

Benning Wentworth

Brief life of a colonial grandee: 1696-1770

by CASTLE FREEMAN

WHEN Benning Wentworth, A.B. 1715, retired as royal governor of New Hampshire in the summer of 1767, he was one of the richest men in New England. That was not mere good luck. Wentworth's long career as colonial viceroy united astute administration with a level of self-dealing rare even in eighteenth-century America, which tolerated official graft quite cheerfully. New Hampshire gained both from Wentworth's ability and, indirectly, from his lack of public scruples. The political geography, settlement, and governance of a good part of interior New England derive from Wentworth's acts and policies. For a generation, he saw to that large region's defense in war and to its economic development in peace, in the process essentially inventing the present-day state of Vermont.

Wentworth was born in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, the eldest of 14 children of a prosperous merchant who was also the lieutenant governor of Massachusetts, which then included New Hampshire. Little is known of his college career: he stood fifth in his class of 20 at Commencement, but in his time Harvard students were ranked according to a system that took account of social position rather than academic attainments. At Harvard, Wentworth evidently stood out mainly for his high spirits; he set a college record of fines for broken windows and other damage consequent upon undergraduate hell-raising.

On graduation, Wentworth, then 18, joined the family business, importing wines from Cadiz and other Spanish ports in trade for the naval stores that were the principal product of New Hampshire's virgin forests. In the next 15 years he would spend considerable time in Spain. At home, he and his father and brothers were actively trying to have New Hampshire constituted a separate colony whose lucrative government offices they would fill.

Like the other American colonies, Massachusetts was run by a governor and council, representing the king's interests, and an elected assembly of substantial citizens, representing the people. Wentworth was elected to the Massachusetts assembly in 1732 and joined the governor's council a couple of years later. He continued to intrigue for the separation of New Hampshire—outraging Massachusetts authorities, who referred to him as “Toby, the Cadix pedlar”—and in 1741, the colony gained its independence, with the 44-year old Wentworth as its first royal governor.

Wentworth made it his business to increase New Hampshire's wealth and power, by means that, not coincidentally, promised also to increase his own. One way involved the wilderness country lying to the west, across the Connecticut River. Although both New Hampshire and New York had plausible claims to the territory, Wentworth, on no authority but his own, began grant-

ing these lands as townships to groups of private proprietors.

Wentworth named the first of his so-called New Hampshire Grants Bennington. In all, he named and granted 129 towns in 15 years, benefiting handsomely from both the £100 fees he collected for each grant and his practice of reserving 500 acres of the best land in each grant for himself, for later sale. In 1791, 21 years after his death, the district Wentworth had so highhandedly, so profitably made his own became a large part of the state of Vermont.

A royal governor's authority was great by law, but limited in practice by the assembly's control of expenditures, including the governor's salary. During Wentworth's tenure, the northern colonies were continually at war with the French in Canada and their Indian allies. Wentworth was determined to furnish troops to protect the New Hampshire frontier. The assembly, however, refused to make the necessary appropriations and fought his repeated attempts to get around their resistance. At one point, Wentworth simply suspended the assembly, bringing government business in New Hampshire to a standstill for five years.

In the end, Wentworth mainly got what he wanted, in large part because his office-jobbery freed him from the assembly's financial control. His vigorous upholding of the royal prerogative—and his own bank account—were on the whole fortunate for New Hampshire, which grew greatly in population and prosperity during his 25-year rule, the longest of any English colonial governor.

Wentworth has come down in history as the very type of British colonial aristocrat. Corpulent and crippled by gout, he was driven around Portsmouth in a splendid carriage, with enough outriders to satisfy a duke. His palatial estate there, at Little Harbor, was one of the colonies' most famous stately homes.

For all his luxury and hauteur, however, the common people of New Hampshire seem to have loved him. They smiled when, at 64, the widowed Wentworth scandalized polite Portsmouth by marrying his housekeeper, a woman young enough to be his granddaughter; and when he died at Little Harbor 10 years later, they mourned. One of his biographers has speculated that if the crown had appointed more governors with Wentworth's strength and ability, our history might have turned out very differently. In the event, Wentworth retired just as the currents of history that would put an end to his world forever began to surge toward the American Revolution. ♡

Castle Freeman is a freelance writer living in Vermont.

Opposite: Wentworth in 1760, by Joseph Blackburn. The white pines in the background reflect the source of his wealth as Surveyor of the King's Woods.

COLLECTION OF THE NEW HAMPSHIRE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, GIVEN IN MEMORY OF STAFFORD AND MARGARET WENTWORTH, BY HIS DAUGHTERS, ANNE WENTWORTH MORSS, MARGARET WENTWORTH WHITING, AND CONSTANCE WENTWORTH DODGE (1863, 30.2)

