

## Starkey, John <sup>[1]</sup>

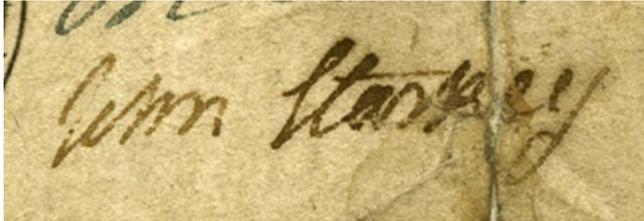


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## Starkey, John

by Tucker Reed Littleton, 1994

ca. 1697–1765



The signature of John Starkey from a 4 shilling bill of credit, 1754. Image from the North Carolina Collection Numismatic Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

<sup>[2]</sup>John Starkey, assemblyman, Southern District treasurer, public school advocate, militia colonel, justice of the peace, attorney, coroner, and county treasurer, first appeared in the White Oak River area in 1723 and received his first land grant there in 1730. His parentage and early years remain obscure. Eventually acquiring vast holdings of land, Starkey appears in the early records as a planter, accountant, and attorney, serving as the executor or coexecutor to numerous wills in the counties of [Onslow](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, [Carteret](#) <sup>[4]</sup>, [Craven](#) <sup>[5]</sup>, and even one in [Hyde](#) <sup>[6]</sup>. Though he remained a bachelor all his life, he was often named a guardian of orphans.

Starkey's political career began in 1734, when he was appointed one of the justices of the peace for Onslow Precinct and elected to the House of Commons, though not seated in that term of the Assembly. He was again elected to represent Onslow in the Assembly in 1739 and held that office until his death. Almost from the moment of his appearance in the House of Commons, Starkey began to assume a position of leadership; he was described as a "commanding personality." Serving on most of the important committees in the colonial Assembly, he introduced some of the most valuable legislation to be presented. His legislative career has been described as enlightened, independent, and advanced. In 1739 he joined the effort to impeach the corrupt Chief Justice [William Smith](#) <sup>[7]</sup>. Starkey's committee memberships included the committees on propositions and grievances (1746); correspondence (1748); public claims (1749), for which he appears to have served as chairman until his death; and revision of the laws (1749); and the committee to direct the colonial agent (1758). He usually served as moderator whenever the Assembly resolved itself into a committee of the whole.

Following the [Spanish Alarm of 1748](#) <sup>[8]</sup>, Starkey was made overseer for the construction of the Bear Inlet fort, and in 1749 he was one of the commissioners appointed to issue [paper money](#) <sup>[9]</sup>. In 1750 the colonial Assembly elected him Southern District treasurer, its most influential office, and kept him there until his death.

Many of Starkey's legislative bills were strongly humanitarian in nature. In 1749 he introduced a measure for the relief of the poor, a bill to improve the quality of justice in the courts and for establishing courts of justice, as well as the first bill in North Carolina's history to provide for a free public school. In 1756 he was coauthor with [Cornelius Harnett](#) <sup>[10]</sup> of legislation to prevent the unlawful killing of slaves. It was also Starkey who introduced the bill to provide the initial postal route and service from Suffolk, Va., to Charleston, S.C., thus linking communications from Boston to Charleston.

Concomitant with his career in the Assembly, Starkey dominated the political and cultural life of [Onslow County](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, where he served as a justice of the peace from 1734 to 1765. From the 1740s to 1765 he appears to have served as chairman of the Onslow [Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions](#) <sup>[11]</sup>. He is listed in the county records as holding various local offices, including coroner (1741), church warden (1743), commissioner of the town of Johnston (1744), colonel of the Onslow militia (1754), and treasurer of Onslow County (1759).

It was as Southern District treasurer that Starkey rendered his most valuable and far-reaching service; he used the influence of that office to oppose every royal encroachment on the rights of the people and to advance the cause of liberty. Starkey refused to be called the treasurer for the [Crown](#) <sup>[12]</sup> and regularly referred to his position as "Public Treasurer." With [Samuel Swann](#) <sup>[13]</sup>, [John Ashe](#) <sup>[14]</sup>, and [George Moore](#) <sup>[15]</sup>, he formed a junta that exerted a controlling influence over the Assembly and essentially the political life of the colony. Despite his wealth and station, Starkey refused to wear the silver shoe buckles and powdered wig that distinguished a gentleman of means. His plainness of dress and humble demeanor were especially offensive to Governor [Arthur Dobbs](#) <sup>[16]</sup>, who mentioned Starkey's considerable fortune and unusual popularity and called him "the most designing man in the whole province." Dobbs complained about the rising

tide of republicanism in the colonies, observing that republicanism nowhere had a stronger hold than in North Carolina largely due to the influence of John Starkey, whom Dobbs called the foremost republican of all. As treasurer, Starkey was known for his integrity, financial responsibility, and balanced frugality, a quality associated with his frequent opposition to new taxes.

As a person, Starkey was described by both friend and foe as a man of unimpeachable character, punctuality, and good fortune, much liked and esteemed by the populace, having won their confidence by his capabilities and diligence. One historian wrote that in his lifetime Starkey was "the most powerful figure in the province of North Carolina." Though death removed Starkey from the scene before the Revolution [17] was fully born, something of his impact on the direction of liberty may be estimated by the fact that many of the younger men with whom he had been most intimately associated in politics and whom he had influenced later emerged as the leaders of the Revolution in North Carolina, among them Cornelius Harnett, Samuel Johnston [18], William Cray [19], and Edward Starkey [20].

Starkey's only known immediate relatives were his older brother Peter and his sister, Phoebe Warburton. Starkey's year of birth is conjectured as 1697 from a deposition made on 31 Mar. 1733 in which he stated that he was "aged 36 years." His death appears to have occurred in March or April 1765, for he was present when the Onslow Court adjourned on 12 March and his death was announced to the colonial Assembly when it convened on 3 May. A member of the Church of England [21], Starkey is reported by tradition to have conducted religious services on his lawn on occasion because no chapel or minister of the Anglican faith was located in his area of Onslow. He was buried in the Starkey family cemetery at the Bluff, about four miles up White Oak River from Swansboro.

## References:

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Walter Clark, ed., *State Records of North Carolina*, vols. 23–25 (1904–6).

William L. Saunders, ed., *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, vols. 4–8 (1886–90).

## Additional Resources:

"Col. John Starkey." N.C. Highway Historical Marker C-52, N.C. Office of Archives & History. <https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program/Markers.aspx?sp=Markers&k=Markers&sv=C-52> [22] (accessed January 17, 2014).

"CSR Documents by Starkey, John, ca. 1697-1765." 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/csr10305> [23] (accessed January 17, 2014).

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