

Innes, James ^[1]

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by Claiborne T. Smith, Jr., 1988

ca. 1700–5 Sept. 1759

James Innes, colonial officer and official, seems to have been born at Canisby in Caithness in the extreme northern part of Scotland. The parish records there for the time of his probable birth are incomplete. His arrival in North Carolina in 1733, about the same time as Governor [Gabriel Johnston](#) ^[2], and his appointment by the governor shortly thereafter as a justice for New Hanover Precinct suggest a prior acquaintance in Scotland. In May 1735, Johnston appointed him assistant baron of the Exchequer Court and unsuccessfully recommended him for the Council.

In 1740 Innes was given a position of command in the expedition against the Spanish Caribbean stronghold of Cartagena, a phase of the war between England and Spain that had begun in 1739. It having been decided in London that colonial troops might be better suited for a tropical campaign, a regiment of foot was raised in the North American colonies for service in the West Indies by [Alexander Spotswood](#) ^[3], a former governor of Virginia. At his death in the spring of 1740, while the expedition was being readied, the command was assumed by Sir William Gooch, his successor as governor of that colony. His regiment, four companies of which were raised in North Carolina, was known variously as Gooch's Americans, Gooch's Marines, or the American regiment.

On 7 June 1740, Innes was appointed captain with a provincial commission in the British Army and assigned command of the Cape Fear company of a hundred men. The names of the captains of the other three companies raised in the Albemarle section of the province—Pratt, Coletrain, and Holton—have been lost in obscurity. These companies met the Cape Fear group at Wilmington, and on 15 Nov. 1740 the North Carolina contingent sailed directly for Jamaica to rendezvous with the British regulars and the other colonial troops. They did not return for two years. According to a contemporary South Carolina newspaper, Innes carried letters of marque, enabling the transport to act as a [privateer](#) ^[4] should it encounter any Spanish ships on the way.

Most of the British colonies in North America were represented in the Cartagena campaign. Among the more prominent colonials who served in the American regiment was Lawrence Washington, the older brother of George Washington. The expedition, poorly planned and executed, ended in disaster. Although the British captured the forts at Boca Chico, the entrance to the harbor of Cartagena, the inner fortifications of the city successfully withstood a three-month siege and the British and colonial troops were decimated by fever. Moreover, the British regulars were strongly prejudiced against the native American regiment. The colonials were quartered on transports and British men-of-war. The field officers of Gooch's regiment, in a memorial to Major General Thomas Wentworth, commander in chief, dated 7 Feb. 1742 at Kingston, Jamaica, complained of the treatment their men were subjected to on the ships. It is significant that the first name on this document was that of James Innes. He was among the twenty-five survivors of the Cape Fear company who arrived in North Carolina in January 1743.

On returning to civilian life, Innes prospered as a planter and he was appointed colonel of militia of [New Hanover County](#) ^[5]. On 5 July 1750 he became a member of the Council following the death of [Eleazer Allen](#) ^[6] and served until his own death nine years later. Innes had been on the Council a little over a month when a Spanish ship was wrecked off Ocracoke on 18 August. Governor Gabriel Johnston immediately sent him to investigate as one well acquainted with the Spanish language and method of trading, no doubt because of his service in the West Indies. From 1751 to 1754, Innes was associated with [Francis Corbin](#) ^[7] as Proprietary agent for Lord Granville in the sale of his land.

Early in 1754, trouble broke out with the French in the Ohio country on the Virginia frontier. North Carolina promptly authorized the use of £12,000 and 750 men to assist in the defense of its sister colony and placed Innes in command of the force. According to historian William L. Saunders, these were the first troops raised by any British colony in America to fight outside its own borders on behalf of a common cause and in a common defense.

Governor [Robert Dinwiddie](#) ^[8] of Virginia, who had an astute perception of the threat posed by the French, spearheaded the Ohio expedition. In a letter of 23 Mar. 1754 to [Mathew Rowan](#) ^[9]—who as president of the Council, was governing North Carolina pending the arrival of Governor [Arthur Dobbs](#) ^[10]—Dinwiddie commended the appointment of Innes, observing that he was a man "whose capacity, judgement, and cool conduct I have great regard for." At some point in their respective careers, he and Innes, a fellow Scot, had become close friends. Dinwiddie, before becoming governor of Virginia in 1751, had been surveyor general of customs for the southern part of British America and may have had contact with Innes in that capacity. Governor Dinwiddie had considered appointing Innes commander in chief of the expedition from the start. Instead, however, the post was given to Joshua Fry, mapmaker, frontiersman, and a Virginia commissioner to continue the dividing line between that colony and North Carolina in 1751. Shortly afterwards, on 15 May 1754, Fry died in camp at Wills Creek, Md., while marching to the Ohio. By a commission dated 4 June, Dinwiddie named Innes to replace him. Young George Washington, who was second in command to Colonel Fry and might have expected to

succeed him, wrote to Dinwiddie on hearing of Colonel Innes's appointment: "I rejoyce that I am likely to be happy under the command of an experienced officer and man of sense. It is what I have ardently wished for." Washington may have known of Innes from his brother Lawrence as the two men had been comrades in arms at Cartagena.

