

Whitmell, Thomas ^[1]

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by Claiborne T. Smith, Jr., 1996

1713–88

Thomas Whitmell, legislator and Indian agent, the son of Thomas and Elizabeth Whitmell, was born in Virginia shortly before the family moved to North Carolina. His grandfather, Thomas Whitmell, the first of the family in Virginia, settled in Charles City County prior to 1690. According to extant Bible records for the family of Thomas and Elizabeth Whitmell, Thomas was the oldest child and only surviving son. Five daughters, however, reached maturity.

The public career of Thomas Whitmell began on 14 Oct. 1736, when, although he was only twenty-three, the North Carolina Assembly ^[2] appointed him, Robert West ^[3], John Gray, and one Spiers general commissioners for Indian affairs. On 18 Sept. 1737 the Council of the colony allowed Whitmell and Gray £77 for running the dividing line between Crown lands and those of Lord Granville. Granville was the only Carolina Proprietor who refused to sell to the Crown, and the northern section of the colony had been laid out as his district. A justice of Bertie County ^[4] in 1739, Whitmell was sheriff for many years. In 1749 he was a vestryman for Society Parish, and in 1750 he was mentioned in county records as a merchant. He also represented the county in the Assembly during the period 1754–60 and while so serving was delegated to deal with Indian affairs. Late in 1757 some Indians appeared in New Bern to visit Governor Arthur Dobbs ^[5], producing a scalp to demonstrate that they had been in action against the "Swanees." Whitmell was allowed £10 from the public treasury to be laid out in presents for the Indian allies.

Whitmell had a special relationship with the remnants of the Tuscarora ^[6] tribe who were then living on a reservation in Bertie ^[4] at a place still called Indian Woods. In 1752 Moravian ^[7] Bishop A. G. Spangenberg ^[8] visited North Carolina to look for land for his followers who planned to move to the colony from Bethlehem, Pa. On 12 September of that year he wrote that Whitmell had taken him to the Indian settlement, noting that Whitmell had been a trader among the Indians and spoke their language fluently. He commented further that Whitmell was one of the wealthiest men in Bertie County and enjoyed an excellent reputation among all classes.

At the beginning of 1755, when the Tuscarora in the county had one hundred fighting men, the colony called on them for help in the French and Indian War ^[9] then in progress. In May 1757 Whitmell was awarded £40 for the relief of the wives and children of the warriors from the Tuscarora and Meherrin tribes who had gone to the assistance of Virginia. In 1771 Governor William Tryon ^[10] issued him a warrant to raise militia for use against the insurgents in the War of the Regulation. This proved to be Whitmell's last public service of record.

Thomas Whitmell married Elizabeth West, the daughter of Robert and Martha Blount West. His will, written in Bertie County on 15 Dec. 1779, was filed first (but not probated) in Martin County ^[11]. He lived many years after making his will, but it probably was filed in Martin County because he left 250 acres there to a son who was out of the country at the time. The will, on file at the State Archives in Raleigh, mentions other children, grandchildren, and relatives. Three grandsons who had moved to Alabama were dead without heirs by 1827, thus ending the surname. Nevertheless, Whitmell as a given name has continued to be used among descendants into the late twentieth century.

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