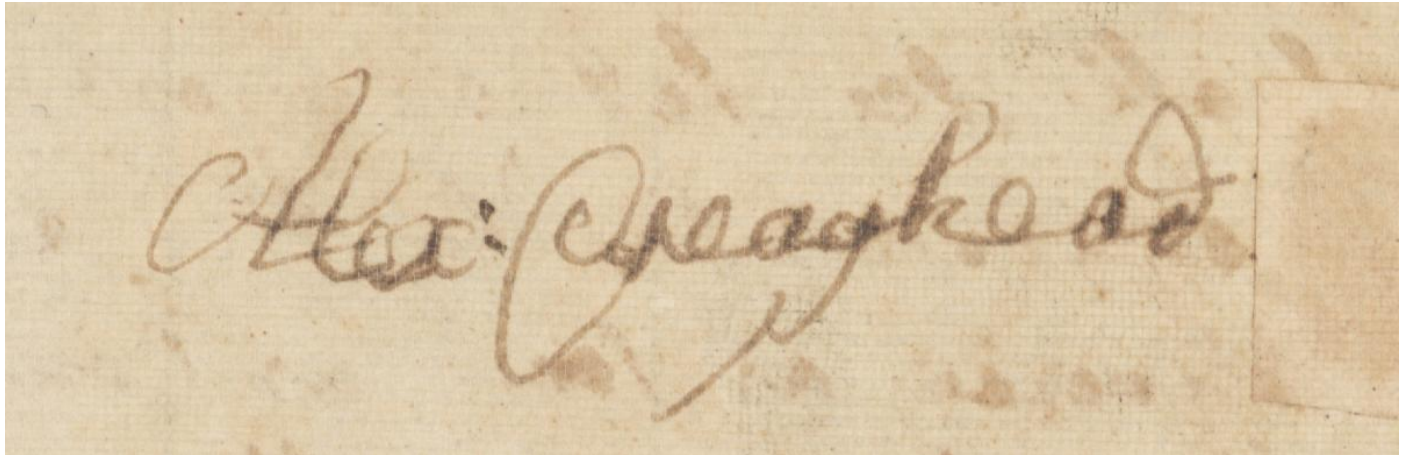


Craighead, Alexander ^[1]

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by David T. Morgan, 1979; Revised November 2022.

18 Mar. 1707–Mar. 1766



Signature of Alexander Craighead, from his Last Will and Testament, from the collections of the State Archives of North Carolina.

Alexander Craighead, maverick Presbyterian minister in Pennsylvania, Virginia, and North Carolina, was born the son of the [Reverend Thomas and Margaret Craighead](#) ^[2], near Donegal, Ireland. Arriving at Boston in October 1714, the Craigheads gradually drifted into Pennsylvania and joined the Donegal Presbytery and the Synod of Philadelphia. After studying the classics and theology under his father, Alexander was licensed to preach in 1734 and ordained in 1735. He then became minister to Middle Octorara Presbyterian Church in Lancaster County.

In 1740, Craighead was denounced from several quarters for meddling with the congregations of other ministers without an invitation; members of his own church accused him of reprehensible conduct. When hailed before a meeting of the presbytery in his own church, he heaped verbal abuse on the presbytery and charged a number of ministers, whose names he dared call, of various shortcomings in the performance of their duties. The presbytery suspended him, but he continued his ministry as if nothing had happened.

Craighead's zeal of 1740 may have been touched off by the evangelistic fervor that electrified the religious atmosphere of Pennsylvania after the visits of [George Whitefield](#) ^[3] late in 1739. The [Great Awakening](#) ^[4], of which the controversial Whitefield was the central figure, received Craighead's approval and support. Whitefield referred to Craighead as a worthy minister, but he might more appropriately have described the eccentric Presbyterian as cantankerous. In the Old Side-New Side controversy that split the Presbyterians in 1741, Craighead naturally joined the New Sides and with them was excommunicated from the Synod of Philadelphia. After that experience, Craighead began to identify himself as a rigid [Covenanter](#) ^[5] or Cameronian, meaning that he had adopted the views of Richard Cameron, a seventeenth-century Scottish Covenanter; the Cameronians refused to take the oath of allegiance to the British government or to hold office under it. Craighead also admired the teachings of Ebenezer Erskine, who formed the Scottish Secession church and denounced all secular control over the church.

By espousing Cameronian doctrines, which avowedly mixed theology and politics, Craighead soon precipitated a political disturbance. In 1743 there was published in Pennsylvania an anonymous pamphlet that everyone attributed to him. To the provincial authorities the pamphlet seemed "calculated to foment disloyal and rebellious practices, and disseminate principles of disaffection." Considering it most radical in tone, the governor complained to the Synod of Philadelphia. The synod, agreeing with the governor that the pamphlet was seditious, disavowed it and Craighead.

From 1743 to 1749, Craighead remained in Pennsylvania and presided over a group called the Covenanter Society. The year 1743 was an eventful one for him. To explain his withdrawal from the Donegal Presbytery during the preceding year, he wrote and published *The Reasons of Mr. Alexander Craighead's Receding from the Present Judicature's of This Church*. Benjamin Franklin printed the pamphlet at Philadelphia in the same year. In November 1743, Craighead called Covenanter Society members together at Middle Octorara and renewed the National and Solemn League Covenants that had once been adopted by the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. He then commemorated the event by writing *Renewal of the Covenants, Nov. 11, 1743* a pamphlet printed by Franklin in 1744.

In 1749, Craighead moved to Augusta County, Va., and became minister of the Mossy Creek Presbyterian Church. His views seem to have disturbed Governor Robert Dinwiddie of Virginia even more than the officials of Pennsylvania, for on 10 June 1752, Craighead was arrested for proclaiming doctrines that smacked of treason. Making every effort to straighten matters out, the Presbyterian clergyman made a plea to the governor's council. He was permitted to preach again but only if he recanted all disloyal stances and took a public oath of allegiance to the government. Whether Craighead ever met this condition is not clear, but he continued to live in Virginia for several more years, accumulating a considerable amount of wealth. Property in the form of land, and enslaved people (and their labor) accounted for this wealth. He also continued to be a member of the New-Side New York Synod.

Unsettled conditions in the back country during the French and Indian War prompted Craighead and some of his congregation to move to North Carolina in 1757. In November 1758 he was installed as pastor of the [Rocky River](#) ^[6] and [Sugaw Creek](#) ^[7] Presbyterian churches in [Mecklenburg County](#) ^[8]. Presiding at the ceremonies was William Richardson, a New-Side Presbyterian, who was being sent by the New Hanover Presbytery of Virginia to serve as a missionary to the [Cherokee](#) ^[9] Indians in South Carolina. Craighead's political views were as radical as ever, and he urged his congregations to resist, not cooperate with, the provincial government. In 1760, Craighead left Rocky River and devoted full-time to the Sugaw Creek Church, apparently because two officials of the Rocky River Church agreed to cooperate with the colonial government in working out the boundary line between North Carolina and South Carolina.

Craighead was married to a woman named Jane, whose surname is not known. He left to her his plantation and the rights to continue enslaving the people who worked there. Their children were Margaret, Agness, Jane, Rachel, Mary, Elizabeth, Robert, and Thomas. Agness married the minister William Richardson, and Rachel married [David Caldwell](#) ^[10], who was also a minister. One of Craighead's sons, Thomas, entered the ministry and at one point in his career served the Sugaw Creek Presbyterian Church.

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[Will of Alexander Craighead, c. 1765.] MARS Id: 5200.65.505, State Archives of North Carolina.

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