While awaiting the arrival of the new commander, Washington continued the advance to the Ohio and built an entrenched camp called Fort Necessity in the Great Meadows near present Uniontown in southwestern Pennsylvania. Here in late May he surprised a French patrol and killed the leader. The French later retaliated in force and Washington surrendered Fort Necessity on 3 July 1754, withdrawing to Wills Creek. These two skirmishes marked the beginning of what became known as the French and Indian War ^[11], which at its end left England mistress of the North American continent.

North Carolina's participation in the Ohio expedition turned out to be unpleasant. In the latter part of June Innes and his troops began to assemble in Winchester, Va., too late to prevent Washington's defeat at Fort Necessity several hundred miles away. In his will, which he made in Winchester on 5 July 1754, Innes stated that the expedition was ready to go into action against the French and their Indian allies who had most unjustly established themselves on land belonging to the English king. But the campaign was plagued with difficulties from the start. The script issued by the province of North Carolina was not accepted outside its borders. No provision had been made for the supply and payment of the North Carolina troops as had been expected, so the men had to be disbanded and sent home. Innes's appointment as commander in chief was not popular among the Virginians or the officers from the other colonies.

Governor Dinwiddie, on the other hand, gave Innes his unqualified support. An obscure Scot settler in the area, writing home to his sister about the troubles on the frontier, reported with pride that a Scotsman was commanding the expedition. Dinwiddie kept a tight control of affairs from Williamsburg. Believing that the force was not strong enough to go into action, he directed Innes to proceed to Wills Creek, Md., a strategic location, and expand the fort George Washington had built there after his defeat at Fort Necessity. Innes renamed the post Fort Cumberland. It was the nucleus of the present city of Cumberland, the second largest in the state of Maryland. Innes remained at the fort with four hundred men, only a few of whom were from North Carolina. Early in October, Governor Horatio Sharpe of Maryland produced a commission from the king appointing him commander of the Ohio expedition. Relieved of the post that he had held for only five months, Innes wished to resign but was persuaded to remain with the title of campmaster general (by a commission dated 24 Oct. 1754), to continue organizing the troops, and to complete the fort. Governor Sharpe, however, did nothing.

In 1755 General Edward Braddock arrived from England with a large force of British regulars to march on the Ohio. On 24 June he appointed Innes governor of Fort Cumberland and left him in command when the forces moved on to Fort Duquesne on the present site of Pittsburgh. With the subsequent death of Braddock and the rout of his troops, his successor, Colonel Dunbar, retreated, stopping at Fort Cumberland long enough to leave in the care of Innes three or four hundred sick and wounded men. Innes was joined at the fort by Edward Brice Dobbs ^[12], the son of North Carolina's Governor Arthur Dobbs, who commanded a second detachment of North Carolina troops authorized by the Assembly in October 1754 for service in the Ohio campaign. This regiment missed action with Braddock near Fort Duquesne because at the time it was on a scouting expedition. After the battle, the flight of the British regulars disorganized the provincial troops and many under Dobbs's command deserted.

Innes remained at Fort Cumberland until the early fall, when he returned to North Carolina on a leave of absence. On 10 Oct. 1755, Robert Dinwiddie advised Arthur Dobbs that trouble had broken out around the fort and asked that Innes return. The colonel accordingly went back to Fort Cumberland and remained there until the summer of 1756. The situation by then had quieted down enough to permit his retirement from service. His fellow councillor and friend, James Murray ^[13], summed up the Ohio campaign by saying that Innes would have done better to stay at home to gather lightwood ^[14].

The few remaining years of Innes's life were uneventful, and he lived quietly at Point Pleasant, his plantation on the northeast branch of the Cape Fear River ^[15] not far from Wilmington, where he died and was buried. The dwelling house, described in 1775 as a handsome residence built on the British plan, burned in 1783. In his will, drawn up at Winchester in 1754, Innes stipulated that, after the death of his wife, his land, library, and considerable personal property was to be used for a free school for the youth of North Carolina. This legacy, the first private bequest for educational purposes in the history of the state, was not implemented until 1783, when the state legislature established the Innes Academy in Wilmington. Innes also provided in his will for the purchase of a bell for the parish church of Canisby in Caithness and left a bequest of £100 to be invested for the use of the poor of the same parish.

Innes had no children by his wife Jean, whose surname is unknown. It is likely that she, too, was a native of Caithness. In 1761 she married Francis Corbin ^[7], with whom her first husband had been associated as agent for Lord Granville. She made her will in 1775, leaving her property to the children of John Rutherford and his wife Frances, the widow of Governor Gabriel Johnston. Mrs. Innes died during the North Carolina visit of Janet Schaw, who left a graphic account in her journal of the lady's last days and funeral; she was buried between her two husbands at the foot of the lawn at Point Pleasant.

James Innes was one of the most important residents of North Carolina in his time. He has been described as an honorable man and an honest and efficient public servant. State historians, beginning with John Hill Wheeler ^[16], have tended to assume from a reference in Robert Dinwiddie's correspondence in 1754 to Innes as a former officer in His Majesty's Army, that Innes had had service prior to his arrival in North Carolina in 1733. Recent research in the archives of the War Office in London has not proved this to be the case. No doubt Dinwiddie was referring to Innes's provincial commission as captain in the Cartagena campaign.

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Additional Resources:

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