

Gilchrist, Thomas ^[1]

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by Claiborne T. Smith, Jr., 1986

ca. 1735–89

Thomas Gilchrist, merchant, was the subject of an unusual episode in the Revolutionary ^[2] annals of North Carolina. Married to Martha Jones, sister of the Halifax ^[3] Whig ^[4] leaders Willie and Allen Jones ^[5], Gilchrist for a time was under suspicion of treason. He was a native of Scotland, and there is some indication that he came from Galloway in the southwestern section of that country. With his brother, John, Thomas Gilchrist settled in Virginia and established a mercantile business in the town of Suffolk. While there he was active in the affairs of the Upper Parish in Nansemond County. He served as a vestryman and church warden, and in 1768 was directed to employ an attorney to prosecute one Lunan on behalf of the parish. The attorney engaged was Thomas Jefferson ^[6], and this is thought to have been the young lawyer's first case.

In 1773 Gilchrist went on a business trip to Scotland, leaving his affairs in the hands of his brother John, who was living in Norfolk. During his absence, John Gilchrist committed suicide and one John Campbell ^[7] became administrator of the estate. The American Revolution broke out before the estate could be settled, and Thomas Gilchrist, who on his return to America had settled in Halifax, N.C., was unable to secure his property. Campbell, an ardent Tory, left Norfolk when it was evacuated by Lord Dunmore and eventually went to Bermuda. According to the petition of Martha Jones Gilchrist to the Assembly of North Carolina ^[8], dated 1 Aug. 1778, her husband was loyal to the American cause but had to feign adherence to the king in order to obtain his property from John Campbell. Hence Thomas Gilchrist had left North Carolina without taking the required loyalty oath to the new state and followed Campbell to Bermuda. Successful in his mission, he immediately sailed to Savannah where he took the oath of allegiance to the state of Georgia. A short time later he did the same in South Carolina. Mrs. Gilchrist succeeded in obtaining permission for her husband to return to Halifax and his reputation was cleared. Though Willie Jones ^[9] was considered a political radical during the Revolution, his opposition to the Assembly's act of 1779 confiscating the estates of certain loyalists may have been influenced by the difficulties of his brother-in-law.

After the Revolution, Gilchrist moved to Tarboro, which was growing more rapidly than Halifax, where he was a town commissioner in 1785. His will, dated 6 Aug. 1789, was probated in Edgecombe County ^[10] in the fall of that year. It referred to his share in Richard Henderson ^[11]'s land company and named his brothers-in-law, Willie and Allen Jones, executors. Following his death, his widow moved back to Halifax where she died, leaving a will probated in 1800. Thomas and Martha Gilchrist were the parents of two daughters, Elizabeth and Grizelda, and a son, Allen. Elizabeth married Thomas Hogg, and Grizelda was the first wife of the Revolutionary hero, Colonel William Polk ^[12]. Allen Gilchrist represented the borough of Halifax in the House of Commons in 1805. After his marriage in 1806 to Dolly Lane, the daughter of Joel Lane ^[13] of Raleigh, he moved to Wake County ^[14], which he represented in the House of Commons in 1808. Afterward he and his wife left the state.

References:

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Deeds and Wills of Edgecombe County (County Courthouse, Tarboro).

Deeds and Wills of Halifax County (County Courthouse, Halifax).

Wilmer Hall, *The Vestry Book of the Upper Parish* (1954).

Thomas Jefferson, *Reports of Cases Determined in the General Court of Virginia from 1730 to 1740 and from 1768 to 1772* (1829).

Additional Resources:

Petition from Martha Gilchrist concerning Thomas Gilchrist's return to North Carolina. Gilchrist, Martha. August 01, 1778 Volume 13, Pages 465-467: <https://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr13-0531> ^[15]

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Authors:

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