

Alexander, Joseph [1]

Alexander, Joseph

by Durward T. Stokes, 1979; Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, June 2023.

ca. 1735–30 June 1809

Joseph Alexander, clergyman and educator, born in Cecil County, Md., was the son of Theophilus and Catherine Alexander and grandson of James and Margaret McKnitt Alexander. His mother's maiden name is believed to have been Wallis. He had a brother, George, and five sisters, Margaret, Sophia, Heziah, Ann and Catrine. Theophilus was an affluent blacksmith who reared and educated his children in the strict Calvinist tradition. Joseph was sent to Nottingham Academy at Colora, Md., where in 1759 he, Thomas Ruston, and Benjamin Rush were recommended by the head of the school for entrance to Nassau Hall (later [Princeton University](#) [2]). At Nassau, from which Alexander was graduated in the class of 1760, he met and married Martha Esther Davies, daughter of Samuel Davies, the president of the college. For the next several years he applied himself to the study of theology, having chosen the [Presbyterian](#) [3] ministry as a profession, and in 1767 he was licensed by Newcastle Presbytery. In the same year he moved to North Carolina in the wake of the Nottingham Colony, which had originated near his Maryland home. He transferred his ecclesiastical affiliation to the Presbytery of Hanover, as did [David Caldwell](#) [4], whom he had known at Princeton; John McKnitt Alexander, a cousin; and other relatives. On 4 Mar. 1768 "Father" [Henry Pattillo](#) [5] ordained both Caldwell and Alexander in the same ceremony, and the latter accepted the pastorate of the Sugar (Sugaw) Creek Presbyterian Church in [Mecklenburg County](#) [6].

Within a short time after his ordination, Alexander opened an academy, with provisions for boarding students. One pupil was Thomas Reese, who later became an eminent clergyman in the Carolinas. On 15 Jan. 1771, as a result of the success of the academy, the [General Assembly](#) [7] of North Carolina authorized the opening of Queens College in [Charlotte](#) [8], with Joseph Alexander as a fellow and trustee. When Crown disapproval forced the college to close, Alexander moved to the Bullock's Creek Presbyterian Church, in present York County, S.C. where he continued to conduct his own school. The students at the new location included an eventual South Carolina governor, David Johnson; William H. Crawford, who became a candidate for the presidency of the United States; [Andrew Jackson](#) [9], later the seventh president of the United States; and James McRee, R. B. Walker, John B. Davies, and Thomas Neely, who became Presbyterian ministers. In 1797 the South Carolina General Assembly authorized the founding of Alexandria College, named in honor of the clergyman-educator, but the school never materialized. In 1807 the College of South Carolina recognized Alexander's contribution to education by conferring the D.D. degree upon him.

Alexander participated prominently in the expansion of the organization of the Presbyterian church, being an original member of the [Presbytery of Orange](#) [10] (created in 1770), the Presbytery of South Carolina (1784), the Synod of the Carolinas (1788), and the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (1789). He held various official positions in these organizations, including the office of moderator of Hanover Presbytery (1770) and the Synod of the Carolinas (1791). In addition to his regular pastorate, Alexander preached at Nazareth, in present-day Spartanburg, from 1774 to 1776; at Thicketty Creek, in [Union County](#) [11], in 1775; and at Beersheba, from 1775 to 1780.

During the [American Revolution](#) [12] Alexander was an enthusiastic patriot. Particularly influential was a meeting at his church after the [Battle of Camden](#) [13], at which he encouraged the patriots to continue their efforts to win independence. Alexander was closely related to the men in his first parish who drafted the Mecklenburg Resolves, and he became so aggressive in his encouragement of the Revolution that the male members of his church brought rifles to Sabbath services to guard the minister and his congregation.

After the war, a controversy over hymn singing split the membership in Alexander's church, and in 1801 the pastor resigned to devote his remaining years to the supervision of his school and farm.

Alexander was buried in the cemetery at Bullock's Creek Church. He was survived by two sons, Samuel Davies and George Baldwin, and by his daughters: Sarah, widow of Joseph Barnett; Editha, wife of Robert S. Walker; Ann, wife of James Garrison; Margaret, wife of Abner McJunkin; and Martha, Esther, and Judah, married to men named Byers, King, and Bankhead respectively. He willed the two people he had enslaved, as well as considerable real and personal property to his family.

Alexander's only known publication is *Eight Sermons on Important Subjects; By the Reverend Joseph Alexander, D.D. In the District of York, South Carolina* (Charleston, 1807).

References:

William Henry Foote, *Sketches of North Carolina, Historical and Biographical* (1846).

Hanover Presbytery Minutes, 1755–1812 (Library, Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Va.).

George Howe, *History of the Presbyterian Church in South Carolina*, 2 vols., (1870).

Princeton University General Biographical Catalogue 1746–1906 (1908).

"Records of the Presbyterian Church, and the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America" (Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pa.).

York County Deeds (York County Courthouse, York, S.C.), for Will Book A.

Additional Resources:

"Princeton of the South," by Elizabeth Leland, *Our State Magazine*: <https://www.ourstate.com/queens-college/> [14]

Subjects:

[American Revolution \(1763-1789\)](#) [15]

[Biographies](#) [16]

[Educators](#) [17]

[Religious Leaders and Clergy](#) [18]

Authors:

[Stokes, Durward T.](#) [19]

Origin - location:

[Charlotte](#) [20]

From:

[Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press](#). [21]

1 January 1979 | Stokes, Durward T.

Source URL: <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/alexander-joseph>

Links

[1] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/alexander-joseph> [2] <http://www.princeton.edu/> [3] <https://www.ncpedia.org/presbyterian-church-0> [4]

<https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/caldwell-david> [5] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/pattillo-henry> [6]

<https://www.ncpedia.org/geography/mecklenburg> [7] <https://www.ncpedia.org/general-assembly> [8] <https://www.ncpedia.org/geography/charlotte> [9]

<https://www.ncpedia.org/jackson-andrew> [10] <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/orangepresb/menu.html> [11] <https://www.ncpedia.org/geography/union>

[12] <https://www.ncpedia.org/american-revolution> [13] <https://www.ncpedia.org/camden-battle> [14] <https://www.ourstate.com/queens-college/> [15]

<https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/us-revolution> [16] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/biography-term> [17]

<https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/educators> [18] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/clergy> [19]

<https://www.ncpedia.org/category/authors/stokes-durward-t> [20] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmon-24> [21]

<https://www.ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/dictionary-no>