

Urmston, John ^[1]

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by George Stevenson, 1996; Revised by Andrea Smythe, SLNC Government and Heritage Library, October 2023

1662?–November 1731

John Urmston, Anglican clergyman and schoolmaster, was born in Lancashire, England, the home of his family for centuries. The names of his parents and the college where he received his liberal education are unknown. After having lived "many years in divers foreign countries," he returned to England and entered the priesthood. He was ordained in the chapel of Fulham Palace by Henry Compton, bishop of London, on February 17, 1695. From about this time until the end of the century Urmston was master of a school at Kensington. From his experience in the school, he prepared and published *The London Spellingbook: Being a Most Easie and Regular Method of Teaching to Spell, Read and Write True English* ^[2], which ran through four editions between 1700 and 1710. Also in 1710 he published his octavo grammar *A New Help to the Accidence: With a Preface Shewing the Right Method of School Teaching* ^[3].

On February 23, 1701/2, Urmston got his first clerical appointment as chaplain aboard the *HMS Woolwich*. He was discharged from the appointment half a year later. He then accepted a chaplaincy in the Russia Company. By March 1702/3 he was in Moscow, and by September in Archangel. Urmston focused his attention on the English merchant fleet and servants of the Russia Company at Archangel. In 1704 he was made a corresponding member of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge ^[4], but his chaplaincy in the Russian Company came to an end shortly afterwards.

Returning to London, Urmston became curate of East Ham in Essex in 1706. During this curacy he was recommended to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) by the bishop of London in August 1709. One of the society's missionaries, William Gordon, had just returned from North Carolina, and when the society offered Gordon's vacant place to Urmston, he accepted it. Urmston departed for North Carolina with his wife, their three small children, and two indentured transportees in the spring of 1710, with a letter from the bishop of London recommending him to the Lords Proprietors ^[5] as a minister.

Once in the colony, Urmston discovered that the Church of England ^[6] was weakly established in North Carolina. Local vestries had begun building a few churches but had left them unfinished and abandoned. Parishes were unable to raise the money to pay their ministers, and no glebes ^[7], (land and housing for the minister) had been set aside. Urmston was responsible for administering the Chowan ^[8] and Perquimans ^[9] Precincts. These districts were large and difficult to navigate.

In addition to this, North Carolina was divided into two armed factions struggling for control of the government. One of these groups had support from residents who rejected the Church of England and its beliefs. In 1711, the Tuscarora War ^[10] between the white colonists and the native Tuscarora people began and lasted four years. Despite these difficulties, Urmston traveled and preached in his assigned parishes for eleven years. Although he settled in Chowan Precinct on an Albemarle Sound ^[11] plantation southeast of Edenton ^[12], Urmston traveled throughout eastern Carolina in efforts to grow the Anglican church. He appears to have journeyed annually to the Pasquotank ^[13] and Currituck ^[14] Precincts, whose parishes had been left vacant by the death of the Reverend James Adams shortly after Urmston's arrival in the colony. Records show that Urmston carried his mission into all precincts of Albemarle and Bath counties.

Governor Edward Hyde ^[15], in a confidential aside written in 1712, believed that Urmston's reception in the colony was "purely owing to himself and his unfortunate temper which noways suits with the humors of the natural born people of America." This is the harshest failing assigned to him by his superiors in the colony. His vestry, in 1714, informed the SPG that "His great Pains and universal Dilligence to keep together those of our Church hath had good success," and Governor Eden told the society in the same year that Urmston "is really an honest painstaking Gentleman and worthy your care." While

Urmston also served as chaplain to the General Assembly when it was in session, and he lobbied for the interests of the Church of England. His influence on the vestry act of 1711 appears to have been weak; it failed to address some issues that Urmston was concerned with. He had better success with the 1715 vestry act, which stipulated that ministers were to be members of the vestry, ordered the vestries to post the church's table of marriages, imposed a fine for uncanonical marriages, and established fees for marriages solemnized by the clergy.

Urmston had less success with the Lords Proprietors. Before departing for North Carolina, he had tried to persuade the Duke of Beaufort to appoint him his chaplain in the colony, and he unsuccessfully renewed his efforts in 1712. His communication with other Lords Proprietors included a "very tart" letter he wrote to Sir John Colleton in 1711 and a 1715 letter that "mightily offended" John Danson. He frequently complained to the Proprietors about life in North Carolina and was asked not write them any more.

