

Churton, William ^[1]

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by Mary Claire Engstrom, 1979

fl. 1749–December 1767

See also: William Churton (by Stewart Dunaway, 2017 for recently updated biographical entry)^[2]

William Churton, pioneer surveyor ^[3] and cartographer ^[4] for the Granville District ^[5], colonial official of Childsburgh (Hillsborough) and Orange County ^[6], and member for Orange in the colonial legislature, came from England to America in the 1740s as a surveyor attached to the Granville Land Office in Edenton ^[7]. His English background is unknown, but it seems probable that he was a Londoner with family roots in Gloucestershire.

In October 1749, North Carolina's two appointed commissioners, William Churton and Crown lawyer Daniel Weldon ^[8], together with Virginia commissioners Joshua Fry and Peter Jefferson, extended the existing Virginia-North Carolina boundary line ^[9] ninety miles westward beyond the Blue Ridge Mountains to Steep Rock Creek. At about this time, Churton evidently supplied the two Virginia surveyors with the topographical information concerning the Granville District that appeared on the 1751 Fry-Jefferson Map. The second (1755) edition of the map showed further significant increases in detail, especially in the vast area that Churton had just surveyed for the Moravians ^[10]. No mention of indebtedness to Churton, however, appears on either edition.

Churton undertook a second arduous survey of mountainous western lands between August 1752 and January 1753, when he accompanied Bishop August Gottlieb Spangenburg ^[11] and a party of Moravians to the "Blue Mountains" to survey tracts totaling 98,925 acres. The Spangenburg Diary and later Moravian records provide numerous brief personal glimpses of Churton, whom Spangenburg characterized as "certainly a reasonable man" and "excessively scrupulous" in his surveying practices. For the next fifteen years, until his death, the Moravians maintained a warm friendship with their "Good Companion . . . the Surveyor Mr. Churton."

It was Churton's custom to defer the actual drawing of plots and writing of descriptions (deed certificates) until he returned to Edenton. Only a few of his delicate plats of individual grants survive today, on tiny slips of paper, in the North Carolina Land Grant Office, Raleigh. Long delays in delivering the deed certificates were inevitable; and in various cases, notably that of the Quaker ^[12] William Wiley, Churton assisted waiting grantees by paying accumulated quitrents ^[13] for them and otherwise standing between them and the far-off Granville agent in Edenton.



(Click to see larger). "A Compleat map of North-Carolina from an actual survey," 1770. John Collett. Image courtesy of North Carolina Maps, UNC Libraries.

^[14]In 1753, 635 acres were granted to Churton and Richard Vigers to hold in trust for the establishment of Salisbury (incorporated in 1755). Similarly, on 7 June 1754, 663 acres (also recorded as 653 acres) were granted to Churton to hold in trust for Francis Corbin ^[15] to establish a town successively named Orange, Corbinton, Childsburgh, and Hillsborough, on the north bank of Eno River. Approximately 120 one-acre lots of the new town were staked out by Churton and his assistant surveyor, Enoch Lewis, in the late summer of 1754. It is also probable that Quaker surveyor James Taylor ^[16] worked with Churton in Orange County in the early 1750s.

Although Churton had been appointed first public register of Orange County in 1752, he did not actually qualify until the 12 June 1753 court, because of his enforced absences on surveying expeditions. For the next full decade, until 1763, he occupied the post of register, but a deputy register, William Reed, of necessity served in his place. Churton served as member from Orange in the colonial legislature for approximately eight years, from 1754 to 1762, and as town commissioner of Childsburgh from its incorporation as a town in 1759 until his death. He was also officially appointed

public surveyor of Orange County in 1757 and served as justice of the peace after 1757.

On the evidence of court minutes alone, Churton appears to have been a valued permanent resident of Childsborough from 1757 onward. In 1759 he received by legislative grant four one-acre lots, F, G, H, and [K], in the low-lying southeastern quadrant of the town, "in Consideration of the many Services he hath performed for the Inhabitants of the said Town, and his Labour, Expence, and Pains in laying out the said Town." This gift of lots was reaffirmed in the 1766 legislative bill renaming the town Hillsborough. The lower portion of the street running north and south near Churton's lots had apparently been named Churton Street even before 1759.

