

Christoph von Graffenried's account of the Tuscarora War

WITH COMMENTARY BY DAVID WALBERT

From Vincent H. Todd and Julius Goebel, eds., *Christoph von Graffenried's Account of the Founding of New Bern* (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton Printing, 1920).

As you read...

GRAFFENRIED'S FAILURES

Baron Christoph von Graffenried had already angered the Tuscarora by unwittingly settling Swiss and Palatines on Indian land. When he and surveyor John Lawson set out in September 1711 to explore the Neuse, the Tuscarora assumed that the two men had come to take their land. The Tuscarora at the town of Catechna captured von Graffenried and Lawson. When Lawson threatened that the English would retaliate, the Indians executed him.

Graffenried pleaded for his life and the safety of his settlers. He arranged a treaty of neutrality, promising to give the Tuscarora a ransom for his own life and to help neither the English nor the Indians in the coming war. The Tuscarora, meanwhile, agreed to spare the Swiss and Palatines at New Bern who marked their homes with an N.

Graffenried returned to New Bern to find that New Bern had already been attacked. Nevertheless, he wanted to keep his treaty. It was madness, he believed, to begin a war against the Tuscarora without sufficient planning and supplies. But the furious settlers opposed the idea of paying the Tuscarora a ransom, and some, Graffenried wrote, "wanted no less than to have me hung." He found himself brought before a tribunal and forced to defend his actions.

In 1714, Graffenried, by now penniless, returned to Switzerland. He later wrote *Relation of My American Project* as an attempt to explain his failures. This page is excerpted from a twentieth-century translation of that book.

What caused the Indian war was firstly, the slanders and instigations of certain plotters against Governor Hyde, and secondly, against me, in that they talked the Indians into believing that I had come to take their land, and that then the Indians would have to go back towards the mountains. I talked them out of this and it was proven by the friendliness I had shown them, as also by the payment for the land where I settled at the beginning

(namely that upon which the little city of New Bern was begun), regardless of the fact that the seller was to have given it over to me free. I had also made peace with the same Indian inhabitants so that they were entirely satisfied with me. Thirdly, it was the great carelessness of the colony. Fourthly, the harsh treatment of certain surly and rough English inhabitants who deceived them in trade, would not let them hunt about their plantations, and under this excuse took away from them their arms, munitions, pelts or hides, yes, even beat an Indian to death¹. This alarmed them very much and with reason.

The Indians kept their design very secret, and they were even then about to take counsel in an appointed place at the time that I happened to travel up the river.

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The carelessness of the Carolinians contributed not a little to the audacity and bold actions of these Indians, because they trusted them too much, and for safety there was not a fortified place in the whole province to which one could retire; also in case of any eruption or hostility no arrangements were made and much less were there the necessary provisions of food and war supplies. This was carried so far that in these times of unrest, whole shiploads of corn and meat were carried away and exchanged for sugar, molasses, brandy, and other less necessary things.² In short, everything was carelessly managed. Instead of drawing together into one or two bodies of well ordered soldiery in order to drive the enemy from the boundaries of the settlements, every one wanted to save his own house and defend himself.³ This was the cause that finally the Indians or savages overpowered one plantation after another, and soon brought the whole province under them. My idea was that in case the savages would not act in accordance with the agreement made with them, and could not be brought to a good treaty, to divert them with the peace I had made, to procure a truce, and meanwhile, with the help of my people to establish myself in some place and, provided with all necessary munitions and food, by this means to make a greater and more vigorous resistance, or else entirely to destroy the savages. But there was nothing to be done with these wrong-headed Carolinians, who, even if some were more courageous than the others, took the matter up so heedlessly and clumsily, got around behind the Indians who were much stronger in numbers, good shots, and well provided with everything, so that this small handful of Christians immediately had to get the worst of it. Yes, without the help of the Palatines and Switzers they would have been destroyed, as is to be seen in the first account. In the same account there is to be seen from a letter with the date and salutation, how the troops who were in Bath Town, a little village on the Pamtego River, about 150 in number, would not go according to their word and the sign which they had given to them, and did not have the heart to cross the river to help their neighbors, in such urgent need; but rather, after they had eaten up the corn and meat of the inhabitants of this district, leaving us on the other side along the Neuse River in the lurch, they went home again.

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After I had strongly represented to Governor Hyde and the General Assembly that we should make better arrangements than had previously been made, otherwise we were in danger of all being killed by the Indians, we got to work, and never in my life should I have thought to meet such awkward and faint-hearted people.

First of all it was of importance to find where provisions were to be obtained, for it was impossible to go to war, and yet these improvident Carolinians were so foolish as to sell grain and meat out of the country. For this reason I urged Governor Hyde immediately, to publish a sharp command forbidding the exportation of certain things.

