

Cray, William, Sr. ^[1]

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by Tucker Reed Littleton, 1979

1726–29 Nov. 1778

William Cray, Sr., councilor of state, legislator, county clerk, colonel of militia, merchant, and farmer, was of Scottish descent. He first appears in North Carolina records in 1746, when he recorded a power of attorney designating that he was from Charleston, S.C. In 1747 he proved another power of attorney in the [Carteret County](#) ^[2] court, and in 1749 he bought land on the east side of [New River](#) ^[3] in [Onslow County](#) ^[4]. In 1750 he was granted land on New River at the mouth of Duck Creek, where he resided for the rest of his life. As early as 1753, he appears as clerk of court for Onslow County; he served in that capacity until he was replaced by his son, William, Jr., in 1774. Deed records of 1753 reveal that he was a merchant (importer), that he had a brick kiln on Duck Creek, and that he engaged in the [naval stores](#) ^[5] trade.

In Onslow County, Cray held at one time or another the offices of clerk of the county court, register, colonel of the militia, and county coroner. He probably filled all these offices simultaneously during most of his public career, as one report to the assembly seems to indicate. His first twelve years as Onslow clerk of court—perhaps the most important formative period of his life—were spent in close association with Colonel [John Starkey](#) ^[6], whom Governor [Arthur Dobbs](#) ^[7] considered the most dangerous exponent of democratic principles in the colony. Cray not only served the local court, which Starkey dominated, but also entered the House of Commons as Starkey's junior partner during the last session in which Starkey served; Starkey's ideals and principles no doubt profoundly influenced the young Cray and helped to prepare him for the role he would later play in the struggle for liberty.

Cray in 1761 was appointed by the assembly one of three commissioners to improve and promote the navigation of New River Inlet. Three years later, Onslow County sent Cray to the North Carolina House of Commons to serve in the sixth assembly under Governor Dobbs (1764–65). Cray was reelected to represent Onslow County in the first and second assemblies under [William Tryon](#) ^[8] (1766–70), and he also served in the first, third, and fourth assemblies under [Josiah Martin](#) ^[9] (1771, 1773–75). In 1774 and 1775 he represented Onslow County in the First and Second [Provincial Congresses](#) ^[10]. In 1777 the county sent Cray to the North Carolina Senate, where he served until shortly after his election to the council of state on 18 Apr. 1777. He resigned his seat in the senate following his election to the council, and the council promptly elected him to serve as its president, succeeding [Cornelius Harnett](#) ^[11], who was elected to the Continental Congress. From then until Cray's death, the assembly kept him on the council of state, and the council kept him in its office of president—the second highest position in the state government of that time. His second election to the council came on 18 Apr. 1778, just slightly over seven months before his death.

In his career in the assembly, Cray rapidly advanced to some of its most influential committees and positions, gaining many of the places of prestige and honor that Starkey had held. Cray was one of the assemblymen most frequently sent as liaison between the commons and the council or senate, as well as between the assembly and the governors. He served on the Committee on Public Accounts throughout his career in the assembly and also sat on various committees to prepare special legislation. He was appointed, along with Cornelius Harnett and [Joseph Hewes](#) ^[12], to examine and settle the claims of the forces in the [War of the Regulators](#) ^[13]. On occasions when the house resolved itself into a committee of the whole, Cray was unanimously chosen chairman. In 1769 he also served on a seven-member committee to prepare the reply to Governor Tryon's speech and on a committee investigating allegations against [Thomas Person](#) ^[14]. In 1770 he was chairman of the Committee of Privileges and Elections.

Cray's military genius and administrative efficiency in the training of the Onslow militia earned him a place among the seven colonels chosen by Governor Tryon to participate in his council of war and to share the leadership in the campaign against the Regulators. Toward the end of April 1771, Cray marched the Onslow militiamen to a rendezvous in [Johnston County](#) ^[15], where they were reviewed by the governor. After the [Battle of Alamance](#) ^[16], Cray was appointed to sell the captured horses and to account to the public treasurer for the monies received. He was one of five colonels appointed by Governor Tryon to receive the expense accounts for the Regulator War and to make a full report and settlement to Tryon's successor as governor.

Not serving in the assembly of 1772, Cray had time for personal business pursuits and decided to invest in the new port town being developed in the southeastern corner of Onslow. In 1773 he bought one-twelfth of the lots comprising the original town of Swansboro; his son-in-law, Joseph French, bought almost as many. To what extent Cray was able to make commercial use of these lots before the revolutionary cause claimed his full attention, we do not know.

From the beginning of the movement for independence, Cray was a thorough Patriot. He appears to have been head of the [committee of safety](#) ^[17] for Onslow County from the beginning in 1775, and he was also appointed to the committee of safety for the Wilmington District that same year. In conjunction with the [Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge](#) ^[18] in 1775, he led the Onslow minutemen in the strategy that prevented the passage of the Loyalists through [Duplin County](#) ^[19]. He was

reappointed colonel of the Onslow militia and minutemen in 1775 and 1776, and in 1776 and 1777 he was named on both commissions of the peace for Onslow County.

Cray's election to the senate in 1777 opened the door to his most significant public service. Moving from the senate to the council of state and thence to the presidency of the council, he reached one of the most powerful positions in the government, where he influenced the planning and directing of North Carolina's role in the American Revolution [20]. In council and at home, he never wavered in his loyalty to the Patriot cause but seized every opportunity to strengthen that cause, expelling from Onslow any who sympathized with the enemy and executing five deserters from the ranks of the Continental Line.

Cray's last official function was presiding over the council session that opened on 9 Sept. 1778. His death shortly thereafter must have come unexpectedly. He was originally buried on his Duck Creek Plantation, but when the Camp Lejeune Marine Corps Base [21] was established, Cray's gravestones and those of his family were moved to the Montford Point Cemetery near Jacksonville, N.C.

In 1746, Cray married Mary Magdalene de Gignilliat (b. 3 June 1726) of Charleston, S.C. She was the daughter of Henry de Gignilliat and Esther Marion; the famous Revolutionary general Francis Marion was her first cousin.

Cray apparently had three children who predeceased him: Gabriel, who died in 1767 at the age of twelve; Hester, who died in 1765, aged sixteen months; and one child whose gravestone is so eroded that only the first initial, "R," can now be read. Cray in his will refers to his wife and five children: William, Jr., who married Elizabeth Randall; Mary, who married first Joseph French, Jr., and second William Gibbs; Joseph Scott, who married Frances Howard; Henrietta, who was not twenty-one years old at the time of her father's will; and Charlotta, who married first James Davis and second Enoch Hancock.

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