

## Thomlinson, Thomas <sup>[1]</sup>

### Thomlinson, Thomas

by Alice E. Mathews, 1996; Revised by Jared Dease, Government and Heritage Library, January 2023

**November 1732–23 or 24 Sept. 1805**

Thomas Thomlinson, schoolmaster, the son of John Thomlinson, was born at Evening-Hill in the parish of Thursby, Cumberland County, England, and was master of Uldale School nearby from 1752 to 1762. At the invitation of a brother who owned a plantation near New Bern, he decided to migrate and establish [a school in North Carolina](#)<sup>[2]</sup>. Arriving in New Bern in December 1763, he began classes on 1 January 1764. He "immediately got as many scholars as he could instruct" and received so many additional requests that he needed an assistant. The Reverend [James Reed](#)<sup>[3]</sup>, rector of Christ Church Parish, excited about the presence of a schoolmaster and the prospects of a schoolhouse, wrote that "during 11 years Residence in this province I have not found any man so well qualified for the Care of a school as Mr. Tomlinson." He was "not only a good scholar but a man of good conduct." A year later, in 1765, Governor [William Tryon](#)<sup>[4]</sup> informed the [Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts](#)<sup>[5]</sup> that Thomlinson was "the only person of repute of that profession in the country."

Thomlinson not only became the first "regular settled Schoolmaster" in the province, but also the first instructor of the colony's newly incorporated free school. In 1764, shortly after his arrival, the Assembly passed an act for the construction of a schoolhouse. Two years later it placed the school on a sound foundation by naming trustees and providing a source of revenue. Reed reported that the schoolmaster was ready to make New Bern his permanent home. At that time Thomlinson was living in an ordinary ([inn or tavern](#)<sup>[6]</sup>), which he found distasteful, but it kept his expenses down as the owners sent two children to his school. Reed believed that the young schoolmaster needed "a house of his own in the honorable state of matrimony." Thomlinson's salary came to approximately £60 sterling. In addition, the parish hired him as a lay reader for £12, and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel granted him a stipend of £15. Because £100 per annum was considered an adequate income, Thomlinson could almost live in comfort, except that his fees were not always paid promptly.

For the first seven years of its existence, the school prospered and Thomlinson was praised for his teaching. He even hired an assistant, James Macartney, in 1767, when his enrollment reached eighty scholars. He generally averaged sixty students, who came from all over the province. By 1770 Thomlinson noted a decline in enrollment; the school was becoming too much of a local institution. He gave as the principal reasons "the advanced price of Boarding in this place, and the extreme scarcity of our currency." At about the same time a dissenting minister in Wilmington had opened an academy and Thomlinson lost six boys who lived in the Lower Cape Fear area. But what apparently hurt the school most was Thomlinson's discipline and expulsion of two unruly children, the offspring of two trustees. The Reverend Mr. Reed reported that when the schoolmaster began classes, he had been "apprized of the excessive Indulgence of American Parents, and the great difficulty of keeping up a proper discipline; more especially as his school consisted of numbers of both sexes." Thomlinson had thus proceeded with caution, but to maintain order in the school he had finally found it necessary to discipline the two youngsters and had thus committed a "sin against the Holy Ghost, never to be forgiven."

He managed to maintain the school for about a year, but during that time a majority of the trustees were pressuring him to resign first by removing the poor children from the school's foundation, which lowered his income, and then by encouraging Thomlinson's former assistant to set up school. Both schemes failed and, finally, in September 1771 the trustees dismissed him on the basis of neglect—an unfounded charge. The new governor, [Josiah Martin](#)<sup>[7]</sup>, protested but could do nothing about the case. Thomlinson apparently kept the school until April 1772. He managed to recover over £235 owed to him by threatening a suit. Remaining in New Bern, he became a merchant and by the time of his death had accumulated considerable wealth. He endowed four schools in his native Cumberland County, including the celebrated Wigton Grammar School where the endowment still exists. Presumably he is the one of this name listed in the 1790 census of [Craven County](#)<sup>[8]</sup> in a household consisting of himself, a free white female (his wife?), and four people whom he enslaved. His wife, Elizabeth, died in 1801, naming Boneta Macartney her sole executrix.

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