

Hamilton, John ^[1]

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Hamilton, John

by Carole Watterson Troxler and Arthur C. Menius, 1988

d. 12 Dec. 1816

John Hamilton, merchant in late colonial North Carolina and Virginia, commander of the largest provincial corps of North Carolina [loyalists](#) ^[2], and British diplomat, was born in Scotland, probably near Glasgow. The Clyde ports became the locus of Scotland's spectacular economic growth in the eighteenth century—a movement in which John Hamilton and his kinsmen participated. Sometime between 1755 and 1760 Hamilton arrived in Nansemond County, Va., where in 1760 his three brothers, Archibald, William, and James, were already engaged in commercial ventures. John formed a partnership with Archibald, perhaps William, and their uncle, John Hamilton of Dowan, a Glasgow merchant. The firm, originally called William Hamilton and Company, seemingly prospered; it spread into North Carolina within two years and established a major commercial center at Hamilton Hill on Elk Marsh, six to eight miles west of the town of Halifax.

Due to the nature of their trade and clientele, the Hamiltons extended a great deal of credit, thereby making a major contribution to the development of the Piedmont. Moreover, their firm engaged in extensive land speculation. These two strains merged in the attempt to establish a commercial outpost in [Wake County](#) ^[3]—a project that never succeeded due to the [American Revolution](#) ^[4]. Hamilton and Company's largescale involvement in the [backcountry](#) ^[5] seems to suggest that east-west sectionalism in colonial North Carolina may have been overemphasized by scholars. The Atlantic network of trade and credit in which the firm operated, however, required that the British Empire, at least in a commercial sense, remain intact. Thus, the coming of the American Revolution doomed Hamilton and Company.

By 1775 the firm found it nearly impossible to collect its debts, despite the respect it apparently earned from many North Carolinians, and was forced to greatly restrict its activities. The inevitable occurred in August 1777, when John and Archibald Hamilton, as well as several of their employees, refused the oath of allegiance required by the new state. Given two months to leave North Carolina, the Hamiltons tried desperately to reduce their losses before sailing from New Bern on a ship purchased for that purpose on 25 Oct. 1777. The brothers would later claim that their departure, a consequence of their loyalism, cost them close to £200,000 in land, personal property, and especially debts.

In New York the Hamiltons separated; John offered his services to the British military, whereas Archibald, burdened by a family, returned to Glasgow. After serving as a messenger between General William Howe and General Sir Henry Clinton, John Hamilton received authorization to raise loyalist troops in conjunction with the new British campaign in the South. His commission specified that the number of men he recruited would determine his rank. When the British attacked Savannah, he took about 30 refugees there; they formed the nucleus of the North Carolina Volunteers (later the [Royal North Carolina Regiment](#) ^[6]). Lieutenant Colonel Hamilton commanded the corps, which mustered a peak membership of about 750 men. North Carolinians—refugees in South Carolina and Georgia, as well as those who joined Cornwallis's march through North Carolina—composed the main part of the unit. Hamilton commanded his troops at the siege of Savannah and the battles of Briar Creek, Kettle Creek, Stono Ferry, Monck's Corner, Hanging Rock, [Camden](#) ^[7], [Guilford Court House](#) ^[8], and Yorktown, where he surrendered with 80 of his men. He was wounded three times in the king's service. Cornwallis later wrote that "his conduct as a citizen and soldier appear to me highly meritorious and I think he deserves a mark of the gratitude of his country." In 1782 the Royal North Carolina Regiment absorbed the North Carolina Highlanders, organized by royal governor [Josiah Martin](#) ^[9] before the [Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge](#) ^[10] and reactivated in 1781.

When the British evacuated Charles Town in the autumn of 1782, the 142 men remaining in the Royal North Carolina Regiment, along with the South Carolina Royalists and the King's Carolina Rangers (primarily a Georgia group), were transferred to St. Augustine, Fla., under Hamilton's command. When the loyalists in East Florida learned that their new home had been ceded to Spain, plans for an insurrection to prevent the Spanish from taking possession gained currency. These schemes led to the proposal that the erstwhile merchant lead a mutiny to spark the uprising; his firm refusal and his avowal to oppose any such activities contributed greatly to maintaining the peace in East Florida during this difficult time.

From East Florida the Royal North Carolina Regiment went to Nova Scotia and disbanded there in November 1783. Hamilton probably went with the troops, but by June 1784 he was in London seeking compensation for his losses as a loyalist—an endeavor that would occupy the next six years. Receiving half pay as a lieutenant colonel, Hamilton settled at Portland Place in a London neighborhood frequented by Tory refugees. He apparently married during this period, for by

the summer of 1785 he listed a wife and small child among his dependents. Little is known about his personal life except for a suggestive statement by [Willie Jones](#) ^[11] in a letter to Archibald Hamilton, dated 19 May 1786, that he was "exceedingly sorry for his [John Hamilton's] misfortune in loosing his children." In London, despite any personal problems, Hamilton became a spokesman for a group of former southern merchants. The British government gave him and two partners £8,000 as compensation for their American losses. In 1790, however, this entire sum went to their Scottish creditors. In 1806, Hamilton and his partners received further compensation of £5,630 after their case was reopened as a result of the Jay Treaty.

Like many once wealthy southern loyalists, Hamilton looked to the Bahama Islands as a favorable place to rebuild his life, trying in vain to secure appointment as governor there. Finally in 1790 he became British consul in Norfolk, Va.—a post he held until returning to England shortly after the outbreak of the [War of 1812](#) ^[12]. Only two other American loyalists received such consular appointments. The poet Thomas Moore, who visited the consulate in Norfolk during 1803, found Hamilton "a plain and hospitable man, and his wife full of homely, but comfortable and genuine civility." Moreover, Moore felt that the consul "is one among the very few instances of a man, ardently loyal to his King, and yet beloved by the Americans. His home is the very temple of hospitality; and I sincerely pity the heart of that stranger who, warm from the welcome of such a board, could sit down to write such a libel on his host, in the true spirit of a modern philosopher."

Hamilton died in England. Friends and enemies alike remarked on his kindness and integrity. He was described as "a short, stout, red-faced man; well bred, and well fed."

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Additional Resources:

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