



The American Revolution

A Historical Series Sponsored by William Hightower Chapter #35
Sons of the American Revolution

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Life in Colonial Virginia Prior to 1774

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The American Revolution is a serialized account of events in colonial America leading up to and including America's independence from British rule. The articles come from the membership of William Hightower Chapter #35, The Texas Society for the Sons of the American Revolution. Many articles include personal accountings by current members for the actions of their ancestors during the Revolutionary War.

Our starting point is back to a time prior to this war, when America was a crown colony. I will accomplish this story telling by relating a true story concerning my colonial American family living under British rule in the Old Dominion of colonial Virginia.

In 1754, Great Britain was one of the most powerful nations in the European community. It was composed of four dominions: Britain and Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and Colonial Virginia. Virginia had a royal governor, a legislative body, and a judicial system. All answered to His Majesty, The King of England.

The portion of the judicial system most familiar to average citizens was the Quarter Sessions for the Court of Common Pleas. It met four times each year. In the year 1754, the Fairfax, Virginia, Quarter Session Court records reveal an indenture for John Hollis and two of his sons, William and Burr Hollis. English common law indentures were contracts between two or more parties. The party offering the contract

was the sponsor, and the other party was the recipient. We are most familiar with a form of indenture, where the sponsor was offering passage to the New World in exchange for payment by services from the recipient, i.e., *indentured servitude*. This latter is how most of us got to America. This is not the case with John Hollis. His indenture was a contract to grow tobacco on 100 acres of Lord William Fitzhugh's *Ravensworth* plantation and split the profits.

William Fitzhugh was a British nobleman, who owned approximately 37 square miles of Virginia countryside along the south shore of the Potomac River. William Fitzhugh acquired his land as a gift from the king, because the king owned everything within the realm. Noblemen such as the Fitzhugh's, Fairfax's and Washington's acquired their lands as gifts from the crown. John Hollis was a yeoman, which meant he was not a nobleman, but a non-land owner of substantial merit. Yeomen could lease land and these leases were "99 year indentures" or life-time leases. A yeoman with such a lease was said to, "hold paper." John Hollis "held paper" on 200 acres of Fairfax County land. John Hollis' land parcel was in the exact middle of *Ravensworth*. Today there is a parkway running through it, bearing the name, Ravensworth Parkway. In 1754, John and his two sons were cultivating tobacco on their own 200 acres, plus 100 acres of Mr. Fitzhugh's land. Obviously, John and his sons were industrious.

John Hollis was born about 1700 in County Surrey, England, and like many of his Hollis kinfolks came from a village on the river Thames near London City. It is most probable that he and his father, Edward Hollis, immigrated to Accomack County, Virginia, via an indentured servitude. About 1720, John was living in Fairfax County,

Virginia where he took a wife, Eleanor Canterbury, the daughter of Samuel Canterbury. The Canterbury's owned a small plantation located near Pohick Creek and about four miles from John Hollis.