

## **Fanning, William** <sup>[1]</sup>

### **Fanning, William**

by Claiborne T. Smith, Jr., 1986

**26 Oct. 1728–1782**

**See also:** [Edmund Fanning](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, brother.

William Fanning, clergyman of the established church, was born at Riverhead, Long Island, N.Y., the son of Captain James and Hannah Smith Fanning. On 10 Mar. 1754 he was ordained priest by the Bishop of Gloucester in England, and seventeen days later he left for America at the direction of the Bishop of London. By 1758 the Reverend Mr. Fanning had assumed his duties as the first rector of St. George's Parish, [Northampton County](#) <sup>[3]</sup>. This parish had been established by the North Carolina Assembly in that year by a division of Northwest Parish. On 3 Jan. 1759 Joseph Thomas sold "The Revd. Doct. William Fanning of the parish of St. George" 350 acres on the [Roanoke River](#) <sup>[4]</sup>. Among the witnesses to the deed was William's younger brother [Edmund](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, later to play a stormy role in the history of the colony.

Unlike the majority of the colonial clergy in North Carolina, Fanning was not a missionary under sponsorship of the [Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts](#) <sup>[5]</sup>. His stay in Northampton was a short one for on 4 Mar. 1761, as "William Fanning, present minister of the parish of Tilletson" in Albermarle County, Va., he sold his North Carolina lands. On 3 Oct. 1765, however, he again purchased land in Northampton on the Meherrin River near the Virginia border. This bears out a tradition mentioned by Bishop William Meade that Fanning had become rector of Meherrin Parish in what is now Greenville, the Virginia county just above Northampton.

In 1772 Fanning married Mary Gray, the widow of Littleton Tazewell and the daughter of Joseph Gray, of "the White House," a prominent citizen of Southampton County, Va. During the [American Revolution](#) <sup>[6]</sup> he was in Greenville County, Va., as from there he wrote Thomas Jefferson asking for a passport for his relative John Wickham, a [loyalist](#) <sup>[7]</sup>, who was a prisoner of the patriots and wanted to leave the country. Jefferson replied that Wickham must be considered an enemy and prisoner of war. He added that the Virginia government was "thoroughly satisfied of the decided principles of Whigism which has distinguished the Character of the revered Mr. Fanning that they shall think this young Gentleman perfectly safe under his Care." Jefferson was to hear of Wickham again many years later. As a brilliant Richmond lawyer, Wickham was chief defense attorney for [Aaron Burr](#) <sup>[8]</sup> at his trial for treason in 1807.

Fanning died at the residence of his sister-in-law, Mrs. John Flood Edmunds, in Brunswick County, Va. The only record of issue was a daughter who married the John Wickham mentioned above. A son of this marriage, William Fanning Wickham, resided at Hickory Hill, Hanover County, Va. During the Civil War, General Robert E. Lee's son, "Rooney," was captured by the Federals while recuperating from war wounds at the Wickham home.

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#### **Additional Resources:**

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Brown, Douglas Summers. *The will and the man: the Reverend William Fanning* <sup>[10]</sup>. Emporia, Va: Mrs. H.D. Brown. 1985.

#### **Subjects:**

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**Origin - location:**

Northampton County <sup>[15]</sup>

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