomas began operating a store in the town. Nevertheless, his store and branch of the Blount shipping company contributed to the town’s commercial activity and, more importantly, gave the merchants a base at the Tar River’s most inland commercial center. Thomas also served as a town commissioner and represented the surrounding area in both the North Carolina General Assembly and U.S. Congress. The commissioner position gave Thomas the authority to improve the town’s navigation and public landing. In 1790, he oversaw

²⁹⁶ McGuinn, “Shell Castle, A North Carolina Entrepôt,” 78.

construction of a new bridge in Tarborough to reinvigorate the flow of produce into the town. His political positions also helped him control factors that affected the Blount shipping business. His vote for constitutional ratification in the state convention and solicitations for a lighthouse and fortifications near Ocracoke all originated in a desire to promote the Blounts' shipping operations in the Tar-Pamlico and throughout the Atlantic community.

The rise of Washington, Shell Castle, and the Blount shipping business were directly related to American Independence and the creation of the United States. The closure of ports during the American Revolution created an opportunity for Washington to develop as a port. As North Carolina experienced independence under the Articles of Confederation, the Blount Brothers and other coastal assemblymen passed a series of laws to bring order to the state's ports, help Washington grow as a town and port, and control the lives of slaves in river towns. When the Articles of Confederation proved detrimental to American shipping, the Blounts joined the national mercantile push for constitutional reform and a strengthened federal government and advocated the constitution's adoption in North Carolina with their friends, Hugh Williamson and Richard Dobbs Spaight. The new federal government supported them financially and politically—their shipping prospered, William received appointment as governor of the United States South of the River Ohio, and Thomas won election to Congress where he championed legislation that brought a lighted beacon to Shell Castle.

Despite their unbridled ambition, the Blounts could not create all of the change they desired. Schemes to improve the Tar failed and Dismal Swamp legislation passed despite their objections. Also, John Gray's interest in connecting the Pungo and Roanoke

never materialized and other canals suffered from delays. Failures at internal improvements remained a statewide problem beyond the scope of this paper, only changing after 1815. The Blounts could only go as far as state and national governments allowed, and their lobbying for a lighthouse and fortifications near Shell Castle were only partially successful. The federal government did not build a lighthouse on Shell Castle, as Blount and Wallace hoped, but constructed a lighted beacon on Shell Castle land bought from the two men.

John Gray placed himself at the center of his “burgeoning empire” in Washington and both he and his adopted hometown were major transitional agents in the wake of the American Revolution.²⁹⁷ As the end of the line for traditional river transport (flats, rafts, scows), Washington was the place that Tar River produce left its North Carolina origins for northern, European, or Caribbean markets. Likewise, Washington was as far inland as many northern or European sailors would venture. As a planter and merchant in a rural southern area, John Gray was culturally and economically rooted in the region and tied to its people. As a businessman, shipper, and speculator, however, he interacted with members of different cultures throughout the Atlantic world. Though these communications were often through letters, John Gray had traveled with Daniel Boone across the Appalachian mountains and sailed to the Caribbean as a young man to gain the worldly experience necessary to direct his far-flung business ventures.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁷ David S. Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 77.

²⁹⁸ Genealogy, Blount Family, Box 161, Folder G, in William Rodman Blount Papers, East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J.Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina.

John Gray also understood the value of partnerships. He could not manage his business alone, and he depended on a select group of men to support him in business, politics, and development. Chief among these were his brothers, William and Thomas, fellow merchant Hugh Williamson, and Shell Castle overseer John Wallace. He worked with these partners to ensure North Carolina's adoption of the U.S. Constitution, obtain over a million acres of land, develop Washington and Shell Castle as trading centers, diversify and expand the family business, and ultimately increase his wealth.

John Gray's commitment to control and development greatly affected the lives of slaves in eastern North Carolina. As he and other men built Washington, they brought slaves into the town and some of them worked as shipwrights, coopers, and watermen. The ratio of slaves to free persons in the town was higher than the surrounding countryside, and the conditions of life in town were less rigid than on the plantation. The North Carolina General Assembly's strict measures in 1785 to "regulate and restrain" slave behavior in the towns of Washington, Wilmington, Edenton, and Fayetteville was an attempt to curb their independence and prevent runaways. The presence of ships bound for the north made Washington an ideal location for runaways in the surrounding area, and John Gray occasionally received requests to assist in their apprehension. Though his slaves may have fared better as maritime laborers than as field workers, slaves relegated to canal digging fared worse. Janson's description of the Blounts' timber camp and Cecelski's research on canal digging show that the draining of swampland and opening of waterways in eastern North Carolina created a miserable existence for slave laborers.

This paper was not intended to comprehensively study the Blounts or the Tar-Pamlico, but to illustrate the connections between maritime commerce, development, and politics in North Carolina after the American Revolution. As merchants and shippers, the Blounts were entirely dependent on the key locations of their shipping network. Shaping the maritime cultural landscape, an environment of ports, canals, lighthouses, bridges, ferries, and laborers, was a vital part of their business strategy. John Gray Blount and his associates successfully grew Washington and developed Shell Castle through politics and investment, all while diversifying and expanding the Blount assets of ships, slaves, mills, factories, and land. The Blounts' efforts to develop the Tar-Pamlico around their shipping business resulted in short-term and long-term changes to the maritime cultural landscape. While the rise of Shell Castle was short-lived and the entrepôt declined in John Gray's lifetime, Washington's importance as a port and shipbuilding center endured throughout most of the nineteenth century.²⁹⁹ John Gray Blount died in 1833, and his well-documented life offers valuable insight into the early American business climate along the eastern seaboard. The Blount Papers, both published and unpublished, are a comprehensive resource for any researcher interested in North Carolina, southern, maritime, African-American, and business histories.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁹ Bradley A. Rogers and Nathan Richards, *The Castle Island Ships' Graveyard: The History and Archaeology of Eleven Wrecked and Abandoned Watercraft* (Greenville, NC: East Carolina University, 2006), 16-20.

³⁰⁰ *The John Gray Blount Papers*, ed. Alice Barnwell Keith, vol. 1, 1764-1789 (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1952), xxiv.

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