

William Pennington (1740-1829)

Background and early life

William came from Bristol and appears to have been distantly related to Sir Joseph Pennington MP who was appointed Commissioner of Customs in 1751, a post he held in succession to his grandfather. Not surprisingly both William's father and his brother were customs officers in Bristol but William, who seems to have been well educated, joined the Guards. In 1764 he was appointed colonial Customs Officer for the port of Brunswick, which at that time was North Carolina's leading port. He travelled out to America with William Tryon, a Lieutenant colonel in the 1st Regiment of Foot (the Scots Guards) who had been appointed Lieutenant Governor of N. Carolina. On his arrival the latter soon found himself Governor facing colonists rebelling against the Stamp Act of 1765. This was to lead to the American War of Independence ten years later. During this difficult period William Pennington acquitted himself well and when he succeeded Lord Dunmore as governor of New York Tryon gave William his house in Brunswick. It seems that Pennington remained at his post until finally driven from office in February 1776 and which point he fled to New York and joined the loyalist forces. After the final British defeat at the Battle of Yorktown William made his way to England. During the long voyage home he befriended and later nursed another colonist who before he died at sea rewrote his will in Pennington's favour. However on arriving in England William destroyed the new Will, and sought out the beneficiaries of the original will and put them in possession of all the man's property.

It is likely that when he arrived home William thought of himself as returning to a wealthy family but the trade with Bristol had been drastically affected by hostilities with America and France. Though he was now a poor man there was strong public support for such loyalists returning to England and William, supported by Tryon, made a successful claim to the Loyalist Claims Commission for a small pension.

William and the Bristol Hotwell

In 1795 in an effort to regain its reputation as a centre for entertainment, the Hotwells followed the example of Bath and appointed William as its Master of the Ceremonies responsible for its public breakfasts, balls, cotillions, country dances and other entertainments. It is clear that there was much local support for William's appointment. More than one account describes him as being elegant and witty and many Americans as well as British had left the American colonies at the outbreak of the War of Independence and settled in Bristol where they formed their own social circle based on College Green. One of William's first acts was to publish "Rules of the Hotwell" to ensure that all behaved with decorum, and these were soon copied by Bath. The year after his appointment the Colonnade opened and Hannah More's protégé Ann Yearsley the "milkmaid poetess" was soon installed in its bookshop.

In 1791, now enjoying a comfortable income, William learned of the distress of one of Mrs Thrale/Piozzi's intellectual circle which included Hannah More, Anna Seward, The Rev Dr Whalley and Dr Johnson. This was Penelope Sophia Weston who, through no fault of her own, had been brought to financial ruin by the criminal acts of her wayward brother. Learning of this, William who had met her when he first arrived in Bristol, offered marriage though he was 52 and she 41 years of age. After some hesitation but encouraged by Mrs Piozzi she accepted his offer and they lived happily in Dowry Square for the remaining thirty years of his tenure of office. When a frail Mrs Piozzi returned to Bristol in 1821 Mrs Pennington visited her almost daily until she died, and then wrote a moving obituary which was widely published. Penelope Pennington died in 1828 and William the following year. Both had memorial plaques placed in the Dowry Chapel which were lost following its demolition in 1872, and the site of their final resting place remains unknown.