

CHAPTER 7

TRYING ROYAL GOVERNMENT

- A. Introduction. It took the British government nearly a decade to work out all the details for the official assumption of royal authority in place of the proprietary regime. The political changeover occurred at about the same time that South Carolina's economy began to flourish. With political stability provided by royal authorities and economic prosperity, South Carolinians had the time and opportunity to develop and nurture strong local political institutions of their own. The most important of these was the Commons House of Assembly.
- B. Origins of the Commons House
1. The Carolina Charter called for the "advice and assent of the freemen of the province" to any laws passed by the Proprietors.
 2. The Fundamental Constitutions made references to a "Parliament."
 3. The first meeting of Commons House occurred in 1692.
 - a. There were property qualifications for voting.
 - b. There were property qualifications for holding office.
 4. The Election Act of 1721, in force until the American Revolution, established procedures for voting and office holding. It made the colonial parishes the election districts for representation.
- C. Organization of South Carolina's Government
1. The Royal Governor was appointed by the King.
 2. The members of the Royal Council, usually prominent South Carolinians, were appointed by the King.
 3. The members of the Commons House of Assembly were elected by the voters of South Carolina.
 4. All other colonial officials (what today we would call state-wide officeholders) were appointed by the King or by the governor in the name of the King.
 5. The only local officials elected by the people were the wardens and vestries of the parishes and, in Charleston, various commissioners

charged with public safety and sanitation.

- D. The Commons House of Assembly was the avenue to power and social acceptability for young men on their way up.
- E. The Rise of the Commons House
 - 1. The struggle between the Commons House and The Royal Governor and Council is another chapter in the saga of "What Shall Rule?"
 - 2. At the beginning of the 1740s, the Royal Council was the most prestigious governmental body in South Carolina.
 - a. Over the next two decades, the Council lost its prominence to the Commons House.
 - b. A series of clashes between the Governor and Council, on one hand, and the Commons House, on the other, resulted in the ultimate triumph of the Commons House.
 - c. By the 1760s, prominent South Carolinians declined to serve on the Royal Council. Their positions were taken by placemen, British officials who were beholden to the King or Governor for their jobs.
 - 3. By the 1760s, South Carolina's Commons House of Assembly was one of the more powerful colonial assemblies in English America.
 - a. There was no real local government in South Carolina. Wardens and vestries took care of the poor and the local parish church buildings and supervises elections.
 - b. Local governmental authority was divided among numerous commissions – all elected by the Commons House.
 - i. Some commissions were self-perpetuating, such as Commissions of the High Roads in each parish.
 - ii. Most commissions were created to fill a specific need, such as build a bridge or clear a creek for navigation. Once the work was completed, the commission ceased to exist.
 - iii. Charleston was unincorporated. It had no unified local government, which was most evident in the high crime rate.
 - iv. The absence of local government would hamper the development of the backcountry and later become a major point of contention between the backcountry settlers and the government in Charleston.

- c. This centralization of authority in the Commons House is the origin of the legislative state of today.

F. Summary. The transfer of authority from the proprietors to the King created a stable environment in which South Carolina's institutions could begin to mature. Most notably, the period of royal government saw the rise of the Commons House of Assembly into a formidable political force in the colony's life. The power and prestige that it wrested from the other governmental officials and bodies laid the firm foundation for the legislative state of today.

G. Readings

- 1 Edgar, South Carolina: A History, Chapter 7
2. Greene, Quest for Power, see index for "South Carolina"
3. Jones, South Carolina, pp. 104-106, 198-199, 207-208, 288-290
4. Weir, Colonial South Carolina, pp. 105-140