



Alexander Spotswood

An Empire in Virginia



"[Spotswood] buried a bottle with a paper inclosed, on which he writ that he took possession of this place in the name and for King George the First of England."

- Lieutenant John Fontaine, as Alexander Spotswood and the Knights of the Golden Horseshoe stopped to claim land for the British Empire.

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Alexander Spotswood

Truly a man of the British Empire, Alexander Spotswood was born in 1676 to a Scottish physician who was treating English troops in Tangier. When the British were forced to abandon Tangier, the Spotswood family returned to England where Spotswood soon joined the military that he was raised around.

During the War of Spanish Succession, Spotswood quickly distinguished himself and ascended the chain of command. In 1710, George Hamilton—the Earl of Orkney—was appointed Governor of Virginia with the understanding that he would receive half the salary and appoint an acting governor to take his place. He chose his fellow Scotsman, Spotswood.

Spotswood managed Virginia for the crown from 1710 until 1722. He balanced the desires of the colonists with the demands of British government. Spotswood made many enemies walking this tightrope, and influential colonists were eventually able to convince the British government to remove Spotswood from office. With his replacement on the way, Spotswood deeded—under pseudonyms—large portions of then Spotsylvania County (now most of central and western Virginia).

With his new lands he developed much of central Virginia by selling land to those looking to move westward. These dealings gave him the financial freedom to return to England where he met and married Anne Butler Brayne, bringing her to Virginia in 1730. Spotswood was later given the position of Deputy-Postmaster-General and hired the young Benjamin Franklin to run the Philadelphia post office. With the outbreak of war with Spain in 1739, Alexander Spotswood accepted the opportunity to raise a regiment and was given the rank of Brigadier General. On June 7, 1740, as he traveled north to meet with other colonial executives, he became sick in Annapolis and died at the age of sixty-four.

Knights of the Golden Horseshoe

In August of 1716, Governor Spotswood organized "an expedition over the Appalachian mountains." His intent was to claim more land for England as the French continued to expand from the North and West. He gathered together a dozen gentlemen in search of a rumored passage over the mountains that would allow the British to expand deep into North America. Four Indian guides, fourteen military scouts, and many servants accompanied these gentlemen. Below is an excerpt from the journal of Lieutenant John Fontaine from August 6 and 7, when the gentleman decided they had gone far enough and stopped to claim new lands for the English crown.

"The Governor had graving irons, but could not grave any thing, the stones were so hard. I graved my name on a tree by the river side; and the Governor buried a bottle with a paper inclosed, on which he writ that he took possession of this place in the name and for King George the First of England. We had a good dinner, and after it we got the men together, and loaded all their arms, and we drank the King's health in Champagne, and fired a volley—the Princess's health in Burgundy, and fired a volley, and all the rest of the Royal Family in claret, and a volley. We drank the Governor's health and fired another volley...We called the highest mountain Mount George, and the one we crossed over Mount Spotswood."