

Child, Thomas ^[1]

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fl. 1720-1790s

Thomas Child was an [attorney general](#) ^[2], legislator, as well as an agent and attorney to [John Carteret](#) ^[3]. Child was born in 1720 or 1721 in the vicinity of Sudbury, Suffolk County, England. He was the youngest of three sons of Richard Child, a physician in that county. It is likely that Child was educated in the Yorkshire school of Dr. Kinsman at Bury, like his brothers Richard and John. While Child's brothers went to Caius College in Cambridge, he read law in the Middle Temple in the early 1740s. On April 22, 1746, Child was admitted a member of the Middle Temple and made a junior barrister, or junior lawyer, on May 30.

Late in 1745, Child's father, Dr. Richard Child, learned of a vacancy in North Carolina's attorney generalship; he encouraged Thomas to apply for appointment to the vacant office. Thomas Child applied in December 1745, and the appointment was granted on February 8, 1746. Child left for North Carolina soon thereafter.

Child's initial appearance in North Carolina was in June 1746, when he assumed the duties of attorney general in the colony's general court. Within a few months, however, he had returned to London with the consent of Governor [Gabriel Johnston](#) ^[4]. To Johnston, Child explained that affairs at home necessitated his return; in London, however, he reported to the secretary of state for the southern provinces that he had been compelled to leave North Carolina because of the unrest and confusion in the colony. In late 1748 and early 1749, Child joined an anti-Johnstonian party that sought the governor's removal by denouncing him to the [board of trade](#) ^[5]. This party included: [Francis Corbin](#) ^[6], one of Earl Granville's protégés; land speculator [Henry McCulloh](#) ^[7] and some of his associates; and other merchants. Child's accusations against Johnston included: maladministration in the [court of chancery](#) ^[8] and the court of ordinary; imposition of inflationary economic policies; the granting of commissions to unfit and disloyal persons; and attempts to intermeddle arbitrarily in legislative representation. These charges were outside the scope of his office as attorney general, and their validity was debatable. The board of trade was not sufficiently moved by the testimony presented to it to recommend Johnston's dismissal from office.

While in London, in addition to agitating for Johnston's removal, Child sought appointment as proprietary agent to John Carteret, Earl Granville. Child was given a commission and power of attorney to Granville on October 18, 1749. He shared the duties of agent to the earl with Francis Corbin. Both agents returned to the colony, but after they had opened the proprietary land office in [Edenton](#) ^[9] in October 1750, Child returned to London and stayed for nearly a decade. He continued acting on Granville's behalf in proprietary affairs and gradually took on work that had been overseen by Corbin.

Child was an Anglican. He was first married at the age of twenty-eight to the heiress Jane Arthington of Arthington, Yorkshire. They married at St. Dunstan in the West, London on June 12, 1749. After her death, he married Ann Faver of Stafford, Staffordshire. They married at St. James, Westminster, on March 18, 1756. He is not known to have had children by either marriage.

By 1752, Granville warned the agents in the colony to be certain to remit all monies owing to Child, "as I shall particularly interest myself in his concerns." Child was entrusted with a role in the negotiations with the [Moravians](#) ^[10] in London for sale of tracts totaling nearly one hundred thousand acres within the proprietary, and the deeds transferring title to these tracts were drawn up by him. Similarly, he negotiated contracts between Henry McCulloh and Granville involving nearly three hundred thousand acres in the proprietary. Child guided the earl when grants of land from these tracts, drawn up by Corbin, resulted in legal action. The end result was that McCulloh had to renegotiate or forfeit upon expiration of the original contract. In January 1759, Corbin's mismanagement of the land office led to a riot and a direct attack on him and his coagent, [Joshua Bodley](#) ^[11]. Child persuaded Granville to remove Corbin and in April 1759 he became exclusive agent to the earl.

In July 1759, the Privy Council reaffirmed Child's commission of 1746 as attorney general of North Carolina, and by September he was back in the colony. His first action in the proprietary land office was to turn out all the Corbin appointees. He then forwarded to the courts of the proprietary counties his new plan of business for the land office, assuring the earl's tenants through the county justices that Earl Granville "will do any Thing on his part that may be yet wanting to the Establishment of People's Rights." Child further assured the tenants that in future dealings with his office, fairness and equity could be expected. In October he commissioned new entry takers, [surveyors](#) ^[12], and receivers of [quitrents](#) ^[13]. By July 1760, most of the backlog of delayed land grants, some of them pending completion for twelve years, were resolved, and the land office was restored to order.

While undertaking these reforms, Child became a supporter of the political and economic interests of the northern proprietary counties. Child and several others were active in the General Assembly on behalf of those counties during

1760 and 1761, when he represented Chowan County ^[14]. Governor Arthur Dobbs ^[15] labeled the group "the northern Junto" and denounced Child as an opponent of the royal prerogative. Dobbs also called for his dismissal as attorney general.

However, Child left of his own accord in 1761. He resigned as attorney general and selected Robert Jones as his successor. On July 25, 1761, Jones officially received his commission from Dobbs. Child also transferred part of his power in proprietary affairs to Jones. In August 1761, he left active management of proprietary affairs in the hands of Jones and moved to Suffolk, Virginia. From there he maintained an oversight of the proprietary affairs until April 1763, when the death of John Carteret closed the land office. Upon receipt of the news of the proprietor's death, Child settled his American affairs and returned to London. There he attempted to persuade the new proprietor, Robert, to sell him the proprietary lands in North Carolina. Though he was unsuccessful, Child was able to buy the quitrents from the nearly one hundred thousand acres owned by Moravian settlers. These he held until 1767, when he sold them back to the Moravians. While the amount Child paid and sold the quitrents for is unknown the fact that the Moravians were still paying for the purchase of the quitrents from Child in 1789 suggests it was profitable to him. With this sale, Child withdrew from North Carolina affairs. It is presumed that Child died in London in the early 1790s.

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Additional Resources:

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Subjects:

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Stevenson, George, Jr. ^[32]

Origin - location:

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