

Price-Strother: a final letter

Jonathan Price's debt to the State transferred to
the University of North Carolina Board of Trustees
and
Price's stirring letter to the Trustees.

In Laws of North Carolina at a General Assembly... (Raleigh : Printed by
Gales & Seaton, printers to the State), Chapter III, Paragraph II states:

*And be it further enacted, That all debts, dues and demands, which have
been accrued to this State, and all such balances as have been owing to
this State, or to any Public Officer for the benefit thereof, on or before ,
be, and the same are hereby transferred and assigned unto the Trustees
of the University of North Carolina, who are authorized to demand and
receive from the Officers of this State, the documents and evidences by
which the same are substantiated.*

Paragraph III of this Act empowered the Trustees to sue for collection
of those debts. (The remaining information on this page is from the
University Archives.) These suits were instigated at the request of the
Board of Trustees on December 16, 1812:

*As to the exemplifications of records procured by the Treasurer for
the purpose of enabling the Attornies of the Board to bring suits &
collect monies for debts formerly due to the State; the Committee are of
opinion that such exemplifications should be forthwith sent to the
Attornies respectively within whose districts such suits are to be brought.*

The following year, on December 14, 1813, the Minutes of the Board of
Trustees state the following:

With respect to the suits at law in the superior Court of Wake County, in which the University is interested and which are mentioned by in the Treasurer Report, Your Committee are of opinions that the Treasurer shall exercise his discretion in continuing or dismissing them, as the one or the other course shall appear to him the most advisable. In regards to the claim on Mr. Price however the Committee would advise that the Treasurer first endeavour to inform himself fully and correctly of his circumstances, through the Members attending the present Assembly who reside in Mr. Price's neighborhood.

Obviously, there was already some concern over the ability of Jonathan Price to pay off the loans that had been granted by the General Assembly before 1800. Wake County Superior Court records for these years do not survive, but the University's Board of Trustees Treasurer's report in November 1817 indicates that a judgment was made in that Court:

It is further stated that in the Superior Court of Wake County Spring term 1817 a judgment was obtained in behalf of the Trustees of the University against Jonathan Price for £698:18: six hundred and ninety eight pounds, eighteen shillings; and a CaSa execution thereupon issued returnable to the last term of said Court. That in consequence of a representation made by Mr. Price to the Trustees; it was advised by three members of the Board that the Casa be recalled, and that the subject be stated to the Board at their next meeting for their consideration; and that a collection of the costs in the mean time be suspended. The subject is now submitted to the Board, and it is asked what measures shall hereafter be adopted relative to this debt?

The "representation made by Mr. Price" was a July 21, 1817, letter written by him to the Secretary of the Board of Trustees, the text of which is included below. The Secretary added the following statement when he apparently submitted Price's letter to a Committee:

A Ca Sa is now out against him and I have written to Mr. Donnell that we would take the debt in maps. What more must be done?

The Committee, consisting of Board members Henry Potter, John Haywood, and William Polk, responded on July 31, 1817:

We advise that the Ca-Sa be recalled & that the subject be stated to the Board at their next meeting for their consideration. Meanwhile let the collection of the costs be suspended.

At the University's Board of Trustees meeting on December 16, 1817, the following committee report was presented:

With respect to the judgment against Mr. Jonathan Price amounting to £698:18-0 — and of which the Treasurer makes mention, your Committee are of opinion that all further proceedings against Mr. Price be in consequence of that judgment it be stayed; save as to the costs, which it is held must be collected from and paid by Mr. Price in the usual course.

The Committee recommend this indulgence not because the money due is not wanted, but because of the scanty means and indigent circumstances of the debtor, which are represented as being such as forecloses the prospect of all expectation of immediate ~~payment~~ or timely payment.

The text of Jonathan Price's letter of July 21, 1817, follows on subsequent pages. Brackets containing [text] represent a "best guess" of text affected by paper loss, or text that is difficult to read. Empty brackets [] indicate paper loss where text might be expected, but the context of the letter suggests no text is missing.

