

Rowan, Matthew (from Research Branch, NC OA&H) ^[1]

MATTHEW ROWAN

Governor: 1753-1754

by Ansley Herring Wegner

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<https://www.dncr.nc.gov/about-us/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program> ^[2]

Matthew Rowan (d. April 1760), longtime member of the executive council, became President of the Council and acting governor upon the death of [Nathaniel Rice](#) ^[3] and served in that capacity for nearly two years. He was born to Reverend John Rowan and the former Margaret Stewart in County Antrim, Ireland. It is unclear exactly when Matthew Rowan immigrated to the colonies. His first appearance in extant records is as a church warden in Bath in 1726, where he was a merchant and was involved in [shipbuilding](#) ^[4]. He became a member of the assembly in 1727 and was named to the executive council in 1731, actively serving from 1734 until his death in 1760. In 1735 Rowan was part of the team that surveyed the boundary line between North and South Carolina, and two years later was appointed surveyor-general of the colony.

Matthew Rowan married Elizabeth, the widow of his brother Jerome, in 1742. Together they had no children, although she brought with her four daughters, Elizabeth, Anna, Esther, and Mildred. Rowan did father one child, a son called John Rowan, with Jane Stubbs of Bath. He always acknowledged the child and, indeed, left John significant real and personal property in his will.

The majority of his time in North Carolina was spent in the Lower Cape Fear region near the [Brunswick County](#) ^[5] community now known as Northwest. By the time of his death in 1760, he owned at least twenty-six enslaved and 9,401 acres of land in that area. Rowan is often associated with the western piedmont because during his service as acting governor, a large county was established in that region, what was then the frontier. It was named [Rowan County](#) ^[6] in his honor.

Matthew Rowan recognized that the militia of North Carolina was in need of reorganization, since it had virtually dissolved under former governor [Gabriel Johnston](#) ^[7], but was not able to boost its strength during his tenure. His attempt to create a company of cavalry in each county failed. The musters lagged behind in numbers because many eligible men were exempted due to their occupations and lacked potential because many men who joined did not have the arms and supplies to contribute. Despite tensions with the Indians and the threat of war with the French, the militia would not be augmented until [Arthur Dobbs](#) ^[8] arrived in 1754 with supplies and money.

Matthew Rowan died at some point between the signing of his will, on April 18, 1760, and an Executive Council meeting held on the twenty-second of that month, which he missed. He was likely buried on his Brunswick County plantation known as Rowan, now Roan.

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