Secondly, to find out what grain there was in the country, and to take measures accordingly. It was found that there was not enough by far, to carry on such a tedious war. Hereupon arrangements were made with the neighboring provinces which had plenty, to procure some.

Thirdly, to provide powder, lead, and firearms, with which the province was not at all supplied, and of which the individuals had very little⁴. Hereupon it was decided to send for it among those from other places. But no one wanted to give the money for this purpose, nor did the province which was then in bad credit, find means, and so I had to try to effect something with the Governor in Virginia.

Fourthly, Suppose that all the above things of which the people had need were ready, there was still labor. We could with the greatest difficulty make out scarcely 300 armed men, and there were among them many who were unwilling to fight. They were mostly badly clad and equipped.⁵ With reference to this, commission was given to me to seek for help in Virginia. When, finally, Governor Spotswood, acting in the Queen's name, promised them this with the stipulation that the provisions and soldiers' pay should be returned, they did not want it, unless the Governor would send the soldiers and the provisions at the expense of the Queen, asserting that they could not pay back such sums, which was absurd. Why should the Queen have the expenses of the colony since the Lords Proprietors draw the revenue? This gave occasion for several to go to the Governor of Virginia to sound him to see whether he would take upon himself the protection of Carolina. But this the Governor refused, for good reasons.⁶

Fifthly, it was proposed that we fortify some place in the province to be used in case of need as a retreat, in which to keep ourselves in safety. But this did not succeed.

With things as we knew they were, what was to be done? Mean-time the Indians continued their depredations, became bold with such poor defense, and overcame one plantation after another.

The last resource was to send hastily to South Carolina for help, which we also obtained, otherwise the province would have been destroyed. So the Governor of South Carolina sent 800 savage tributaries with 50 English South Carolinians, under the command of Colonel Barnwell, well equipped and provided with powder and lead. The *theatrum belli*⁷ was not far from New Bern. Only when these arrived did the Indian war begin in earnest, and these South Carolinians went at it, when they came to the Tuscarora savages, in such a manner that they awakened great terror among them, so that the North Carolina Indians were forced to fortify themselves. But our friendly Indians, after they had received their orders at New Bern went against Core Town, a great Indian village about 30 miles from New Bern, drove the King and his Indians out of the same after they had slain several, got into such a frenzy over it that they cooked and ate the flesh of one of the Carolinian Indians that had been shot down. To this assistance from South Carolina we

detailed 200 North Carolina English with some few of our Indians who were friendly to us, and about 50 Palatines and Swiss under command of Colonel Boyd and Mr. Michel, whom we made Colonel. This small army went further up, to Catechna, a large Indian village, where I and Surveyor General Lawson were captured and condemned to death as has been told in the first account. In this village Catechna, our enemy consisting of Indians of Weetox, Bay River, Neuse, Core, Pamtego, and partly of Tuscaroras, had collected and strongly fortified themselves, and we could accomplish nothing against them; that is to say, in the storm planned against them, the orders were not properly executed, the attack should have been made in certain places. But Brice's people⁸ were so hot-headed that they stormed before the time, many of them were wounded, some were left dead, and so our forces had to withdraw. When the report of this was given to us in the council we were very much busied considering how better to subdue the enemy and how to make better arrangements. By chance I was looking about and saw six or eight pieces⁹ in the yard, lying there uncared for, all rusty and full of sand. My notion was that two of the smallest should be refitted, sent over, and the fort bombarded with it.¹⁰ At this I was laughed at heartily, and it was represented to me as impossible to take them through morasses, forests, and ravines. But I remembered what Captain Jaccard of St. Croix had told me. Just as he said he had done it before a fortress in Flanders (which made his fortune), each small piece was carried very nicely, as though upon a litter,⁴³ between two horses, the rest disposed further as suited best, and the scheme succeeded well. For when the approaches were made and only two shots had been fired into the fort of the savages along with some grenades which we tried to send in, such a fear was awakened among the savages who had never heard nor seen such things before, that they asked for a truce. Then a council of war was held by our highest officers to decide what to do, and it was decided to accord a truce and to try to make an advantageous peace. The principal cause of this was the Christian prisoners which they still held from the first massacre, who called to us that if the fort fell to us in a storm they would all miserably perish without mercy. Hereupon they surrendered under condition that first of all the captives should be set free. And this was done.