Newbern July 21st 1817

Dear Sir,

Having been informed that there has been or will be issued, at the instance of the Trustees of the University, an Execution against me for several sums of money borrowed from the State of North Carolina about the years 1792 and 94, I have taken the liberty of addressing to them a few lines on the subject, through you as Secretary to the Board. How the University has become a party concerned in this business, I have never been officially informed. But the money was obtained from the State on loan, for the purpose of enabling myself and Christmas (and after him, Strother) to complete a Map of this State from Actual Survey. After being deserted by Christmas, with the aid of Strother I entered on the laborious undertaking, in which the prime of my life was spent, and my little patrimony completely exhausted. I had, indeed, fondly anticipated that the liberality of the State would have been displayed towards me in a degree, which in the opinion of the world such an undertaking justly merited – in short, that they would have generously relinquished claim so trying to them, for the lasting benefit derived to the community at large, by the publication of a Map which (however small its merits) has commanded the admiration not only of our Sister States, but even of the European Reviewers, (disposed as they are to censure everything American). One of the English Reviews, soon after its appearance, pronounced it “to be worthy of being classed among the first publications of its kind in the world.” – Such an acquisition to the Geographical knowledge of the State, had it been deferred till this time, would have been deemed more than a compensation for ten times the sum in question. Some of our sister States, (and I cannot but be gratified in the honorable distinction they have conferred on my work) have by public acts made provision for the publication of Maps of their respective

territories “on the plan of Price & Strother,” ample sums have been generously voted for the purpose of carrying their Resolutions into effect. May the persons reap the reward of their labours; and not, like me in the winter of their age, be left to the pinching hand of poverty, nor doomed to the melancholly reflection, that on the one hand a grave is yawning to receive them, and on the other a prison. But I should feel proud, even in a dungeon, of the advantages which the present generation is receiving and which posterity will receive from the time and fortune I have devoted to my country; and though my feelings make my old hand tremble while I write, heart beats with honest exultation in the recollection that my labours will survive me, and that even after my death they will be of service to my fellow citizens. If neither my poverty nor my age can screen me from the gripping hand of the law – why, then I must submit; and shall ever bow my gray hairs with reverence to the majority of the laws of the land; for I had rather die in a jail than live to see my sufferer for an act of friendship. But for their kind assistance and my own sacrifices of time and money, North Carolina would most probably now, and perhaps for years to come, have been unknown to herself and to the world. — It is, perhaps, the vanity of an old man—but I cannot but feel a glow of honest pride in having contributed so much by my feeble efforts to the advancement and completion of an object that hundreds had said would never be accomplished; but which will ever be viewed by scientific and enlightened men not only as a highly laudable and useful undertaking, but one equally honorable to its authors, and to the State. The only recompense I now ask for my labor is to be if possible, to go down to my grave in peace and with an approving conscience before the Almighty of all events. Should the Legislature of the State not think proper to make a sufficient allowance from the Treasury to liquidate the debt, I can only say that while I live, I will do all in my power towards it. If the University shall think proper to withdraw any process that may have been issued against me, I will most freely give them the one half of all sums that may be now due me for maps sold, and half the amount of all sales that may take place during

my stay here (which in all human probability will be short) reserving to myself the other half as a small pittance for my own maintenance. At my decease, I will confer on the University (which I always intended) all the Maps remaining unsold, with an exclusive property in the copyright. This is all I can do—and, I trust it is all that can be asked.

With my best wishes for the prosperity of the Institution

of which you have the honor to be Secretary,

I most cordially subscribe myself

Your obedient servant,

Jonathan Price.

Source: University of North Carolina Papers, #40005, University Archives, Louis Round Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

The information in this post is referred to in [Footnote 81](#) and [Footnote 82](#) in the [Price-Strother article](#).