In response to Urmston's frequent appeals to the SPG for financial relief, the society in 1715 induced Governor Charles Eden ^[16] to intervene with the vestries to settle their accounts with Urmston. The Pasquotank Precinct parish paid Urmston in 1716. In 1717, the Chowan vestry voted to pay him a portion of what he was owed but never delivered. Eden believed Urmston's economic difficulties stemmed from the fact that "he has been but a moderate conductor of his affairs," but he reported in 1717 that he "does all he is able in the discharge of his function and spares for no pains." In the interim, at Urmston's urging, the SPG voted on November 16, 1716 to allow him to return to England and formally notified him in a letter dated December 17; he did not receive it until three years later in February 1720. His wife died on October 18, 1719. Urmston declared her heart was broken "through our ill usage and our comfortless way of living." Urmston's desperation is further expanded when he stated: "I can not hear from England... I am buried alive in this hell of a hole."

Finally, in March 1721, Urmston gave Edward Moseley power of attorney to collect the £138 owing him from the Chowan vestry. He left North Carolina for London in early April in order to appeal in person to the missionary society that had replied to none of his letters during the past five years. Governor Eden wrote the society to say that Urmston had needlessly deserted his parish without informing a single provincial authority, on which account Eden was withholding the usual letter testimonial. An anonymous letter denouncing Urmston as a notorious drunkard given to lewdness and swearing also followed him to London.

In July 1721, Urmston informed the society of his arrival and expressed his intention of remaining in England if he could not return to North Carolina under terms better than his original ones. In June 1722, Urmston applied to the society to be sent back to North Carolina. Because of his earlier statement, the society had concluded that Urmston had left the colony with no intention of returning. Urmston was informed that the vacancy had already been filled and his services were not needed. He immediately made a successful application to the bishop of London to license him for Virginia. Then, drawing on the King's Bounty on June 29 1722 for £20 to defray his passage, Urmston set sail via New England. He sought out various appointments there before learning that the Philadelphia Christ Church needed a chaplain.

In October 1723, an unnamed clergyman criticized the missionaries who had recommended Urmston to Christ Church. A letter dated October 23 to the Christ Church vestry stated that they would have Urmston removed from the parish if the vestry filed a complaint against him. The vestry filed the complaint and Urmston was forced out of Christ Church by December 1723. John Talbot, a bishop and a Jacobite who supported the Catholic Stuart line, temporarily filled the vacancy. Richard Welton, another Jacobite bishop arrived in Philadelphia in June 1724, and in July was given charge of Christ Church. Urmston wrote to the vestry warning of the Jacobite bishops being appointed to positions in the colonies. Talbot was removed from his missionary status for disaffection to the government in October 1724, and Welton was ordered back to England under a writ of privy seal in 1725.

After this, Urmston traveled from Philadelphia to North Carolina. He sold his plantation on Albemarle Sound and settled his affairs before going to Maryland. Here he was inducted into St. Stephen's Parish, Cecil County, in 1724. In 1729, the bishop of London's commissary on the eastern shore died and Jacob Henderson, the bishop's commissary on the western shore, assumed jurisdiction over all Church of England clergy in the colony. In June 1730, Henderson visited the eastern shore clergy and noted his lack of the letter testimonial from Governor Eden. It was also Henderson's opinion that Urmston was drunk, and on the next day he admonished Urmston

Henderson earmarked Urmston for removal from his parish. By October 1730 the vestry of St. Stephen's began drawing up complaints against Urmston, alleging frequent drunkenness. By August 1731 Henderson had removed Urmston from his priestly function in the parish. The vestry then asked the governor to induct a new minister, speaking in the petition of Urmston's conduct in a general charge as "too shameful to mention."

Urmston died in November 1731; his servant found him burned to death in his home. The names of Mrs. Urmston and the two younger children are unknown. Urmston was survived by his son and administrator, Thomas, who had remained in America on the family's return to England in 1721.

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Authors:

Smythe, Andrea ^[43]
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Origin - location:

Bath ^[45]

Chowan County ^[46]

Edenton ^[47]

Currituck County ^[48]

Pasquotank County ^[49]

Perquimans County ^[50]

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1 January 1996 | Smythe, Andrea; Stevenson, George, Jr.

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