

Cabarrus, Stephen ^[1]

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Cabarrus, Stephen

by Robert W. Delp, 1979

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29 Aug. 1754–4 Aug. 1808



Stephen Cabarrus (1754–1808), Speaker of the Assembly. Image from NC ECHO.

^[3]Stephen Cabarrus, speaker of the North Carolina House of Commons and Trustee of [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[4], was born in Bayonne, France, scion of a family of merchants and ship owners. His grandparents were Barthelemy and Marie Fourçade Cabarrus, and his parents were Etienne Pierre and Catherine Suzanne Lancereau Cabarrus. His first cousin was the banker François Cabarrus, whose son-in-law, Jean Lambert Tallien, was influential in bringing the downfall of Robespierre and Jacobin rule in the [French Revolution](#) ^[5].

As a young man, Cabarrus decided to seek his fortune in the New World; he landed at [Edenton](#) ^[6], N.C., in 1776. He married Jeanne Henriette Damery Bodley, the well-to-do widow of [Joshua Bodley](#) ^[7], becoming master of his wife's estate, Pembroke, near Edenton, as well as the owner of an adjacent farm, named Bayonne in honor of his birthplace. His fortunate marriage to a wife about seventeen years his senior was largely responsible for his accumulation by 1777 of 1,980 acres of land and 60 slaves. In the following year his property was valued at £ 15,296. He was joined in America by his brothers Dominique, Thomas, and Auguste, and upon the untimely deaths of Thomas and Dominique, he adopted the latter's two sons, Thomas and Augustus.

Cabarrus was soon recognized as a man thoroughly devoted to his adopted homeland. Governor [Alexander Martin](#) ^[8] commended his politeness and his attachment to the public interest. Cabarrus's fellow North Carolinians were apparently also impressed with his character and public spirit, for the citizens of Edenton elected him borough representative to the House of Commons in 1784. He continued to represent the borough and later [Chowan County](#) ^[9] until his retirement from the political scene in 1805. While in the commons he served on many important committees; he was elevated to speaker in 1789 and frequently reelected. A supporter of the federal Constitution, he was a delegate to the [Hillsborough convention](#) ^[10] of 1788 that rejected the document and to the [Fayetteville convention](#) ^[11] of 1789 that ratified it. He aspired to a seat in the Congress of the new national government and in 1790 and 1793 ran for the House of Representatives from the Edenton District. He was defeated on both occasions but served as a presidential elector in the election of 1792. Although initially embracing the [Federalist](#) ^[12] cause, he soon became active in the [Republican](#) ^[13] party.

Denied a place in the national government, Cabarrus continued to be a prominent figure in the legislature of North Carolina. Early in his legislative career he recognized the importance to the state of education, and in 1785 he was the

sponsor of a bill empowering the commissioners of Edenton to make part of the town common available to the trustees of the proposed Smith's Academy. He also supported a measure to establish a state fund to maintain institutions of learning at Hillsborough and elsewhere in the state. Appropriately, Cabarrus was appointed to the first board of trustees of The University of North Carolina in 1789, while he was speaker of the House of Commons; he served until 1792.

During Cabarrus's tenure as speaker, the legislature agreed to locate a permanent seat of government at Raleigh ^[14], and the commissioners of the new capital city named a street in his honor. The legislature of North Carolina further recognized Cabarrus's contribution to the state when it gave his name to a new county created from Mecklenburg ^[15] in 1792. When the inhabitants of this area disagreed over the location of a courthouse, Cabarrus, in an effort to heal the division, wrote a letter to the citizens urging them to put away their disagreements and expressing the wish that harmony and friendship would soon be restored to the county. Heeding his advice and following his practical suggestions, the factions compromised their differences, located their seat of government halfway between the contesting areas, and named their town Concord and their chief street Union.

In addition to serving in state government and higher education, Cabarrus was an energetic Mason. A member of Unanimity Lodge No. 7 in Edenton, he was a delegate to the Tarboro convention of December 1787 that resulted in the reorganization of the Grand Lodge of North Carolina, after the interruption of its activities by the American Revolution ^[16].

Cabarrus was married in 1777 to Mrs. Jeanne Henriette Damery Bodley (29 Aug. 1754–11 Nov. 1799), widow of Lord Granville's last agent. They were the parents of one daughter, Henriette (16 Dec. 1777–16 Oct. 1784). Cabarrus was originally buried at his country seat but in 1911 was reinterred in the cemetery of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Edenton.

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Additional Resources:

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Authors:

[Delp, Robert W.](#) ^[23]

Origin - location:

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