

Downing, William ^[1]

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by Martin Reidinger, 1986

ca. 1680–1 Apr. 1739

William Downing, colonial official, was descended from the Downing family of Isle of Wight County, Va., which had traveled in the Albemarle ^[2] area as early as 1650 and moved to the area sometime after 1683. Because of this date it can be safely assumed that Downing was born while the family still resided in Virginia. He was the son of one of the three sons of Major Richard Downing, probably of William Downing, but this link has not been definitely established. His paternal grandmother was a full-blooded Cherokee ^[3], and his aunt, Nannie Downing McSwain, was a direct ancestor of American humorist Will Rogers ^[4].

The first record of this William Downing in North Carolina was on his conveyance of all his mercantile interests to a William Sharp in Chowan Precinct in 1715. He was recorded to have been living by 1717 in an area that is now part of Hertford County ^[5], near the present site of the community of Tunis, but by 1720 he was living in what is now Washington County ^[6], near the present-day town of Mackeys. According to colonial records, he was a juror for the courts of the Chowan Precinct in the session of 1720. On 24 Oct. 1724 he was named by the Assembly ^[7] as an associate justice of the colony, serving first under Thomas Pollock ^[8] and then under Christopher Gale ^[9]. For some reason that is not explained in the records, the Assembly dismissed him as a judge on 2 May 1727.

Downing was first elected to the Assembly from the Chowan Precinct in 1725 and served until his death. Almost immediately he established himself as a maverick in the Assembly by lodging an official protest with the governor after the lower house was prorogued on the second day of the 1725 session. He soon became involved with colonial finances and was named to the Committee on Claims ^[10]; by 1731 he was appointed "keeper of the box of bills" for the treasurer, Edward Moseley ^[11], and by early 1735 he was on the committee responsible for overseeing the payment of bills and issuing public credit. Later that year he was named treasurer for the northern district of the colony, the first person to hold that office for only a portion of the colony. This prompted a rather heated debate between the governor and the Assembly over which had the power to appoint the treasurer. As the Assembly's choice, Downing won and held the post until his death. On 29 Nov. 1734 he was appointed by the governor to be an associate justice of the Court of Oyer and Terminer. He was reappointed and served until 1738, when he was not returned by his own request.

Downing's residence was in Tyrrell Precinct upon its formation in 1729, but he continued to represent Chowan until 1735 when the representative districts were rearranged to include Tyrrell. In that year he became the new precinct's first representative, and he was unanimously voted to be speaker of the lower house. He was returned to the speakership by unanimous vote and with the approval of the governor until his death.

In many records he was referred to as Captain William Downing, suggesting that he was probably an officer in the militia. He was married to Dorcas Slade, and they had at least two children, William (d. 1748) and a daughter who married Thomas Lee.

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