

Pennington, William ^[1]

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by William S. Powell, 1994

1738–15 Mar. 1829

William Pennington, colonial official in North Carolina and master of ceremonies at the Hot Wells, Clifton, near Bristol, England, was probably the son of a Bristol merchant and member of an ancient family resident there. He may have had a classical education, as a letter written in 1801, quoting a ballad, said, "Mr. Pennington will see an allusion to an Epigram of Martial in the first stanza."

He went to North Carolina with [William Tryon](#) ^[2] in 1764, when Tryon was appointed lieutenant governor of the colony. Pennington was named comptroller of customs at the port of [Brunswick](#) ^[3], then the colony's leading port, and was so diligent in performing his duties that Tryon later wrote that "he acquitted himself faithfully and becomingly in the execution of his office." His responsibilities included collecting customs duties and inspecting ships in search of cargoes on which duties had not been paid. In March 1765 Pennington was a member of the board of inquiry charged with investigating the death of Lieutenant Thomas Whitehurst, a British naval officer, in a duel with a seaman.

In February 1766, during the course of colonial resistance to Parliament's [Stamp Act](#) ^[4], a delegation sought Pennington in the governor's house but Tryon, by then the governor, refused to permit them to take him. The next day between four hundred and five hundred men gathered and threatened to remove Pennington by force. Pennington offered to leave, declaring to the governor that "whatever Oaths might be imposed on Him, he should consider them as Acts of Compulsion and not of free Will." In spite of Tryon's intention to protect him, Pennington volunteered to resign his office and accompany the men. They took him into the town and obliged him and other officials to sign an oath not to enforce the Stamp Act. On 3 Mar. 1766, however, Pennington was restored to his office by the governor.

When Tryon left for his new post as governor of New York on 1 July 1771, he gave his fine house on the outskirts of Brunswick to Pennington. It is not clear how long Pennington remained in North Carolina, but on 12 Aug. 1776 Tryon reported that his friend had rendered nearly twelve years of faithful duty when he was driven from office. This suggests that Pennington remained at least until 1776. The American Revolution began that year, and in trying to persuade the British government to assist him, Tryon said that Pennington "is now left without friend or Relation in England."

There are references to Pennington as a colonel and as having fought against the Americans in the Revolutionary War. He probably was not the Captain Pennington of the Guards, however, who fatally wounded the Honorable J. Talmash (Tollemache), brother of the Earl of Dysart, in a duel in New York in November 1777, although the *Virginia Gazette* (21 Nov. 1777) does not give Pennington's full name.

Pennington was captured by the Americans in or near New York on 16 July 1781, but at some time before January 1783 he left America for England. It is reported that aboard ship he met another Englishman who was returning home to try to locate relatives last seen many years before. The new acquaintance became ill and in spite of Pennington's nursing care, he died soon after preparing a will leaving everything to Pennington. Once in England Pennington searched for and found the man's relatives and then destroyed the will so that they might inherit his property.

In 1785 Pennington was acting as master of ceremonies at the Clifton Hot Wells near Bristol, having been "inducted" into the position "under the patronage of the Archbishop of Tuam and the Bishop of Cloyne [both of Ireland], and with the unanimous voice of a numerous circle of nobility and gentry." Clifton Hot Wells was a popular spa fifteen miles from the better-known Bath. It was the function of the master of ceremonies to arrange balls, entertainments, and other amusements for the pleasure of the wealthy and the titled elite of the day. One of his acquaintances observed, "We are all in the right to love Mr. Pennington, 'tis for all our credit to love him." Another said, "He has won all our hearts here, and his charming wife will do the same with his friends wherever they are." As a mark of his position, the master wore a gold medallion hanging from a blue ribbon around his neck. For nearly thirty years Pennington ably operated a dignified, socially correct, and popular resort. The waters of the wells were believed to have medicinal qualities, and many of the patrons sought to improve their health as well as to be entertained.

On 27 Dec. 1792 Pennington married Penelope Sophia Weston (1752–1827), an attractive, popular lady who had declined many offers of marriage; she perhaps was the daughter of Edward and Penelope Weston and related to a number of people in high positions. She was a close friend of numerous highly regarded people but was especially attached to Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi and well acquainted with Samuel Johnson; her correspondence with a wide range of friends has been published. Mrs. Tryon was one of Sophia's admirers, Mrs. Piozzi wrote a mutual friend. (Penelope Pennington appears to have been called Sophia by her close friends.)

William Pennington, having suffered from gout since 1793, became seriously ill in 1813 and resigned his position, but his

successor proved to be ineffective. After a stay at Weymouth and the return of better health, Pennington resumed his old post for a time. He died in his ninety-first year.

In her will drawn on 30 May 1818, Margaret Wake Tryon, widow of Governor Tryon, bequeathed fifty pounds to Penelope Pennington, while to Penelope and William together she left all of her real property in Sloane Street, Chelsea, occupied at the time by Lady Skipwith. Pennington's own will, proved 7 Apr. 1829, is in the Public Record Office, London (Prob. 11/1756/310).

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