

Rutherford, William Gordon ^[1]

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by Alan D. Watson, 1994

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William Gordon Rutherford, captain in the British navy who participated in the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, was born at Bowland plantation, [Rocky Point](#) ^[2], approximately twenty miles north of [Wilmington](#) ^[3]. He was named for Lord Adam Gordon, his godfather and a British army colonel who visited North Carolina shortly after his birth. Called "Little Billie," he was the younger son and third child of Frances Button Johnston and John Rutherford. His mother was formerly married to Governor [Gabriel Johnston](#) ^[4] of North Carolina; his father was receiver general of the [quitrents](#) ^[5] for the colony and a member of the Royal Council.

Upon the death of his mother in 1768, William Rutherford was sent to Scotland for his education. He returned to North Carolina in 1774, but the outbreak of the Revolution forced his departure a year later. His father then placed him in a free school in England under the protection of Lord Townshend. In 1778 Rutherford joined the British navy as a midshipman on the *Suffolk*. Between 1783 and 1789 he served on merchant ships in the Orient. Later he rejoined the navy, eventually becoming senior frigate captain under Admiral Horatio Nelson. In 1805 Nelson made Rutherford captain of the new seventy-four-gun *Swiftsure*. Rutherford participated in the pursuit of the fleet of the French admiral Pierre de Villeneuve to the West Indies and then in the Battle of Trafalgar, in which the *Swiftsure* wrecked the French *Archille* while suffering small losses. Rutherford remained captain of the *Swiftsure* until 1807, when he was discharged. In the same year he became captain of the *Sea Fencibles* and remained in that post until 1810. In 1815 he was made a Companion of the Bath and in 1816, one of the four captains of Greenwich Hospital, where he died two years later.

Rutherford married Lilia (Lilas or Lillias), the eldest daughter of Sir George Richardson, Baronet, of London, in 1795. She died in 1831 without children. However, the couple apparently had an adopted son, John Henry Defou, known as Henry Rutherford. William Gordon Rutherford and his wife were buried at St. Margaret's Church, Westminster, London.

References:

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Additional Resources:

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