

Johnston, Gabriel ^[1]

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by Jaquelin Drane Nash, 1988

ca. 1698–17 July 1752

See also: [Gabriel Johnston](#) ^[2], Research Branch, NC Office of Archives and History

Gabriel Johnston, second royal governor of North Carolina, was born in Southdean, Borders Region, Scotland, where he was baptized on 28 Feb. 1698, the son of the Reverend Samuel and Isobel Hall Johnston. His father, minister of the Church of Scotland parishes of Southdean, and later, Dundee, was probably a descendant of the Elsie Shields branch of the Johnstons of Annandale.

Young Johnston studied Greek and philosophy at the University of Edinburgh for four years from 1711, and in 1717 entered the University of St. Andrews as a divinity student, holding the Patrick Yeaman Bursary. He was graduated with a master of arts degree *per supplicationem* in 1720. The following year he studied medicine at the University of Leiden, but his interest seems not to have been serious, for within a month of his arrival in Holland he applied for a patent to teach Hebrew at St. Andrews. He received the royal appointment and in November 1722 was again at his alma mater, occupying the chair of Hebrew. In 1724 he was made Burgess and Guild Brother (gratis) of the city of Glasgow. Three years later he deserted his university post and went to London where, according to his own account, he lived in the household of Spencer Compton, Lord Wilmington, for seven years. During this time Johnston wrote political articles for the *Craftsman*, an anti-Walpole publication to which Bolingbroke, Pulteney, and Harley also contributed.

On 27 Mar. 1733 Johnston was appointed governor of North Carolina, taking his oaths of office in London that August. But he did not arrive in [Brunswick Town](#) ^[3], at the mouth of the [Cape Fear River](#) ^[4], until 27 Oct. 1734 to assume his duties on 2 November.

Following the unpopular [George Burrington](#) ^[5], Johnston was hailed with almost unanimous delight by the Carolinians. Soon, however, the inevitable frictions arose between a chief executive sworn to promote the interests of the [Crown](#) ^[6] and an assertively independent citizenry, equally determined to maintain the rights granted them by the [Lords Proprietors](#) ^[7]. Johnston's most troublesome problems during his eighteen-year tenure, the longest of any North Carolina governor, were the conflict between the northern and southern sections of the colony, the misuse of [blank patents](#) ^[8], and the quitrent controversy. Because his own salary and those of the other Crown officials were paid from the [quitrents](#) ^[9], this, of the three, most nearly touched his own well-being. At his death, his salary of £1,000 per year was found to be in arrears to the amount of £13,462 19d. The last of the debt was not collected by his heirs until forty-six years later.

Johnston antagonized the colonists by his stand on the collection of the quitrents, now double the amount paid by the settlers under the Lords Proprietors, and now to be collected in specie in designated places, instead of in produce at the farms, as formerly. His arbitrary removal of the government offices to New Town (later [Wilmington](#) ^[10]) caused the eventual decay of Brunswick, making implacable enemies of the powerful Moore family and their adherents on the Cape Fear. Members of "The Family," as they were called, were also among the landholders who were enabled by the blank patents to appropriate Crown-held lands. Johnston's spirited opposition to this misuse of the patents further antagonized this element.

Despite almost constant opposition in North Carolina and lack of support from London, Johnston accomplished many reforms. During his term of office, the first [printer](#) ^[11] was brought to the colony and the first [newspaper](#) ^[12] was published. The laws of the colony were collected and printed. Forts were built along the coast for protection from Spanish depredation. A [rent roll](#) ^[13] was drawn up. New counties were formed as the colony expanded towards the west. The governor introduced new agricultural methods at his plantation, Brompton, in [Bladen County](#) ^[14]. Above all, he encouraged immigration, notably of his fellow Scots, so that the population of the province increased threefold during his tenure. His earnest attempts to establish free schools and to encourage the work of the [Church of England](#) ^[15] in the colony met with apparent failure during his life but laid the groundwork for future success.

Arriving in North Carolina penniless and deeply in debt to his patrons, he soon made a most propitious marriage (ca. 1740) to Penelope Golland, stepdaughter of Governor [Charles Eden](#) ^[16], one of the wealthiest women in the province; she had been successively the widow of [William Maule](#) ^[17], [John Lovick](#) ^[18], and [George Phenny](#) ^[19]. Their only child, Penelope, married [John Dawson](#) ^[20], of Williamsburg, son of the president of William and Mary College. Johnston's will mentions his son, Henry, and daughter, Carolina; these are thought to be two natural children; a third, "Polly," predeceased her father. After his first wife's death in 1741, he married Mrs. Frances Button. Governor Johnston died and was buried at Eden House, his plantation in [Bertie County](#) ^[21] near [Edenton](#) ^[22].

He was bitterly criticized by his political opponents for what he himself called "management." They had stronger words for

it: sharp practices, trickery, and fraud. In contrast to his predecessor's violent and profane behavior, Johnston's demeanor seems to have been consistently marked by self-control. He stated that he had known confusion and disorder, but had not made a single personal enemy in North Carolina.

Something of his personal standards may be learned from his instructions in his will concerning his "dear little girl," Penelope: that she should be brought up "in the Fear of God and under a deep Sense of being always in His Presence, confining her desires to things Plain, Neat and Elegant . . . not aspiring after the Gayety, Splendour and Extravagance and Especially to take care to keep within the Bounds of her Income and by no Means to Run in Debt."

No known portrait of him remains, although a miniature existed in 1893.[Johnston County](#) ^[23] and [Fort Johnston](#) ^[24], at the mouth of the Cape Fear River, perpetuate his name in North Carolina.

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Additional Resources:

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