

Burrington, George ^[1]

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by William S. Price, Jr., 1979

ca. 1682–22 Feb. 1759

See also [George Burrington](#) ^[2], Research Branch, NC Office of Archives and History

George Burrington, colonial governor, was born in Devonshire, England. His father was Gilbert Burrington, and his relatives were among the earliest supporters of William III in the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Included among the Burrington clan was one member of Parliament from Devon. This sort of family prominence was most advantageous to a young man in the eighteenth century, and Burrington was fortunate to have as his friend [Thomas Pelham-Holles](#) ^[3], Duke of Newcastle-upon-Tyne of the third creation. Newcastle was a master of patronage during the first half of the eighteenth century, and he helped Burrington procure an army commission in 1715. Later, when he was secretary of state for the Southern Department, Newcastle was to obtain the [royal governorship](#) ^[4] of North Carolina for his friend. Burrington has the unique distinction of having served as both proprietary and royal governor of the North Carolina colony. How he received his initial appointment as proprietary governor on 26 Feb. 1722/23 is unknown, but one suspects the influence of Newcastle again. The leading figure among the [Lords Proprietors](#) ^[5] at the time was John Carteret, later Earl Granville, who was a close political associate of the duke. In any case, Burrington went to North Carolina and was sworn in as governor in [Edenton](#) ^[6] on 15 Jan. 1723/24. A strong-willed, sometimes violent man, the new governor soon quarreled with some of the leading men of the colony. Although he did not have an immediate argument with his predecessor, president of the council [William Reed](#) ^[7], Reed did not attend council meetings between July 1724 and April 1725 because of disagreements with the governor.

According to testimony given in England by Chief Justice [Christopher Gale](#) ^[8] in January 1725, Burrington made menacing statements about Gale from his first days in the colony. During the general court session of July 1724, Burrington openly insulted Gale before the court. On 23 Aug., Burrington attacked Gale's house in Edenton, attempted to break down the door, and when that attempt failed, threatened to demolish the place with gunpowder. Shortly after this incident, the chief justice went to London to request the proprietors to remove Burrington as governor. Gale carried with him a letter signed by seven councilors of the colony supporting his charges. Although details are not known, it appears that the governor's animosity toward Gale may have dated from Gale's days as customs collector for the Port of Beaufort: Gale gave advice to his counterpart at Roanoke, who was quarreling with Burrington over seizure of a trading vessel.

Regardless of his problems in Edenton, Burrington was highly successful in the Lower Cape Fear region. More than any other governor, he was responsible for the growth of the area that by the 1750s had become the colony's richest. He liberalized the [land-grant](#) ^[9] procedure and encouraged settlement by several trips there. In 1730 he purchased a ten-thousand acre tract called Stag Park in present-day [Pender County](#) ^[10], and eventually he built a summer home there. When he became royal governor, Burrington explored much of the Lower Cape Fear region on horseback and charted some of its waters. He personally oversaw construction of several bridges in the area. Finally, he did preliminary clearing for and urged completion of a highway linking the [Neuse River](#) ^[11] communities with those in the Lower Cape Fear, thus expediting settlement.

In the summer of 1725, Christopher Gale returned to Edenton with Burrington's dismissal as governor. Burrington was in the Lower Cape Fear at the time, and on 17 July 1725, [Sir Richard Everard](#) ^[12] was sworn in as his successor. After his ouster, Burrington remained in North Carolina for almost a year. His resentment against Everard grew, and on the night of 2 Dec. 1725 he went to the governor's house in Edenton and attempted to goad his successor into a duel. After calling Everard "a Noodle and an ape" and other more violent terms, but failing to receive satisfaction, Burrington left the governor's dwelling seeking a fight. He physically attacked at least two other houses in the neighborhood and earned criminal charges for his actions at the March 1726 general court. Although he was represented by counsel, Burrington did not appear in court, and the case was continued until July. In April he served in the lower house of the General Assembly from Chowan Precinct, but he returned to England before July.

After the proprietary transfer of North Carolina to the Crown, Newcastle secured the first royal governorship of the colony for Burrington. His commission was issued on 15 Jan. 1729/30, and he was sworn at Edenton on 25 Feb. 1730/31. As might be expected in light of his previous administration, Burrington still had some powerful enemies in North Carolina. Within the first six months of his new administration, he had alienated some of his previous allies as well. The governor persisted in his former style of invective and violent behavior. He openly insulted councillors, assemblymen, and judges who opposed him. By May 1731, Chief Justice [William Smith](#) ^[13] was so angry with Burrington's methods that he went to England to seek his dismissal.

Engaged in a battle with the council for resistance to his land policies, Burrington quarreled with the lower house of the assembly concerning fee schedules in the colony. By 1732 many legislators were unalterably opposed to him. Attempting

to rule increasingly by executive decree, the governor began illegally suspending uncooperative councillors and replacing them with his own allies. On 12 Nov. 1734, however, Burrington was notified that his successor, Gabriel Johnston ^[14], had arrived in the province, and his rule ended.

Burrington returned to London and spent the rest of his life there, his income from his North Carolina holdings providing him with a comfortable retirement. In May 1736 he told the board of trade ^[15] that three provincial officials had tried to assassinate him in his final months as governor, but no investigation was instituted. Two years later, Burrington fathered a son named George. This boy was to be his father's sole legatee of landholdings in North Carolina amounting to not less than 18,400 acres. The former governor lived to an advanced age, but his death was a hard one. While taking an evening stroll in St. James's Park, London, he was murdered by a robber. As befitted Burrington, there were signs of a violent struggle.

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