

Johnston, William ^[1]

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by [William S. Powell](#) ^[2], 1988

1737–1785

William Johnston, merchant, land speculator, and Revolutionary patriot, was born in Harthwood, parish of Lochmaben, Shire of Annandale, in the south of Scotland, the son of Robert and Isabell Johnston. He was the great-nephew of North Carolina's royal governor, [Gabriel Johnston](#) ^[3], and the nephew of [Samuel Johnston](#) ^[4] of [Edenton](#) ^[5], revolutionary and early state leader. By 1756 William Johnston was in North Carolina where he acquired 150 acres in [Orange County](#) ^[6]. Soon afterwards he apparently was sheriff of [Granville County](#) ^[7] and was a member of a commission named to divide St. John's Parish in that county and, with others, to erect public buildings in [Bute County](#) ^[8], which was formed from Granville. By 1767 he was living in Hillsborough where he served on the earliest board of commissioners. Johnston also acquired a plantation, Snow Hill, about fifteen miles northeast of the town, where he established a general store. After making [Richard Bennehan](#) ^[9] a partner, his Little River Store served a large area of that part of the colony. In partnership with [James Thackston](#) ^[10], Johnston also opened a store in Hillsborough. In addition to these stores and his extensive farming interests, Johnston engaged in trade as far away as Wilmington and Cross Creek and operated [gristmills](#) ^[11] on some of the swift creeks in the region.

During the [Regulator](#) ^[12] uprising in Orange County, Johnston informed Governor [William Tryon](#) ^[13] of conditions there, and he was referred to as a colonel. Although Johnston was given funds to be used in raising troops, there is nothing to suggest that he participated in military activity. Beginning about 1774 Johnston and other men, including [Richard Henderson](#) ^[14], became involved in land speculation when they acquired land across the mountains in the Tennessee and Kentucky area in violation of royal directives. They lost much of this land but received other land as compensation.

Johnston served as a member of the Hillsborough district [committee of safety](#) ^[15] during the revolution and represented Hillsborough in the [Provincial Congresses](#) ^[16] in the spring and winter of 1776. These two sessions drew up the [Halifax Resolves](#) ^[17] calling for independence and prepared the state's first constitution. Johnston also was a member of a commission named to establish a gun factory in Hillsborough, and at Snow Hill he apparently produced gunpowder, lead, and rifle flints. After the war Johnston acted privately as agent for [Edmund Fanning](#) ^[18] of New York, formerly an unpopular colonial official in Orange County, but a man whom Johnston regarded as his friend. Johnston purchased Fanning's property scheduled for confiscation by the state and, in effect, saved it for Fanning.

Johnston's wife, Anne, ten years older than he, died at the age of 42 in February 1769, leaving a daughter. Johnston never remarried. The daughter, Amelia, later married Walter Alves and in about 1800 moved to Kentucky where she owned property inherited from her father. Johnston by his will granted freedom to his black servant woman, Esther, and made generous bequests to his widowed mother in Scotland and to other relatives living in England, Scotland, New York, and Virginia, as well as to his business partners.

References:

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Additional Resources:

"CSR Documents by Johnston, William, 1737-1785." 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/csr10563> ^[19] (accessed May 28, 2014).

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