

Thackston, James ^[1]

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Thackston, James

by Arthur C. Menius, 1996

d. 1792

James Thackston, was a rather suspect figure of secondary importance in North Carolina mercantile, political, and military affairs throughout the Revolutionary period. Thackston (occasionally spelled Thaxton) first appears in 1768 as a captain of the [Orange County](#) ^[2] militia. That he is first noted in a fairly significant position indicates that he may have belonged to the class of non-native officeholders who went to the colony. Indeed, Thackston soon began to associate himself with the so-called Courthouse Ring composed of people of that description. By 1769 he was engaged in tobacco and hemp production in Orange County. That year he opened a store on Churcton Street in Hillsborough in partnership with William Johnston.

During the riot at the September court of 1770 [Edmund Fanning](#) ^[3] sought refuge in their establishment, which the Regulators "instantly beset, demolishing the windows and threw dirt and stones or brickbats into the house." The merchants became active in their opposition to the mob, signing a petition to Governor [William Tryon](#) ^[4] on 30 Sept. 1770. The memorialists requested forceful measures against the Regulators, "a set of men . . . whom we have long considered as dangerous to society and as pursuing every measure destructive of Peace and good Government." Thackston journeyed to [New Bern](#) ^[5] in March 1771 to testify against the "backwoods Revolutionaries" at the Special Court of Oyer and Terminer. On 1 May 1771 he raised a company of sixty-two Orange County militiamen, which served in the [Alamance](#) ^[6] campaign.

This slight military experience was sufficient to secure an appointment as colonel of minutemen for the Hillsborough District in September 1775 for Thackston, who had established a residence between Lindley's Mill and [Rocky River](#) ^[7] in southern Orange County. With this command, theoretically five hundred men, he participated in the Moore's Creek campaign, occupying [Cross Creek](#) ^[8] in order to prevent an orderly Loyalist retreat. Afterwards the New England papers celebrated him as a hero of the battle. Unfortunately, it was the apogee of his Revolutionary career.

After that success Thackston received an appointment as lieutenant colonel of the Fourth North Carolina Continental Regiment under [Thomas Polk](#) ^[9] on 15 Apr. 1776. Before the unit could be raised Thackston took [Robert Howe](#) ^[10]'s Second Regiment to Charles Town, where it helped repulse the British siege during June 1776. Returning to the state, he commenced recruiting activities, and on 22 Apr. 1777 the Fourth regiment marched north to serve under George Washington. From all appearances an inept field leader, Thackston by the summer of 1776 found himself in charge of the camp at Peytonsburg, Va., where new recruits from North Carolina were assembled. Even this assignment proved difficult, for the lieutenant colonel failed in most of his efforts to acquire provisions for the outpost. In November he removed himself from active duty due to poor health, but by February 1779 he had recovered so that he could serve under Benjamin Lincoln in South Carolina. Soon he was back in his home state, however, supervising the discharge of soldiers at Cross Creek during the summer.

After Horatio Gates's debacle at Camden in August 1780, the [Board of War](#) ^[11] authorized Thackston to assemble new recruits and repatriated deserters at [Hillsborough](#) ^[12]. By mid-November he had amassed but sixteen men, not counting himself. Not surprisingly, he was one of the Continental officers ordered by Congress to retire on half pay effective 1 Jan. 1781 due to the lack of a proper command.

Lord Cornwallis's invasion of North Carolina restored Thackston to duty. Once General [Nathanael Greene](#) ^[13] had safely retreated across the Dan River, he placed Thackston in charge of the thirty Continentals from the state still with the Southern Department. The lieutenant colonel served throughout the [Guilford Court House campaign](#) ^[14], but in July 1781 he left the army when Greene charged him with misrepresenting the position and arrangement of his troops. Thereafter he served in various roles, was captured and exchanged, and retired for a second time on 26 Apr. 1782. Two years later he proudly joined the Order of the Cincinnati, and on 14 Mar. 1786 the veteran of such an undistinguished career received 4,352 acres in Tennessee as a reward.

Thackston reestablished his mercantile operations on New Street in [Fayetteville](#) ^[15], near the scene of his greatest military exploit. He won election to the House of Commons for the session of 1787, during which term he accomplished little other than to win the legislative stationery contract for his firm. In December he unsuccessfully sought appointment as brigadier

general from the Fayetteville District. By 1790 the veteran resided there, owning nine slaves but having no family. Although his exact date of death is unknown, an inventory of Thackston's estate was commissioned on 11 Apr. 1792. In sum, his career was active but his record uninspiring.

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[Menius, Arthur C.](#) ^[32]

Origin - location:

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[Fayetteville](#) ^[34]

[Alamance County](#) ^[35]

[Guilford County](#) ^[36]

[Orange County](#) ^[37]

[Hillsborough](#) ^[38]

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