

Cathcart, William ^[1]

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by Thomas C. Parramore, 1979

ca. 1710–27 Feb. 1773

William Cathcart, physician, was a native of Genoch, Scotland. He was apprenticed in 1726 to a surgeon at Edinburgh, and there is evidence that he also pursued some studies at the University of Edinburgh. He reached Bertie County ^[2] in 1737 and, with his brother John, entered into mercantile business there. Within two years, however, he had taken the title "practitioner of physick." In 1742 he married Penelope Maule, daughter of former surveyor general William Maule ^[3], and by this union came into the possession of his wife's large landed estate. The couple settled at one of their plantations on the upper Roanoke River ^[4] in Northampton County ^[5]. Penelope died early, but Cathcart again married well, this time to Prudence West, granddaughter of former governor Thomas Pollock ^[6].

Cathcart's wealth and social eminence thrust him into numerous offices of local leadership, including terms as sheriff, justice of the peace, and Anglican vestryman. He did not, however, seek major office, preferring his medical practice, the management of his estate, and the company of his books and a wide circle of acquaintances. He was on intimate terms with Governor Gabriel Johnston ^[7] and named his only son after the governor, who was his first wife's stepfather.

On his son and his daughters, Peggy and Frances, Cathcart lavished his wealth, procuring for them the best education afforded by the times. It was Cathcart who brought to North Carolina, in the character of a tutor to his children, the Reverend Daniel Earl ^[8], later the most eminent Anglican churchman in the province. Gabriel Johnston Cathcart was sent to the University of Glasgow ^[9] in 1759 but died soon after returning home at the completion of his course of studies. Peggy was married to the Reverend William McKenzie of the Church of England ^[10] and Frances to Governor Samuel Johnston ^[11].

Testimony to the cultural and literary sophistication of the Cathcart family comes from the diary of Waightstill Avery ^[12], who visited with them on his way to a new home in Western North Carolina ^[13] in 1767. Avery commented that he had been "Improved by his [Dr. Cathcart's] Company and diverted and pleased with his Daughters." Cathcart proved to be "a gentn. of extraordinary fine sense and great reading," while the girls were blessed with "the three greatest motives to be courted: Beauty, Wit and Prudence, and Money; . . . [they were] toasted in most parts of the Province." Some of Cathcart's library, bequeathed by him to Governor Samuel Johnston, now forms part of the library at Hayes Plantation ^[14], Edenton ^[15].

The Roanoke River farm was a preoccupation of Cathcart's, absorbing his interest and energies for many years. In a letter written in 1763 by his son, Gabriel, to John Cathcart in Scotland, Dr. Cathcart was described as "quite the farmer tho' on a different plan from what you pursue at Home—he raises little more wheat than to supply his Family, and some Oats for corn and fodder to his horses—his principal object is Indian Corn part of which he sends immediately to Mercate [Market] with the rest he fattens hogs and stall feeds Beef . . . ; his Overseers at the other Plantations go chiefly on Tobacco which he does not trouble himself with . . ."

Cathcart died ten years after the death of his second wife.

References:

"Biographical Sketch of Waightstill Avery with Illustrative Manuscripts," *North Carolina University Magazine* 4 (1885).

Walter Clark, ed., *State Records of North Carolina*, vols. 22–23 (1907, 1904).

North Carolina State Archives (Raleigh), for the Cathcart Family Papers and a deposition of John Dawson in the Bertie County Civil Papers.

Additional Resources:

Colonial and State Records Search, Documenting the American South, UNC Libraries:
<https://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/search> ^[16]

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Public officials ^[20]

Authors:

Parramore, Thomas C.^[21]

Origin - location:

Bertie County^[22]

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