

Johnston, Gabriel (from Research Branch, NC OA&H) ^[1]

GABRIEL JOHNSTON

Governor: 1734-1752

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]

See also: [Gabriel Johnson](#) ^[3], *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*

Gabriel Johnston (ca. 1698-17 July 1752) served longer than any Governor in North Carolina's history, eighteen years. Even more remarkable is that, due to problems collecting the quitrents ^[4] that paid his salary, he was uncompensated for thirteen of those years. Gabriel Johnston was born in Southdean, in the Scottish lowlands, to the Reverend Samuel Johnston and the former Isobel Hall. Records indicate that he was baptized on February 28, 1698. He was educated at the University of Edinburgh and the University of St. Andrews, receiving a Masters degree from the latter. He studied medicine briefly at the University of Leiden, in Holland, leaving there in 1722 to accept an appointment to teach Hebrew and Oriental Languages at St. Andrews. In 1740 Johnston made an advantageous match with his first wife, Penelope Golland, the thrice-widowed stepdaughter of former Governor [Charles Eden](#) ^[5]. Before her death in 1741 they had one child, Penelope. Shortly thereafter he married Frances Button. His will mentions two other children, Henry and Carolina, believed to have been born out of wedlock. A fourth child, Polly, predeceased her father.

Around 1728 Johnston moved to London, where he lived in the home of Lord Wilmington, president of the Privy Council. During the time he wrote political articles and met many influential men. It is likely the London connections that helped Johnston to secure the governorship of North Carolina in 1733. He arrived at his post in October 1734 in a colony that welcomed new leadership. After three turbulent years under [George Burrington](#) ^[6], colonists still condemned many of the realities of being a royal colony, such as heavy, inflexible quitrents and a less powerful lower house. After years of a relatively lenient proprietary government, North Carolinians were resistant to strict royal authority.

Blank land patents were another vestige of the proprietary period to which the colonists clung. Proprietary land agents had sold blank patents ^[7], allowing the purchaser to fill in locations and amounts of land. Many such patents were never properly registered or taxed. Johnston's plan to end this practice was not popular with the wealthy men from the southern counties who owned thousands of acres from blank patents. The governor ultimately compromised and recognized many of these patents provided the owners could provide some measure of documentation. He angered many of the same men when he advocated the establishment of Newton in 1735, later named Wilmington. Johnston facilitated the opening of a port and ordered several government offices and courts to move there, taking commerce away from Brunswick, which would never recover its status in North Carolina.

Johnston's term saw many changes in North Carolina, including the first printer and the first newspaper and printed laws, new agricultural techniques, and the building of several forts. Most notably, North Carolina's population tripled, thanks in part to Johnston's efforts in encouraging immigration, especially from his native Scotland. As a result North Carolina's settlements expanded westward and Johnston saw several new counties formed. Johnston died on July 17, 1752, and was buried at the plantation he inherited from Penelope, "Eden House," near Edenton.

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[WorldCat](#) ^[9] (Searches numerous library catalogs)

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Eden House, Edenton, N.C. "From *The architecture of colonial America* ^[10] (1915) by Harold Donaldson Eberlein (p.88).

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