

Lords of the Soil

By Jeannette Holland Austin



Pictured is George Durant receiving a deed from the chief of the Yeopim Indians. In 1653, Roger Green led a company across the wilderness from Nansemond, in Virginia, to the Chowan River and settled near Edenton. The settlement was a prosperous one, and soon others followed. In 1662, George Durant purchased of the Yeopim Indians the neck of land situated on the North-side of Albemarle Sound, which still bears his name. It was settled by persons driven off from Virginia through religious persecutions. In 1663, Sir William Berkeley, the Governor of Virginia, visited the infant settlement on the Chowan, and being pleased with its evident signs of prosperity and increasing importance, appointed William Drummond as the first Governor of the Colony of Carolina.

Drummond was a Scotch Presbyterian, and, inheriting the national characteristics of that people, was prudent, cautious, and deeply impressed with the love of liberty. The beautiful lake in the centre of the Dismal Swamp, noted for its healthy water, and abundantly laid in by sea-going vessels, was named for Governor Drummond. During the year of 1665 it was discovered that the County of Albemarle, as the settlement on the Chowan was called, was not in the limits of the Carolina charter, but instead, in Virginia. The charters granted the colonists were generally liberal in the concession of civil rights and the proprietors were permitted to exercise toleration towards non-conformists, if expedient. Thus, after King Charles was petitioned, he granted an enlargement of the North Carolina Charter so as to make it extend from twenty-nine degrees to thirty-six degrees and thirty minutes, north latitude. As immigrants from abroad populated the region, a representative government was allowed. This government had its limitations and conceded a certain degree of popular freedom. Because these settlers were mostly refugees from religious oppression, they had no claims upon the government, nor did they wish to draw its attention. Also, they regarded the Indians as the true lords of the soil and treated with them as such, purchasing their lands and obtaining land grants. At the death of Governor Drummond in 1667, the colony of Carolina contained about four thousand inhabitants.