

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

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## **Heritage, William**

by George-Anne Willard, 1988

**ca. 1707–69**

William Heritage, lawyer and planter, served for thirty years as clerk of the General Assembly of North Carolina. His early life remains shrouded in mystery and his parentage unknown. Heritage arrived in North Carolina from Essex County, Va., in the early 1730s. By 1736, he had settled in [Craven County](#) <sup>[2]</sup> and had begun to acquire large tracts of land. Evidently well educated and knowledgeable in the law, he quickly won the respect of colonial leaders.

Heritage became a resident of New Bern and by 1740 had married Susannah Moore, daughter of Adam Moore (Mohr) who had been one of the original Palatine settlers of the town. Heritage took part in various civic activities, and he served on the commission responsible for building Christ Church. In 1741 he provided the Craven County Court with the first census of New Bern, which listed twenty-one families.

As a member of the colonial aristocracy, Heritage was a major planter in his area and held extensive land on the Neuse and Trent rivers. In the 1750s, he established residence a few miles from New Bern at a plantation known as Springfield. During his life, he took part in land transactions involving fifteen town lots in New Bern and over 7,000 acres in Craven and [Dobbs](#) <sup>[3]</sup> (now [Lenoir](#) <sup>[4]</sup>) counties. At his death, his heirs inherited three plantations, seven lots, and two stores in New Bern, an additional 2,200 acres, and sixty-five slaves. The inventory of his estate revealed a personal library of over two hundred books. Almost half of his literary holdings were law books, but his reading interests ranged from the *Book of Common Prayer* to the works of Aristotle and Locke.

As a notable lawyer, Heritage appeared frequently before the Craven County [Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions](#) <sup>[5]</sup>, representing clients in cases involving land titles, the settlement of estates, and the licensing of businesses. In 1739, he was appointed the first King's Attorney for Craven County.

Heritage played an influential part in the political life of the colony as clerk of the lower house of the Assembly. He was chosen unanimously for the office in 1739 and continued in the position until his death, serving under six different speakers of the house and three royal governors. During his unusually lengthy term, he became involved in controversy and was called upon to give evidence in charges against the chief justice and in arguments over representation in the Assembly. Paid by the house, responsible to it rather than to the governor, and involved in the passage and recording of the colony's laws, Heritage held a legislative office second in importance only to that of the speaker.

One law of personal interest to Heritage was that of 1762 which provided for the establishment of Kingston on land he owned on the [Neuse River](#) <sup>[6]</sup>, thus earning him the title of founder of present-day Kinston. He had acquired the land, known as Atkins Bank, in 1744 for £399. From his 640-acre plot, he provided 100 acres for town lots and 50 for a town common. The bill was introduced in the Assembly by his son-in-law, [Richard Caswell](#) <sup>[7]</sup>, and members of the Heritage and Caswell families became prominent in the early development of the town and in efforts to further trade along the Neuse.

Heritage was married three times, first to Susannah Mohr, then to Susannah Franck (daughter of [John Martin Franck](#) <sup>[8]</sup>), and in 1761 to Sarah Lovick (widow of [Thomas Lovick](#) <sup>[9]</sup> of [Carteret County](#) <sup>[10]</sup>). He had seven children who survived to adulthood: Sarah, Heneage, Susannah, Anna, John, William Martin, and Elizabeth. John saw action in the Revolutionary War and service in the lower house; Sarah married Richard Caswell, who became governor of the new state in 1776.

Heritage died in the spring of 1769 and was probably interred at Springfield plantation. He left no known portrait or likeness, but he did leave a reputation as a prosperous, respected colonial leader. In 1914, historian [R. D. W. Connor](#) <sup>[11]</sup> described Heritage's accomplishments: "The records of his time reveal him to us as a planter who cultivated his broad acres with great skill and success; as an attorney who managed large affairs for his clients with distinguished ability and fidelity; as a citizen whose services were always at the command of the community; as a public official who for thirty years bore a large and significant part in directing the legislation of the Colony."

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#### **Additional Resources:**

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#### **Subjects:**

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Lawyers <sup>[18]</sup>

Planters <sup>[19]</sup>

Political leaders <sup>[20]</sup>

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UNC Press <sup>[22]</sup>

#### **Authors:**

Willard, George-Anne <sup>[23]</sup>

#### **Origin - location:**

Craven County <sup>[24]</sup>

New Bern <sup>[25]</sup>

Lenoir County <sup>[26]</sup>

Kinston <sup>[27]</sup>

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Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press. <sup>[28]</sup>

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[12] <https://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/creators/csr10274>

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