

Little, William ^[1]

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William Little, merchant, planter, and politician, was the son of Lieutenant Isaac and Bethiah Little. Born in Marshfield, Mass., he was graduated from [Harvard](#) ^[2] in 1710, seventh in a class of thirteen. On 12 June 1712 he was admitted an inhabitant of Boston, and on 19 June he married Hannah Willard. Little was a merchant in Boston, but after the death of his wife on 29 Mar. 1715 he gradually relinquished his ties with that town and the Willard family.

Little traveled extensively, spending time in Ireland where he was converted to the [Church of England](#) ^[3] and was baptized by the bishop of Cork. Afterwards he went to England to study at Cambridge. While in England he became acquainted with the Yorkshire family of Gale and through this connection met [Christopher Gale](#) ^[4], chief justice of North Carolina, who advised him to move to that colony. Influencing Little's decision may have been the death in Carolina of his brother, Nathaniel, who had left him some property.

Little arrived in North Carolina by 1720 and settled in [Edenton](#) ^[5] by 1725. He began his political career in April 1724 by serving a brief term as attorney general of North Carolina at the appointment of Governor [George Burrington](#) ^[6]. Little resigned in November, probably because he assisted Christopher Gale in efforts to remove Burrington from office, but returned to the post in July 1725 by appointment from the [Lords Proprietors](#) ^[7]. In 1726 Governor [Sir Richard Everard](#) ^[8] appointed him receiver general of the colony. Little held both offices until the Crown purchased the Carolinas in 1729. In 1728 Everard also named Little one of the commissioners to survey the boundary between Virginia and North Carolina. In his "secret history" of the survey, William Byrd referred to Little as "Puzzle Cause," who delayed the commissioners by stopping at every house that promised refreshment and who conducted himself as "a very wicked, but awkward, Rake."

During the last years of Proprietary rule, Little, as receiver general, became involved in the [blank patent](#) ^[9] affair by which hundreds of thousands of acres of land were illegally engrossed. He also antagonized the lower house of the Assembly and alienated Everard. The Assembly ^[10] accused Attorney General Little of instituting suits to harass individuals and then accepting bribes to dismiss the actions. The legislature described Little, Gale, and [John Lovick](#) ^[11], secretary of the province, as evil, avaricious men who were disturbers of the peace, and Everard declared in 1729 that he had been misled by the three men, "the only enemies to the Repose and quiet of the colony." Later the governor asserted that "three more flagrant Villains never came out of the Condemn'd Hole in New Gate for Execution at Tyburn."

Although Little had supported the dismissal of Burrington as Proprietary governor, he effected a reconciliation with him when Burrington in 1731 became the first royal governor of North Carolina. It was suggested but never proved that Little won Burrington's favor by gifts of land. In 1732 Burrington appointed Little chief justice of the colony and clerk of the General Court. Little held the former post until his death two years later, despite assertions of his manifold illegal, arbitrary actions in public and private capacities, his unfitness for office, and his disaffection for the House of Hanover. When he chose to reply to his detractors, particularly the Assembly, the legislature accused him of "Perversion of Justice, Oppression and Extortion" and ordered his arrest for contempt. Burrington released the chief justice and used the occasion once more to excoriate the Assembly.

Little's will, dated 25 June 1734, was probated on 5 Sept. 1734. He may have arrived in North Carolina intending to establish a mercantile trade but his will does not indicate his participation in that business. His income derived principally from his political offices and from his land, the labor of the people he enslaved, and a half interest in a mill. Some of the property was mortgaged, and Burrington, asserting that Little had died in debt, felt that such circumstances exonerated the chief justice from charges of dishonesty. Little had married his second wife, Penelope Gale, daughter of Christopher Gale, in 1726, and by her had three children: Penelope (m. Robert Baker), William, and George.

References:

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[J. Bryan Grimes, ed., *North Carolina Wills and Inventories* \(1912\).](#) ^[13]

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