

Thomas, John ^[1]

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Thomas, John

by Hugh Buckner Johnston, 1996

11 Oct. 1705–3 Dec. 1788

John Thomas, religious leader, justice, and militia officer, was born in Nansemond County, Va., the son of John and Mary Lawrence Thomas. Educated locally, he was "bred a Churchman," but after settling in North Carolina about 1740 he was converted to the [Baptist](#) ^[2] faith by Dr. Josiah Hart in 1748. In 1756 Thomas founded and was first pastor of the Tosneot Baptist Church, the first of any denomination in lower [Edgecombe County](#) ^[3]. On 24 Sept. 1759 the county court licensed the meetinghouse recently completed on his upper plantation near Tosneot Swamp.

In 1760–62 he allied his church briefly with the distant Charleston Baptist Association, but on 6 Nov. 1769 he became a founder and signer of the covenant of [Kehukee Baptist Associatio](#) ^[4] at its first formal meeting in [Halifax County](#) ^[5]. On 17 Sept. 1772 he was named to the committee selected to present a complimentary address of the association to [Governor Josiah Martin](#) ^[6] at New Bern. His last appearance noted in the surviving minutes was 20 Oct. 1777, when he was elected moderator and directed the special committee that drew up the Articles of Marriage still reflected in the ceremonies of the Southern Baptists.

In the course of his evangelical career he assisted, on 2 May 1772, Elders Morgan Edwards (Baptist historian from Rhode Island), John Moore, and John Meglamre in ordaining William Burgess as pastor of Kehukee Baptist Church. On 24 Sept. 1773, "through the goodness of God, and the instrumentality of Elder John Thomas," a reformation was accomplished at the Red Banks Baptist Church in [Pitt County](#) ^[7], and in 1776 he and the Reverend John Thomas, Jr., constituted the Flat Swamp Baptist Church in [Martin County](#) ^[8], also ordaining John Page to the pastorate. Early in 1777 he helped to reorganize the Lower Fishing Creek Baptist Church in [Halifax County](#) ^[5]. With the assistance of Elder John Page, he constituted the Lower Town Creek Baptist Church and installed Elder Joshua Barnes as its first pastor on 17 Sept. 1780. He and Elder Barnes constituted Little Contentnea Baptist Church in [Greene County](#) ^[9] on 10 Aug. 1785, it having been for some years a branch of the Tosneot church. Although Elder Thomas's home church remained in "a languid situation" for a time after his death, it was destined to fill many years of renewed prominence into the late twentieth century as the Wilson Primitive Baptist Church.

On 11 Oct. 1749 Governor [Gabriel Johnston](#) ^[10] and the colonial Council at New Bern appointed John Thomas a justice of the peace, and the surviving minutes of the Edgecombe County Court reveal that he was in regular attendance at Council meetings from 17 June 1758 to 18 Oct. 1775. Although reappointed by the General Assembly on 23 Dec. 1776, he withdrew from the bench and devoted himself to ministerial duties and public service. His name appears on a road or bridge commission almost yearly between 1767 and 1786, and he served as captain of militia in his district from 1761 until after 1774.

A successful [planter](#) ^[11], Thomas accumulated around 1,800 acres and at least nine slaves. His considerable household goods, livestock, and home-distilled or fermented beverages enabled him to provide hospitable entertainment for the frequent visitors in his community on church or public business. The inventory of his estate listed twenty-four books by title, principally of a religious nature, and suggest his intellectual preparation for his long and useful career.

The Reverend Morgan Edwards, who visited Thomas in 1772, recorded that his host was married about 1732 to Christenater Roberts (1712–96), the daughter of Thomas and Mary Roberts of Nansemond County. They had six children: the Reverend John, Jr., (1733–1807), who married (1) Patience Williams and (2) Elizabeth Jones; the Reverend Jonathan (1735–75), who married Mary Hilliard; Obedience (1737–88); Major Theophilus (1740–1803), who married Mary Rogers; Millicent (1742–before 1788); and Theresa (1744–ca. 1826), who married (1) the merchant Theophilus Hill and (2) Don Manuel Marchal of St. Augustine.

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