

Sampson, John ^[1]

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by Donald R. Lennon, 1994

d. 1784

John Sampson, planter and colonial official, arrived in North Carolina during the 1730s from his native Ireland. He quickly obtained major landholdings in New Hanover County ^[2] and purchased a residence in Wilmington ^[3]. After the formation of Duplin County ^[4] from New Hanover in 1750, he became a leading planter and officeholder in the new county. In 1740 he became a justice of the peace for New Hanover County, and in 1747 the people of Wilmington elected him to its town commission. During 1749 he served as sheriff of New Hanover County, and two years later he was appointed inspector of commodities for the Cape Fear River ^[5]. Sampson evidenced an interest in military affairs by commanding militia troops in combating the Spanish invasion of 1748. By 1754 he was a lieutenant colonel of the Duplin militia (the Duplin Foot), and in 1768 Governor William Tryon ^[6] named him a lieutenant general at Hillsborough during the Regulator difficulties.

Sampson became involved in legislative affairs in 1747, when he was elected to the General Assembly ^[7]. As an assemblyman he served on the committee on public claims and on committees to prepare bills for creating Duplin, Rowan ^[8], and Anson counties ^[9]. He served in the legislature continuously until 1754, when he apparently left North Carolina and returned to Great Britain. While there he entered into an agreement with his uncle, George Vaughan, who offered to donate £1,000 annually for the support of an academy or seminary to educate Indians in North Carolina. This project was never realized.

Upon his return to North Carolina sometime prior to 1759, Sampson resumed an active public life. He became mayor and alderman of Wilmington in 1760 and a representative from Duplin County in the General Assembly in 1761. Governor Arthur Dobbs ^[10] appointed him to his Council during the fall of 1761; after taking the oath of office in November, Sampson faithfully served three succeeding royal governors as councillor. In the upper house he repeatedly served on the joint committee to settle public claims. He was also appointed to committees to inspect Fort Johnston ^[11] (1764), consider vestry acts (1764), select a town site at Cross Creek ^[12] (Campbellton), and decide on Assembly decorum (1768). Sampson disagreed with fellow Council members on the location for a permanent capital, and, along with John Rutherford and Lewis De Rosset, he opposed a Council resolution supporting New Bern ^[13] as the capital.

As difficulties with Great Britain mounted during the 1770s, Sampson found himself in the disagreeable position of opposing Governor Josiah Martin ^[14] while declaring complete loyalty and fidelity to Great Britain. When Sampson split with Martin on the highly controversial court bill issue, the governor requested that Sampson, along with Rutherford, De Rosset, William Dry ^[15], and Samuel Cornell ^[16], be dismissed from the Council for failure to support him. Martin complained that Sampson was "a man of middling fortune and of good moral character, but of very shallow understanding and an implicit follower of the opinions of Mr. De Rosset on all occasions."

Despite the Revolutionary fervor of the time, Sampson remained loyal to the king and expressed to Governor Martin his "abhorance for republican ^[17] principles." Even after the Royal governor was forced to flee the province and take refuge on the British warship *Cruizer*, Sampson, James Hasell ^[18], and Lewis De Rosset attended a Council meeting aboard ship in the Cape Fear River on 18 July 1775. The three-man Council, in approving actions taken by Martin, was of the opinion "that the deluded people of this Province will see their error and return to their allegiance."

Obviously, the Duplin County planter was able to reconcile himself with the Revolutionary government of North Carolina. In 1779 he was elected to the North Carolina Council of State, an honor that Sampson rejected due to his inability to serve. In a letter to Governor Richard Caswell ^[19], he explained that "it's not in my power to attend, being at present very infirm and old age creeping fast upon me."

Sampson died at Sampson Hall Plantation, Duplin County, after the death of his wife, the former Ann Walker of Wilmington. They had no children, and his grand-nephew, James Sampson (son of his nephew of the same name) inherited his 1,000-acre plantation. In 1784 a new county, formed from Duplin, was named in honor of Colonel John Sampson. Sampson Hall Plantation was located near the present-day county seat of Clinton ^[20]. Richard Clinton ^[21], for whom the town was named, had been an heir to a portion of the Sampson estate; he is believed to have been a natural son of Sampson.

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