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DEDICATION OF SOMERSET PLACE
CRESWELL, NORTH CAROLINA
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I believe we all should be honored to be here today for the dedication of Somerset Place, for by doing so we emphasize the great heritage we all share as North Carolinians and pay tribute to those persons who long ago, launched a great venture here at Somerset Place, who worked and played, who built, and who left much to be cherished, to be remembered, to be preserved.

Our presence here today marks the culmination of nearly twenty years of effort by those dedicated to preserving for us, and for posterity, a precious part of that heritage. These have been years of planning, excavating, and restoring one of the finer plantations of Eastern North Carolina and the South. And, as you look around you, the evidence of their dedication to this task of restoration is certainly apparent, for we see nestled here among the cypress and the gum trees, by the side of a canal and near the shores of a mysterious lake, a tangible reminder of the mantle of history which enfolds our State.

As we consider the history of North Carolina, we can take great pride in the fact that it parallels so nearly the history of our nation. As the drama of the development of this country unfolded, North Carolina from the beginning played an important, in fact, a leading role. It was upon the shores of this State that the first attempt at colonization by England began with the establishment of a tiny settlement on Roanoke Island. And it is with pride that we remember that North Carolinians were present when the concept of independence from England was brought to fruition during those days of discussion and dissent in the summer of 1776.

We have honored those North Carolinians who during the early days of the republic gave of themselves and their talents for national advancement, and we can point with admiration to those later citizens who have made equally significant contributions to the development of our nation. In short, North Carolinians share a heritage which every citizen can be proud, and it is fitting, I think, that we gather here today to celebrate a portion of that great heritage.

North Carolinians always have been a proud people. This is especially true of the people of Eastern North Carolina. As you will recall, it was here, in the eastern

portion of our State that North Carolina enjoyed the first riches of a new land. The first established government as a young State met here. The early leaders in state government, business, and education resided in the east. The east was the political, economic, and social center of North Carolina, and it was from this area that the lines of commerce flowed to other sections of the State.

It was the east that served as the birthplace for that infant colony which declared independence, adopted the Constitution, and struggled for freedom from foreign domination. Likewise, it was here that the early forms of North Carolina society were developed and the foundations laid for what was to become our State. This is the heritage that is a part of us as North Carolinians.

Somerset Place stands before us today as a tangible portion of that early heritage. Neither written history nor folklore can provide a clearer insight into the society and life which flourished here more than a hundred years ago than is presented to us by this beautiful restoration. Though we cannot step back into the past and share the joys and tragedies of the Collins, the Pettigrews, the Warrens and others who gathered on these porches, who walked these lanes, who enjoyed these gardens and frolicked and mourned in these

halls, let us today at least turn our attention for a few moments to the story of this place which is for all of us a treasured part of the history of Eastern North Carolina and this State.

Earliest historical records indicate that this particular area bordering Lake Phelps was settled during the later portion of the eighteenth century about the same time that the war for independence was ending. Somerset Place came into being as a result of a commercial transaction for the early owners of this land wanted to develop this area, of approximately one hundred thousand acres, for farming by utilizing the land forming the lake bed. To accomplish this undertaking, Josiah Collins with two other prominent individuals, Nathaniel Allen and Samuel Dickinson, all of Edenton, formed a partnership for land reclamation.

A canal was constructed from Lake Phelps to the Scuppernong River, a distance of approximately six miles. Although the lake was never drained, the canal proved to be the most significant investment made by the Lake Company. Using it to the fullest, the company established a saw mill and a grist mill along the canal.

During the 1790s, the partnership was dissolved and Josiah Collins succeeded in purchasing the property, known as the Lake Plantations, from the remaining partners. He

constructed a small home along the canal and renamed his new plantation Somerset Place - a name derived from Collins' ancestral home in Somersetshire, England. At his death in 1819, the property bordering Lake Phelps was left to his son for life with the remainder to be divided among his seven grandchildren. However, a special bequest was made to his grandson, Josiah Collins III, of Somerset Place by a map appended to the will. Until Josiah became of age, his father operated the plantation. Then in 1829, Josiah married and returned from New Jersey to North Carolina to begin operation of the plantation. It was sometime after 1830 that the plantation house was constructed.

The next thirty years were the most prosperous for Somerset Place. A vast array of business enterprises were conducted here including milling, lumbering, and farming. Among the chief crops were corn, wheat, and for a short time rice. In later years, cotton was a major commodity. During these years of prosperity, the Collins home was considered to be the center of culture and of hospitality in the region.

But then the Civil War came and tragedy struck at Somerset. Federal troops surged into the area, Somerset Place was captured, and the Collins family was forced to flee. The lands lay fallow and the water wheels ceased to

turn along the canal. While the proud gentle people of Somerset Place waited out the war in Hillsborough to the west, normal activity here at this place was suspended.

After the war, the plantation never again enjoyed its once rich position. The pall which fell over so much of the south was pulled tight around Somerset Place and eventually the family was forced to liquidate the property. Passing through a succession of individual, corporate, and government owners, the property eventually became a portion of these properties purchased by the State for use as a state park and historical site.

It was not until 1952 that preliminary work was begun on the restoration, but now it has been completed. Those who worked so diligently on this project can point with pride and satisfaction to their work and those of us gathered here today extend our sincere appreciation to them for their efforts to preserve for our enjoyment this place.

So, we meet here to dedicate as an historical site, Somerset Place. And let no one believe that to do so is to waste moments of the present in remembrance of the past, for we know that in history there is knowledge. There is much man can learn from the past.

When our nation was colonized, our forefathers brought with them their history and their heritage. It was

on this foundation that our heritage and our history have grown. These are bonds which tie us to the past and which give meaning to the present.

In some respects, we are all students of history. In our everyday life, the forces of history play a strategic role. When Apollo 11 left Cape Kennedy in July on its voyage to place man on the moon, it followed a route more certain than the one you and I took when we came here today. And the route defined for the Apollo crewman was calculated by mathematics whose basis dates hundreds of years before. This event which we observed through the media will be taught as history to our children.

In a very real way, the historic past has provided a foundation for our nation. The principles of democracy and freedom of the individual underlying the system of government and law which have provided us with the most stable and enduring democratic government in the history of the world are as old as time itself. What was needed was the courage and determination of dedicated men, the early Americans, to encompass these principles and dedicate them to the well-being of a nation. These early Americans, too, had respect for their past and were willing to learn from it. We must respect our past and learn well the lessons of history.

The mistakes of earlier generations we need not repeat, but the triumphs of earlier generations we should follow. Those who do not understand the events that have made history cannot comprehend the present or prepare for the future.

Governor Aycock once stated that "A people who do not have sufficient pride to record their history will not long have the virtue to make history that is worth recording." Let us strive, in North Carolina, to make history that we are proud to record. Let it be history that is worth recording so that future generations of North Carolinians can look upon our record with pride. Let it be history that tells the good that men can do. And most important of all, let it be history that tells the story of man's success in applying to his early life the principles of truth, honor, and liberty - those principles on which our nation was founded.

So as we gather here today to dedicate Somerset Place, let us look back with pride at what was accomplished here; let us look around ourselves with appreciation for what has been preserved here; and let us look forward with hope and enthusiasm for what will occur here, at Somerset Place, in Eastern North Carolina, and throughout this great State and mighty nation of ours.

The history of the triumphs and accomplishments of a free people in a free society is truly a thing to be remembered, to be treasured, to be preserved for future generations. It is fitting that we gather to do so here at Somerset Place today.

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