Joshua Grainger Wright was born in New Hanover County at “Nesses Creek Plantation” near Wrightsboro in 1768. His father, Captain Thomas Wright, died when he was three years old. Two years after his father died, his mother remarried Charles Jewkes, a business partner of John Burgwin, and he may have grown up around the home at Third and Market Streets which he later purchased and which bears their names as the Burgwin-Wright or Cornwallis House. There is very little reliable material about his early life, but a number of anecdotes have been impressively preserved in a chapter in her book on the genealogy of the Wrights by Susan Taylor Block.

Joshua Wright was admitted to the practice of law in the county courts on the Fourth of January 1790. He would have been present when his older brother, Sheriff Thomas Wright, escorted George Washington into Wilmington on his Southern Tour fifteen months later. In 1792, he was elected as a representative from the town of Wilmington to the General Assembly’s House of Commons. He served continuously until 1796 when Henry Urguhart replaced him. William H. Hill served in his place in 1797, and James Walker in 1798. He was again elected in 1799 and served in the House of Commons continuously until he was appointed to the bench in 1808. For the sessions in 1807 and 1808, he was elected as Speaker of the House.

Wright served as a representative for more terms than any other representative during the period. UNC-W Historian Alan D. Watson notes that the Wilmington town representatives tended to develop more seniority than the county representatives, and this was a positive influence in favor of Wilmington in regional politics. Wright was a strong Federalist, and his party had become predominant in state and local politics. This was a shift from the Anti-Federalism of Samuel Ashe, his predecessor on the bench.

During these years, judges and the governor were all elected by the General Assembly. Judges served for life during good behavior. Judge David Stone had served as a Superior Court Judge following the resignation of Samuel Ashe in 1795 but soon resigned. He was reelected in 1806
to one of two new seats which had expanded the court to six judges. Stone resigned again in 1808 when he was elected governor. The legislature then elected Joshua Grainger Wright to replace Stone, and Wright submitted his resignation as a representative from Wilmington to the House of Commons on the Fifteenth of December 1808. While in the legislature, he was a vocal opponent of impending court reforms. A quick search of the Supreme Court Reports yields only a handful of cases bearing Wright’s name during his brief tenure as a judge, and almost all of these are reported in 1809.

In 1811, Wright apparently knew he was in very ill health. On the advice of physicians, he planned a trip to the Bahamas. On the seventh of May 1811, he submitted a letter of resignation to Governor Benjamin Smith in anticipation of the trip from a concern that he might not be able to return in time for the next sessions of court. There is no published record of Wright holding court from that time until his death at the age of 43 in Charleston on the tenth of June of the same year. He was also a member of the South Carolina Bar, and the members from Charleston voted to accompany his remains back to Wilmington.
Henry Seawell of Wake County was appointed to succeed him by the governor, but it appears that the legislature elected Edward Harris instead, who died before he was confirmed. The legislature then elected Seawell, who became the permanent replacement for Wright.\textsuperscript{17}

The year after he became a judge, Wright was elected as a director and as president of the Bank of Cape Fear, which had been incorporated in 1809. He remained the bank’s president until his death.\textsuperscript{18} He also had an interest in education. He was involved in the establishment of the Wilmington Academy and was serving as attorney to the board of trustees for the University of North Carolina, giving advice on legal issues even after the onset of his terminal illness.\textsuperscript{19}

In 1791, he married Susan Bradley, for whose family Bradley Creek is named. They had thirteen children, two of whom became local attorneys. Charles J. Wright, who married the daughter of William Hill, became president of the Wilmington branch of the Bank of the State of North Carolina. William A. Wright practiced law from 1850 until 1878, was associated with the railroad, was president of the Bank of Cape Fear, represented New Hanover in the 1865 Constitutional Convention, and served as the “chairman” of the County Court. A granddaughter married local attorney Robert Strange. Wright’s son-in-law was attorney Adam Empie Jr. Wright was a community leader, large landowner, and progenitor to some of Wilmington’s families. Wrightsville Sound and later Wrightsville Beach were named for him. \footnote{Cheney, 254, 255.}

