

Abercromby (or Abercrombie), James ^[1]

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by Michael G. Martin, Jr., 1979

1707–1775

James Abercromby (or Abercrombie), colonial ^[2] agent and member of Parliament, was born in Tullibody, Clackmannanshire, Scotland. He was the third son of Alexander Abercromby, M.P. There were many branches of the Abercromby family of Clackmannanshire in the eighteenth century, all noted for their wealth, legal training, military careers, and staunch Whiggish ^[3] leanings. Following preparatory training at Westminster in London, James Abercromby attended [Leyden University](#) ^[4] in Holland from 1724 to 1726. In the latter year he returned to London, entering [Lincoln's Inn](#) ^[5] to study law. He was admitted to the bar in 1728. However, as was the case with many who studied at Lincoln's Inn, Abercromby chose a career in public service rather than law.

In 1730 Abercromby left England for South Carolina, having received an appointment as attorney general for the colony. He held this position for fifteen years and, during the period from 1739 to 1760, also served as a member of the South Carolina assembly. He was one of the South Carolina commissioners appointed to run the boundary line between that colony and North Carolina in 1735 and 1736. During the [French and Indian War](#) ^[6] (1754–63) James Abercromby held two positions: from 1757 to 1765 deputy auditor general for plantations and from 1758 to 1764 agent for the Royal American Regiment, which was commanded by a cousin also named James Abercromby. In 1760 Abercromby returned to England and a year later, through attachment to Thomas Pelham-Holles, Duke of Newcastle, gained the seat for Clackmannan and Kinross in Parliament. However, he did not join Newcastle's open opposition to the Lord Bute government, as expected, choosing instead to support the 1762 Anglo-French peace negotiations that led to the [Peace of Paris](#) ^[7], 1763. Later he rejoined the Newcastle Whigs in opposing repeal of the [Stamp Act](#) ^[8] in 1766 and passage of [William Pitt's](#) ^[9] land tax bill in 1767.

The following year Abercromby retired from Parliament. He returned to Clackmannanshire where, until his death seven years later, he lived on a small parliamentary pension awarded in 1764.

Abercromby is best remembered for his contributions as colonial agent. During his career in this capacity he served three colonies: South Carolina from 1742 to 1757, Virginia from 1754 to 1774, and North Carolina from 1759 to 1763. Although a staunch Whig, Abercromby as an agent was in no way a proponent of colonial self-reliance or self-determinism. In fact, he was outspokenly in favor of colonial subservience and strict enforcement of mercantilist trade regulations. While these views can be seen in his opposition to repeal of the [Stamp Act](#) ^[8] in 1766, they are expressed most clearly in a treatise submitted in 1752 to [Robert D'Arcy](#) ^[10], the Earl of Holderness and secretary of state for the North, under the title *An Examination of the Acts of Parliament Relative to the Trade and Government of Our American Colonies: Also the Different Constitutions of Government in those Colonies Considered with Remarks by way of a Bill for Amendment of the Laws of this Kingdom in relation to the Government and Trade of those Colonies: Which Bill is Humbly Submitted to the Consideration of His Majesty's Ministers of State, more particularly those in Office, before whom the Several Matters herein Treated are properly Cognizable: And for whose Use this Performance is intended.* ^[11] While as verbose in content as in title, the pamphlet has been characterized by the historian [Charles M. Andrews](#) ^[12] as the best available eighteenth-century presentation of the mercantilist system. The main points of Abercromby's argument were that the colonies were founded to benefit England and that it was solely Parliament's responsibility to enforce this relationship by statute. Should Parliament not move to assume its responsibility, Abercromby predicted that the American colonies, while in 1752 still divided in interest and action, would eventually realize their common concerns and unite as an independent confederation. To prevent this occurrence, Abercromby urged the passage of a statute clearly stating and providing for the firm enforcement of colonial subservience to the mother country. Thereby, he argued, colonial self-assertiveness would be stemmed and the growing population and prosperity of America could be channeled to the best interests of Britain and the British people.

With such ideas, it is not surprising that Abercromby was a strong supporter of the royal governor and the "prerogative party" in contests with the colonial assembly. As agent for the Virginia colony in the late 1750s, he uncompromisingly supported [Governor Robert Dinwiddie](#) ^[13] in his dispute with the House of Burgesses over the pistole fee. When Dinwiddie's successor [Francis Fauquier](#) ^[14], attempted to cool the burgesses' anger by allowing the lower house to appoint its own agent, Abercromby was bitter in his denunciation of the governor for such a show of weakness. Thereafter he did little for the colony. While his devotion to duty can be documented by his frequent attendance at sessions of the [board of trade](#) ^[15], his actions were often at odds with the best interests of the colony he represented. The principles of colonial subservience and mercantilism held priority in his mind. As agent for South Carolina, his efforts before the board of trade on the salt monopoly and on colonial defense clearly reveal his devotion to England's best interests. In his service to North Carolina, Abercromby was exhaustive in his aid to [Governor Gabriel Johnston](#) ^[16] against assembly criticism of the latter's "tyranny" in the passage of the 1746 representation act. Likewise, he provided [Governor Arthur Dobbs](#) ^[17] with unqualified aid during the [equitrent](#) ^[18] controversy of the 1750s. These actions raised the ire of the North Carolina lower house, and renewal of Abercromby's appointment was hotly contested before it was passed in 1758. Ironically, the council objected to his reappointment as North Carolina agent in 1760, labeling him "a tool of the Assembly cabal."

By 1760 Abercromby's usefulness as a colonial agent had begun to decline. The rising tide of colonial "independency" ran counter to all the ideals he held dear. While he continued as North Carolina's agent until 1763 and as Virginia's until 1774, he was agent in name only, for the representation of these colonies had passed to men whose ideas were more compatible with the interests of the lower houses.

Due possibly to the travel required by his service as agent for three colonies, Abercromby never married. At his death he was buried in the Abercromby family graveyard in Clackmannan. It is perhaps fortunate that he did not live to see the final repudiation of his ideas on colonial policy in the [American Revolution](#) ^[19].

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Additional Resources:

James Abercromby in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography:<http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/68/101068426/> ^[20]

Colonial and State Records Documents by Abercromby, James, 1707-1775, UNC Libraries:<https://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/creators/csr10249> ^[21]

James Abercromby in the History of the Parliament:<http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790/member/abercromby-james-1707-75> ^[22]

James Abercromby Results in WorldCat:https://www.worldcat.org/search?q=au%3AAbercromby%2C+James&qt=hot_author ^[23]

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