Robert Dinwiddie Biography

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Biography

The Scottish merchant Robert Dinwiddie (1693-1770) rose through colonial administrative ranks to the lieutenant governorship of Virginia.

Robert Dinwiddie was born of an old Scottish family. His father was a prosperous merchant, and his mother also came from a commercial family. Robert was educated at the University of Glasgow and entered his father's countinghouse. He later carried on a successful career as a merchant.

Dinwiddie's role as a colonial administrator began in 1721, when he was appointed British representative in Bermuda. After 16 years of service in Bermuda he received the important position of surveyor general, which included jurisdiction over Pennsylvania and the southern colonies of British North America. By tradition the surveyor general was entitled to a seat on the Virginia Council, a post Dinwiddie insisted on assuming. Characteristic of Dinwiddie's service in the Colonies was his zealous attention to the offices under his authority and a tendency to maximize his position by emphasizing the royal prerogative. In recognition of these qualities, he was appointed lieutenant governor of Virginia, England's largest colony, and took office on July 4, 1751.

As lieutenant governor, Dinwiddie saw the beginnings of the conflict on Virginia's frontiers that led to the French and Indian War. He was a firm advocate of British expansion into the west. He sought the help of the Indians and the other British colonies in the struggle against the French, pressed the legislature for defense funds, and favored the use of regular armed forces in place of the less reliable militia. Dinwiddie made George Washington a lieutenant colonel in 1754.

Generally, Dinwiddie was able to work in harmony with the Virginia Legislature. He did, however, prompt a serious conflict with the House of Burgesses shortly after he took office. In hope of increasing the British king's revenues, Dinwiddie tried to levy a fee for land patents, which would also require landholders to pay quitrents to the Crown. This precipitated the famous "Pistole Fee" controversy, in which the lower house charged that the governor had imposed an unlawful tax that endangered colonial liberty--a precursor of the arguments of the American Revolution.

The pressures of office and the war badly taxed Dinwiddie's health. At his own request he was relieved of office in 1758 and with his wife and two daughters returned to Britain. He died in London on July 27, 1770.