The Spangenburg Diary had noted in September 1752 the great need for a "general surveyor's map of the Granville District," and from 1757, Churton appears to have been actively at work on the preparation of a topographical map of the Province of North Carolina. He himself, however, did not survey the southern and coastal areas, and for this data he had to rely on "information and old maps." In November 1766, Governor William Tryon^[17] laid the finished Churton Map before the General Assembly, which allowed Churton the "handsome gratuity" of £155. Governor Tryon further assured Churton that if he would endeavor "to complete and make perfect the southern and maritime parts of the province," he should with Tryon's approval take the map to England and present it to the board of trade^[18].

When Churton in 1767 began actually to survey the coastal areas, he discovered the lower section of his map to be so defective that he "condemned and cut off that portion." He had already bequeathed the map to Tryon in case of accident, and when Churton unexpectedly died in December 1767, Tryon promptly arranged for the Swiss cartographer Claude Joseph Sauthier^[19] to execute the maritime section "from different surveys which several Gentlemen in the Province have obliged him with." The final draft of the third section of the map, delineating Mecklenburg County^[20] and the Cherokee dividing line (originally surveyed by Churton in 1756), was probably done by Captain John Abraham Collet^[21], another Swiss cartographer and engineer, who was commissioned by Tryon to assemble and copy the entire map in final form and transport it to England. It was published in London on 1 May 1770 in a large format (43 1/2" × 28 5/8"), handsomely engraved by I. Bayley, under the title "A Compleat Map of North Carolina from an Actual Survey"^[22]. By Cptn. Collet, Governor of Fort Johnston^[23]. It has remained a landmark in early North Carolina cartography.

Churton's will, probated 5 Jan. 1768 (but not registered or preserved in Orange County), left six of his Hillsborough town lots, nos. 5, F, G, H, I, and K, as well as a tract of land, to four London heirs, probably relatives: James and Dorothy Thompson and William and Sarah Bodington. All the rest of his estate, including his valuable papers, was left to Edmund Fanning^[24].

The entire length of Hillsborough's north-south street, now its main street, was eventually renamed Churton Street, apparently the only memorial in North Carolina to the Granville surveyor whose early cartographic contributions have gone unacknowledged on any published map.

Additional information from NCpedia editors at the State Library of North Carolina:

For many years Churton's death was most likely erroneously believed to have been in December, 1767. The date on his will, written January 5, 1768 suggests this is likely incorrect. It was then probated in the March Term of 1768 in Chowan County. His estate was inventoried on May 3, 1768. His house on New Town Lot #5 in Edenton was sold May 16, 1768, and a tract of land in Orange County was divided between William Comb and Edmund Fanning. The will also freed his "faithful servant", an enslaved man named Joe Churton. The residue of the entire estate was sold and money was sent to his two sisters (Dorothy Churton Tomson, and Sarah Churton Bodington) in England.

References:

A Complete Revisal of All the Acts of Assembly of the Province of North-Carolina (1773).

Walter Alves Papers (Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill).

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William P. Cumming, *The Southeast in Early Maps* (1958, 1962).

Adelaide L. Fries, ed., *Records of the Moravians in North Carolina*, vols. 1–2 (1922).

Minutes of the Orange County Inferior Court of Common Pleas and Quarter Sessions, September 1752–August 1763 (North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh).

North Carolina Land Grant Records, Orange and Rowan County Files (Secretary of State's Office, Raleigh).

Orange County Deed Books 1–3 (Orange County Courthouse, Hillsborough).

William L. Saunders and Walter Clark, eds., *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vols. 5–8, 23, 25 (1887–1905).

Additional Resources:

Bedini, Silvio A. "History Corner: William Churton (fl. 1749-1767) North Carolina Cartographer, Part 1." *Professional Surveyor Magazine*. July/August 2001. <http://www.profsurv.com/magazine/article.aspx?i=781>^[25] (accessed July 19, 2013).

Bedini, Silvio A. "History Corner: William Churton (fl. 1749-1767) North Carolina Cartographer, Part 2." *Professional Surveyor Magazine*. September 2001. <http://www.profsurv.com/magazine/article.aspx?i=793> [26] (accessed July 19, 2013).

William Churton, Surveys of North Carolina. General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. <http://hdl.handle.net/10079/bibid/9720578> [27] (accessed July 19, 2013).

"The Land Grant Surveys of William Churton Showing the Trading Path in Orange County, North Carolina 1751-1761." Trading Path Association.

Image Credits:

Collett, John. "A Compleat map of North-Carolina from an actual survey," 1770. North Carolina Maps, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/ncmaps/id/467> [28] (accessed September 27, 2012).

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