

Rainsford, Giles ^[1]

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by Claiborne T. Smith, Jr., 1994

b. 1679

Giles Rainsford, Anglican clergyman, was born in Dublin, Ireland, the son of Mark Rainsford. A pensioner at Trinity College ^[2] in Dublin on 2 Apr. 1695, he received an A.B. from Trinity in 1699 and an A.M. in 1705. Rainsford continued his education in England and was a fellow commoner at St. John's College ^[3], Cambridge, on 23 Mar. 1700. After his ordination by the bishop of London in 1702, he received the King's Bounty to go to Jamaica on 15 June of the same year. It is not known if he ever went to the West Indies and his record for the next several years is unclear.

On 8 Feb. 1711 Rainsford wrote the secretary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts ^[4] from his charge in Bury in the county of Suffolk and asked for a position. In 1712 the society sent him to North Carolina as a general itinerant missionary. On 25 July Rainsford reported that he had reached his destination after a twelve-week passage from England to Hampton, Va. At Hampton he was befriended by a merchant, Edmond Kearney, who provided a horse for his journey to North Carolina. Kearney, a fellow Irishman, was the brother of Thomas Kearney, who founded the family of that name in North Carolina. At his new post, Rainsford was warmly received by Governor Edward Hyde ^[5]. He divided Chowan Precinct ^[6] with the incumbent, the Reverend John Urmston ^[7], taking the west shore "where there is no church but a vast tract of land to ride over."

From his letters to the officials in London and from the lists of books he requested to be sent him, Rainsford had an active and inquiring mind. After only a few months in his new home, he became interested in the Indians. He had several conferences with Thomas Hoyle, king of the Chowan Indians, who wished to become a Christian. Rainsford was surprised to find that the Indian had some idea of Noah's flood, which had been passed down by oral tradition or, as the king expressed it, "my father told me, I tell my son." The Indian king had some thought of sending his children to a school run by a Mr. Mashburn at Sarum on the border between Virginia and North Carolina. Rainsford was impressed with the instruction given there and in view of his own qualifications, this was high praise indeed.

Unfortunately, Rainsford came to North Carolina shortly after the Tuscarora war ^[8] and conditions were unsettled. He was visited by a terrible "seasoning" and his life despaired of for some months. At least once he was captured by unfriendly Indians but was released. Early in 1713 the clergyman petitioned the governor of Virginia for a living in that colony for six months to recover. This was granted and he was assigned to Surry. The following year Rainsford became rector of the Lower Parish, Nansemond County, Va., and remained in that post for two years. He continued his interest in the Chowan Indians and seems to have visited his old mission area in North Carolina occasionally. On 19 Jan. 1715 Rainsford wrote to the London authorities that he had spent a total of five months in the Chowans' town and had almost mastered their language. He hoped to be able to minister to the Chowans at Fort Christiana, where the governor of Virginia was planning to move the tribe.

Rainsford returned to England for a visit in 1716. On 3 September of that year he received the King's Bounty to go to Maryland but returned to Virginia instead and became rector of St. Anne's Parish in Essex County. This did not meet with the approval of Governor Alexander Spotswood, who wished to present someone else. Rainsford, however, had the backing of both the vestry and Commissary James Blair. The argument became a test case, and an opinion obtained from the Inns of the Court in London was favorable to the vestry. Rainsford apparently remained at St. Anne's until 1720, when he moved to St. Paul's parish, Prince Georges County, Md. According to some accounts, he was in Culpepper County, Va., from 1718 to 1720; however, this county was not settled and organized until 1748. Rainsford was popular in Maryland. On 19 Apr. 1723 Governor Charles Calvert wrote the bishop of London that Rainsford was visiting England for his health and praised his character. The clergyman left St. Paul's four years later and returned to England for good. Rainsford married in Virginia in 1716 but there is no record of any children, and nothing is known of his later career.

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