

The Death of John Lawson

Author, surveyor, and adventurer John Lawson was a great admirer of North Carolina's first people, American Indians. He learned their languages, healing methods, and customs. He even believed that marriage offered a peaceful way of bringing together Indians and European settlers. Unfortunately, neither the Europeans nor the Indians embraced Lawson's radical ideas. This lack of cooperation led to Lawson's murder at the hands of the very people he so respected.

John Lawson came to the Carolina colony in 1700. Hired as a surveyor by the Lords Proprietors, he traveled for 59 days through uncharted interior lands to learn more about the region. Along the way, he and his companions encountered many Indian tribes. The travelers were treated kindly and aided by most tribes. Lawson noted this fact and recorded other cultural observations in a diary.



A drawing by von Graffenried of the death of Lawson. Courtesy of the North Carolina State Archives.

Relations between Indians and European settlers deteriorated greatly over the next 11 years. With more new colonists arriving each year, tribes were forced away from their homelands. Disease and war took many native lives. Unlike Lawson, most Europeans did not respect the cultural differences of the native inhabitants. Traders cheated Indians, whites stole Indian children and sold them into slavery, and settlers shot Indians hunting on their land.

In 1711 Lawson and Baron Christof von Graffenried sailed up the Neuse River in search of a faster route to the Virginia–North Carolina border. Several days out, members of the

Tuscarora tribe ambushed the travelers. The two men were taken to the Indian village, put on trial, and set free. But before they could leave the village, a Coree Indian chief reproached Lawson, and they began to argue. Lawson and Graffenried were tried again, and both were sentenced to die. Von Graffenried tried to explain his innocence and was eventually freed. Lawson was not so lucky.

Von Graffenried was locked away and did not see how his friend was killed. Most people believe that Lawson was burned alive. Lawson had seen and written about this very method of torture during his travels. Pitch pine splinters were gathered up and then pressed into the victim's skin by Indian women. Once the person's entire body was covered, the splinters were lit. The victim would "dance" around until he was overwhelmed by the flames.

A deadly war followed Lawson's murder and continued until 1713. When it was over, many native communities were wiped out. The few remaining tribal nations merged together. How, then, do we know so much about the earlier Indian tribes? Because in 1709 John Lawson had returned to England to publish a book created from his diaries and notes. *A New Voyage to Carolina* described the land and peoples of his new homeland. How much more would we know if Lawson hadn't met an unfortunate (and fiery!) end?