

Elmsley, Alexander ^[1]

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by [William S. Powell](#) ^[2], 1986

[27?] Jan. 1730–29 Jan. 1797

Alexander Elmsley, assemblyman, attorney, colonial agent, and business representative, was born probably in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, but was in North Carolina by 1762 when he was borough representative from [Halifax](#) ^[3] in the April session of the Assembly. He represented New Bern in the November 1762 session as well as in the sessions of February 1764, May 1765, November 1766, and December 1767–January 1768. In the Assembly he was active in having New Bern named the provincial capital and was copatron of the appropriations act for [Tryon Palace](#) ^[4] there. He served frequently on committees to draw up answers to the governor's speeches and to draft addresses to the king, and he was active in preparing legislation concerning the courts, the regulation of duties of [sheriffs](#) ^[5], provisions for the established clergy and vestries, prison repair, military preparedness, the care of orphans, and the distribution of intestate estates. He was often named to deliver bills from the Assembly to the Council.

In a private connection Elmsley was employed by [Samuel Johnston](#) ^[6] of [Edenton](#) ^[7], Henry Laurens of South Carolina, and others to transact business affairs with merchants and financial institutions in England. Business records as well as correspondence that passed between Johnston and Elmsley, preserved in the [Hayes Collection papers](#) ^[8], demonstrate the skill and care with which both men conducted their business. The letters, however, also contain evidence of genuine friendship between the two families. While in North Carolina Elmsley was often in Edenton serving as an attorney for [Crown](#) ^[9] interests, and young [John Elmsley](#) ^[10] (who was just six when he was taken to England) later recalled many pleasant incidents that occurred there. Alexander Elmsley also transacted legal business in Halifax, New Bern, and Wilmington and undoubtedly elsewhere in the province. In letters to Johnston he mentioned interests in South Carolina as well as "my West India Adventure." In November 1772 he related that he had purchased some property in the West Indies. He was deeply interested in relations between the colonies and the mother country and often commented on events in America and in London. His remarks frequently were slanted in favor of the colonies, and he made several suggestions to Johnston as to how differences might be adjusted. Elmsley visited France and his observations on the French Revolution are harsh and critical; he had no love for the people of France.

Elmsley and his family had left North Carolina for England by the summer of 1768 and settled in London where he continued to serve as business representative for planters. In time he also became one of the official agents of the province of North Carolina. [Thomas Barker](#) ^[11] had been designated North Carolina's agent in London in 1761, but in 1774 both Barker and Elmsley were named special agents to represent North Carolina in the court and attachment controversy before the board of trade. In June 1775 they achieved an exemption of the province from the Trade Restraining Act that had been passed two months earlier by Parliament. It was to Elmsley that the Assembly sent assorted petitions and addresses to the king; Elmsley put these documents into more acceptable form than when they arrived and explained much about protocol to the North Carolinians. He seems to have been sincerely concerned for the welfare of North Carolina and to have represented its interests fairly and honestly. He did his utmost to keep leaders in the colony fully informed about acts of Parliament and went to great lengths to explain them to the committee of correspondence. In a final prewar letter to Samuel Johnston on 24 May 1776, Elmsley assured him of his lasting friendship no matter what political convictions might interrupt them. There was no further communication between them until 11 Dec. 1783 when their correspondence was renewed in news-filled letters. Accounts on both sides, long in abeyance, were settled promptly. Thereafter as long as Elmsley lived they continued to exchange friendly and affectionate letters filled with personal, family news on many occasions. Elmsley asked for information about and commented on conditions in the new state of North Carolina and was especially interested in the reaction to the new federal constitution. He expressed the good wishes of the people of England for North Carolina and observed that many there were thinking of moving to America. Johnston, on the other hand, once sent his congratulations on the recovery of King George from illness.

In his correspondence with North Carolina acquaintances, Elmsley referred to his wife as "my Rib" and often mentioned her health and activities. They were the parents of four children: [John](#) ^[10] (1762–1805), born in Halifax, who became a judge in Canada; Alexander, about whom nothing further is known except that he was in Canada in 1800; a daughter who died of hydrophobia in 1771 and whose loss deeply affected her father; and [Peter](#) ^[12] (1773–1825), classical scholar on Sophocles and Euripides, Camden professor of ancient history at Oxford, and Anglican clergyman. In 1793 Alexander Elmsley wrote his friend Samuel Johnston that he had considered returning to North Carolina or Virginia and buying between two and three thousand acres of land on which one of his sons would settle. "I have now three boys to provide for," he wrote; "one of them shall take one of your girls off your hands, if she cannot dispose of herself better." After Elmsley's death his widow lived for a time with her son, Peter, but was in Canada with John for a visit in the early summer of 1801. After the [American Revolution](#) ^[13] Mrs. Elmsley was in frequent contact with Mr. and Mrs. [Robert Palmer](#) ^[14], formerly of Bath, and with members of the Rutherford and Schaw families, formerly of [New Hanover County](#) ^[15], all of whom were then in England. Nor was Mrs. Elmsley forgotten in North Carolina. In addition to the frequent passing of messages between her and the women of Samuel Johnston's family, Mrs. Mary Conway of New Bern willed silk and linen

apparel to Mrs. Elmsley.

Elmsley died at his home in London after a brief period of declining health and was buried in the church-yard of St. Marylebone of which he was a member. In addition to his wife and three sons, he was survived by a brother, Peter, noted London bookseller, who took over the financial business for various North Carolinians and other Americans that remained to be handled. Peter, in fact, had been a financial representative for some of them for several years. This brother had no children, and Alexander's son, Peter, inherited his extensive estate.

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Additional Resources:

"CSR Documents by Elmsley, Alexander, 1730-1797." Colonial and State Records of North Carolina. Documenting the American South, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/creators/csr10540> ^[16] (accessed February 18, 2014).

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