Now when this was past and our troops had marched to New Bern to refresh themselves a little, for the food was getting scarce and scanty, and the response to Colonel Barnwell had not been to his satisfaction, he became impatient that he had not received more honor and kindness. His soldiers also were very badly provisioned. For these reasons, he thought of a means of going back to South Carolina with profit, and under the pretense of a good peace¹¹ he enticed a goodly number of the friendly Indians or savage Carolinians, took them prisoner at Core Town (to this his tributary Indians¹² were entirely inclined because they hoped to get a considerable sum from each prisoner) and made his way home with his living plunder. Whatever before this he did worthy of praise, was flung away by this action.

This so unchristian act very properly embittered the rest of the Tuscarora and Carolina Indians very much, although heathens, so that they no longer trusted the Christians.¹³ Therefore they fortified themselves still more securely and did much damage in Neuse and Pamtego County, yes, the last became worse than the first. This induced us to lay strong complaint against Colonel Barnwell and to write to South Carolina for new help, which followed, but not so strong as the first. But soon after there arrived a goodly number under the command of Captain Moore, who behaved better. After what could be raised had been brought together they went to this Indian fort at Catechna or Hancock Town and at last this

was successfully stormed, set fire, and overcome. The savages showed themselves unspeakably brave, so much so that when our soldiers had become master of the fort and wanted to take out the women and children who were under the ground, where they were hidden along with their provisions, the wounded savages who were groaning on the ground still continued to fight. There were about 200 who were burned up in a redoubt and many others slain so that in all about 900, including women and children were dead and captured. Of ours there were also many wounded and some remained on the field. From this time we had rest, although some survivors still wandered here and there. It was now a question of providing for the future, for putting ourselves in complete security against the surviving neighbors. Certain of the kings with whom we conferred yielded. The kings are really only the chiefs of a certain number of wild Indians, but still, it is hereditary and is passed on to posterity. We conferred with them and finally brought about a wished-for peace.

On the web

Among the Tuscarora: The strange and mysterious death of John Lawson, gentleman, explorer, and writer

<http://learnnc.org/lp/pages/1645>

They've taken his clothes, picked the straight razor out of his pocket: one brave fingers it, touches the blade — bright blood springs from his thumb and he laughs. The pitch pine split by the women...

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Notes

1. John Barnwell, colonel of the South Carolina militia, learned from prisoners that an Indian man and a white man had argued over something the Indian had done to the other man's drink, and that the white man had punished him for it.
2. Sugar, molasses, and brandy were luxury goods that Carolinians could not produce for themselves. Farmers who raised extra food — typically corn and pork — could trade it for luxury goods. In time of war, armies needed food, while crops might have been destroyed and men going off to fight would not have been able to farm. Yet the provincial government was unable or unwilling to purchase food to supply an army, and so Carolinians continued to trade their surplus for luxury goods.
3. What does this say about the nature of society in the Albemarle? It could suggest that people didn't care much for their neighbors, or simply that people who would settle a new colony were independent-minded and not the sort of people inclined to huddle into fortresses. It might also mean that Carolinians had no faith in the colonial government's ability to defend them — which would not be surprising in the chaos of Cary's Rebellion.

4. As owners of the colony, the Lords Proprietors were supposed to provide for its defense — the original Charter of Carolina had required them to do so. But clearly the colony was unprepared for war, and the Lords Proprietors offered no help after the Tuscarora attacked.
5. North Carolina was still a sparsely settled and poor colony in 1711.
6. Spotswood eventually sent a small amount of powder and cloth to North Carolina, and worked to keep neutral Tuscarora and Virginia Indians out of the war.
7. Latin for “theater of war,” the area of fighting.
8. Captain William Brice led the first attack on the Tuscarora in the fall of 1711. The army at Bath refused to join him (as Graffenried mentions), and he eventually had to fall back to his fortified plantation.
9. Cannon.
10. In the passage that follows, Graffenried takes credit for a military victory that led to a temporary truce with the Tuscarora. Given that he is trying to prove his loyalty to the colonists, you might ask how believable this account really is.
11. Barnwell had arranged a treaty with the Tuscarora under which the Indians agreed to submit to the authority of the colonial government and free their captives in return for protection from further violence. The treaty was never supported by Governor Hyde and was unpopular with colonists, who by now wanted the Tuscarora wiped out. But Barnwell himself, by capturing Indians to sell as slaves, seems to have done the most to undermine his own treaty.
12. The “tributary Indians” of South Carolina were those living under the authority and protection of the South Carolina government. Tributary Indians paid tribute to the provincial government — an annual tax that acknowledged their status as a conquered and dependent peoples.
13. Since the Indians were not Christians, Graffenried seems surprised that they were bothered by an “unchristian” act. His attitude was common among European settlers, who frequently distinguished between Indians who had converted to Christianity and those who remained “heathens” and “savages.”

About the author

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