

Colonial Agents ^[1]

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by Don Higginbotham, 2006

See also: [Colonial Period Overview](#); ^[2][Colonial and State Records](#) ^[3]

Colonial agents were authorized individuals in London representing the interests of the North American provinces. They conducted business for their respective [colonial governments](#) ^[4] and passed important public information back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean. Agents were either provincials or influential Britons, possibly London merchants or members of [Parliament](#) ^[5], and they functioned as paid lobbyists seeking legislation, endeavoring to block unpopular bills, and presenting petitions. Prior to the eighteenth century, colonial agents normally were engaged in temporary endeavors. Soon after the [Glorious Revolution of 1688-89](#) ^[6], which peacefully put William and Mary on the throne, provincial leaders saw the value of a permanent resident in London. Such visible Britons as Edmund Burke, [Charles Garth](#) ^[7], and [Richard Jackson](#) ^[8] were colonial agents. [Benjamin Franklin](#) ^[9], the most famous provincial to hold the post, spent many years in that capacity, representing not only his own Pennsylvania but at times other colonies as well.

The tenure of [James Abercromby](#) ^[10] as North Carolina agent (1749-57) illustrates that there were internal as well as imperial problems with the agency. A veteran British administrator, Abercromby was well qualified to assist North Carolina in London; but for a time the Albemarle counties, in the midst of their long-running representation controversy with the [Cape Fear](#) ^[11] region, refused to recognize Abercromby and sent their own spokesman to the metropolis. In 1757 his third term ended on a sour note when he was not reappointed and had trouble collecting his back salary. The following year the Lower House of the Assembly appointed him again; he served another two years, but without the approval of the Upper House and the governor. Fighting over control of the agency seems to have been almost the rule rather than the exception in North Carolina during the 25 years before independence.

References:

Samuel J. Ervin, "The Provincial Agents of North Carolina," *Sprunt Historical Publications* 15 (1919).

John C. Van Horne and George Reese, eds., *The Letterbook of James Abercromby: Colonial Agent, 1751-1773* (1991).

Additional Resources:

The Colonial Agents, English Politics and the American Revolution, Michael G. Kammen, Page 244 of 244-263:
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1920698> ^[12]

'colonial agents' search results in DocSouth: <https://docsouth.unc.edu/global/result.html?lcsh=Colonial%20agents%20--%20North%20Carolina> ^[13]

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Authors:

[Higginbotham, Don](#) ^[18]

From:

[Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press](#).^[19]

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