

# The mysteries of William Churton and his map of North Carolina

<http://blog.ncmaps.org/mysteries-william-churton-map-north-carolina/>

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**William Churton** (1710 – c1767/8) was one of the pre-eminent surveyors in North Carolina during the 18th century. Unfortunately, very little is known about him. He was born in London on April 5, 1710. He was in North Carolina by 1749, but when he arrived is unknown. His professional career in North Carolina predominantly pertained to surveying tracts of land in the [Granville District](#). At the time of his death (late 1767 or early 1768), William Churton had nearly completed a map of North Carolina. Circumstances of Churton's death and the fate of his manuscript map remain mysteries to us.

## William Churton's death

William Churton apparently signed his will in Edenton (Chowan County) on 5 January 1768. The signature looks authentic, but I'm not aware of any analysis by a qualified forensic document examiner. There are two statements by others that raise the question of forgery:

1. In 1991, Fred Hughes wrote, "A will was presented in Chowan Court in 1768 for probate. This will, purporting to be a deathbed will, a very strange document. The usual lengthy preliminaries are completely absent. Bequests were made to Edmond Fanning, before any bequest to Churton's own family. Fanning was known to Churton, but he was no friend, and no reason

is known for this strange handling of his property. This will is a different document from the one probated in Orange County...”<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, a search of Fred Hughes’s papers (preserved at Guilford College) did not uncover evidence of an Orange County will for William Churton, and there is no record of such in Orange County records or the State Archives. The document to which Hughes refers is a mystery. Also a mystery is the source for Hughes’s statement, “purporting to be a deathbed will”, in regards to Churton’s Chowan County will. If Hughes knew of a historical basis for that statement, he provided no citation of such.

2. In a letter dated 27 October 1768, colonial governor William Tryon wrote, “While was on the above surveys he wrote to acquaint me if any accident happened to him before his intended departure for England he gave me his map which was a request I had formerly made him: Soon after this, in December last, he died, and by virtue of the above letter I got into my possession his map...”<sup>2</sup>

That phrase, “in December”, in Tryon’s letter is apparently the source for all modern-day claims that Churton died in that year. No other mention of Churton’s death has been found in any other contemporary letters or newspapers. One would think that, just a few months after the event, Tryon would not get the month (and year!) of Churton’s death incorrect. If Tryon was correct, Churton would not have been available to sign his will on 5 January 1768. Given that we are all prone to errors, the easiest explanation would be that Tryon was simply mistaken in the date of Churton’s death.

It’s not just the date of Churton’s death that remains a mystery, but the location and cause are also unknown. Notice that Tryon did not specifically state that Churton died while surveying the coast, or that Churton was even in the southeast coastal region when he died. In the 1958 first edition of *The Southeast in Early Maps*, author William P. Cumming references Tryon’s 1768 letter (see above), re-phrasing it ever so slightly:

“While he was engaged in these maritime surveys, wrote Governor Tryon that, if an accident should befall him, he left the map to the Governor. Shortly after this, in December, 1767, Churton died...”<sup>3</sup>

However, by 1966, Cumming states:

“While surveying in the coastal region, Churton died in December, 1767...”<sup>4</sup>

Cumming repeated this claim in his biographical entry for John Collet, published in the Dictionary of North Carolina Biography.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, nothing has been found in contemporary documents to indicate where or how Churton died. Modern statements that he drowned while surveying the coast are nothing more than speculation or fabrication. The circumstances of Churton’s death remain a mystery.

## William Churton’s map

As Tryon relates in his letter, he acquired Churton’s nearly completed map after Churton’s death. Tryon then charged John Collet with the task of completing the map. It is presumed that Collet made a copy of Churton’s map, adding appropriate detail for the southeast coastal region. Collet’s manuscript map survives in the British Library. What happened to Churton’s manuscript map? It apparently found its way into the hands of Claude Joseph Sauthier. On 2 January 1771, a message from Governor Tryon to the General Assembly was read into the minutes:

“Mr Southier waits upon you with the original survey of this Province made by Mr Churton deceased.... He also waits on you with distinct plans of all the Towns of note in the Province; these together with the map, he is desirous of having the Honor to present to you.”<sup>6</sup>

The assembly approved a payment of £50 to Sauthier for Churton's map and Sauthier's town plans. How Sauthier's [ten town plans](#) ended up in the British Library, yet Churton's map did not, is unknown.

We ask again, what happened to Churton's map? Unfortunately, that question cannot be answered in the absence of speculation. In 1806, Jonathan Price, Thomas Coles, and William Tatham were selected by the U.S. government to perform a survey of the North Carolina coast. During that work, a hurricane sank a boat in Pamlico Sound, taking with it many of the surveyors' supplies. Among the items listed in an inventory by William Tatham: "a manuscript map of North Carolina, by Sauthier".<sup>7</sup> How and from whom the surveyors obtained this map for use on their coastal survey in 1806 is not known. No evidence exists that Sauthier made a manuscript map of North Carolina. However, there is evidence that Churton's manuscript map was last recorded in Sauthier's possession. Therefore, it isn't entirely unreasonable to postulate that William Churton's great manuscript map of North Carolina disappeared forever into the waters of Pamlico Sound.

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Do you have any information on the life or death of William Churton? Or about his map? Do you know if Churton's purported letter to William Tryon in 1767 survives? Several potential sources have been mined for data by [Stewart Dunaway](#). Although he has not yet found answers to our questions in the [Fanning papers](#) or in the [Alves papers](#) at the Southern Historical Collection, Dunaway has discovered some potential leads. For example, correspondence in the Alves papers makes mention of "Churton's papers" in the hands of Fanning's attorney, William Johnston. Whether or not "Churton's papers" eventually found their way to Fanning is not currently known. There are other potential sources of information that may not yet have been thoroughly researched. Examples might include letters written by Moravians in the Wachovia tract with whom Churton was acquainted (unfortunately for me, such letters would likely have been written in German language), or papers of

Edmund Fanning or William Tryon in other institutional or private collections. Any additional information and/or corrections would be greatly appreciated. Please use the “What’s on your mind?” comment box below.

P.S. Stewart Dunaway has also transcribed the inventory of the sale of William Churton’s estate. Among the items mentioned are a “book of maps” (purchased by Samuel Swift), “some rough plans” (to Joseph Monfort), and “six maps” (to Capt. MacCormack).

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