Notes
\footnote{The Wrights, Jukes, Graingers, Maffits, Bradleys, and other related family names appear frequently in the public records of New Hanover. See marriage settlement of Charles Jewkes and Anne Wright, New Hanover County Court Minutes, November 23, 1792. The record reads: “Marriage settlement from Charles Jewkes and Anne Wright to John Ancrum and Henry Toomer, Trustees, proved by Francis Brice who verified signatures of witnesses Thomas Orr and John Cheesborough; and a lease, leading to a release and marriage settlement, from Ann Wright to John Ancrum and Henry Toomer, with the same witnesses, was likewise proved by Francis Brice.” Alex. McD. Walker, New Hanover County Court Minutes, Part 3 (1960) 82.}

\footnote{Susan Taylor Block, The Wrights of Wilmington (1992), is a major source for this article. The Chapter on Joshua begins at page 59.}

\footnote{Crockette Hewlett and Leora McEachern, Attorneys of New Hanover County (Wilmington, 1979). The references in the biographical notes is a major source for this article. See also Alex. McD. Walker, New Hanover County Court Minutes, Part 3 (1960) 48.}

\footnote{Block, 42.}

\footnote{John L. Cheney, Ed.: North Carolina Government 1583-1979, a Narrative and Statistical Survey (Revised, 1981), 235.}

\footnote{Cheney, 240.}

\footnote{Cheney, 237. See also: article by Richard Rankin, note, infra.}

\footnote{Cheney, 240, 242, 245, 246, 248, 250, 252, 254, 255.}

\footnote{Cheney, 254, 255. Wilmington was one of six towns having a representative until town representation was abolished by the Constitutional amendments of 1835.}

\footnote{Alan D. Watson, Wilmington, North Carolina, to 1861 (2003), 233.}

\footnote{See article by Richard Rankin in the N.C. Historical Review, 1991, p.45, discussing Wright’s membership in the “Ninepenny Whist Club,” a group of Federalist politicians which included Burgwin, Henry Urquhart & James Walker, which met regularly at the Burgwin-Wright house.}

\footnote{Watson, 228. It is useful to note that Samuel Ashe was on the bench when Wright began practicing law, was governor when Wright was elected to the legislature, and survived Wright by eighteen months.}

\footnote{James Broussard, North Carolina Historical Review, 1978, LIV, 33.}

\footnote{Many opinions during his period omit the names of the presiding judges and the opinions are issued “per curium.” The Supreme Court had not yet been created as a separate court, although the act of 1799 required the judges to sit twice a year as a “Court of Conference” and an act passed in 1804 required the presiding judges to file written opinions. The seven cases which bear his name as either author or participant are:

Shaw v Shaw, 5 NC 334 (1809), a will case from Fayetteville.


His opinion in this case is worth reading: “…he who hath done iniquity, shall not have Equity.”

Martin v. Lucey, 5 NC 311 (1809): from Anson, establishing the validity of a sheriff’s deed for delinquent taxes.

Maurice Moore v Eagles, 5 NC 302 (1809): from New Hanover: a celebrated family dispute over the title to Eagles Island in the Cape Fear. Alfred Moore appeared as counsel.

Arrington v. Culpepper, 5 NC 297 (1809): declaring horse-racing wagers illegal.

Parker’s executor v. Parker’s administrator, 5 NC 295 (1809): from Halifax, listed as participating in the decision.

Warden v Nielson, 5 NC 275 (1809): in which Wright writes learnedly on common law principles.

In a capital case in which the judges split, Wright did not participate: State v. Owen, 4 NC 452 (1810). This may suggest that the onset of his illness rendered him unavailable after 1809.

Smith had been a representative from Brunswick County.

Block, 64-65.}

\footnote{Cheney, 367, notes 19, 22, 23, and 24. There is some confusion in the historical notes about this chain of succession.}

\footnote{See Robert Neale, The Bank of Cape Fear (LCFHS, 1999) c. 10, for discussion of his role in the bank and legislation relating thereto.}

\footnote{Block, 64 and citations in endnote 191 therein.}
The courthouse in Wilmington as depicted in 1785 on the Belanger map of Wilmington. Joshua Grainger Wright was admitted to the practice of law in the county courts in 1790.