

# The Founding Fathers: North Carolina

En Español

## William Blount, North Carolina



William Blount was the great-grandson of Thomas Blount, who came from England to Virginia soon after 1660 and settled on a North Carolina plantation. William, the eldest in a large family, was born in 1749 while his mother was visiting his grandfather's Rosefield estate, on the site of present Windsor near Pamlico Sound. The youth apparently received a good education.

Shortly after the War for Independence began, in 1776, Blount enlisted as a paymaster in the North Carolina forces. Two years later, he wed Mary Grainier (Granger); of their six children who reached adulthood, one son also became prominent in Tennessee politics.

Blount spent most of the remainder of his life in public office. He sat in the lower house of the North Carolina legislature (1780-84), including service as speaker, as well as in the upper (1788-90). In addition, he took part in national politics, serving in the Continental Congress in 1782-83 and 1786-87.

Appointed as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention at the age of 38, Blount was absent for more than a month because he chose to attend the Continental Congress on behalf of his state. He said almost nothing in the debates and signed the Constitution reluctantly--only, he said, to make it "the unanimous act of the States in Convention." Nonetheless, he favored his state's ratification of the completed document.

Blount hoped to be elected to the first U.S. Senate. When he failed to achieve that end, in 1790 he pushed westward beyond the Appalachians, where he held speculative land interests and had represented North Carolina in dealings with the Indians. He settled in what became Tennessee, to which he devoted the rest of his life. He resided first at Rocky Mount, a cabin near present Johnson City and in 1792 built a mansion in Knoxville.

Two years earlier, Washington had appointed Blount as Governor for the Territory South of the River Ohio (which included Tennessee) and also as Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Southern Department, in which positions he increased his popularity with the frontiersmen. In

1796 he presided over the constitutional convention that transformed part of the territory into the State of Tennessee. He was elected as one of its first U.S. senators (1796-97).

During this period, Blount's affairs took a sharp turn for the worse. In 1797 his speculations in western lands led him into serious financial difficulties. That same year, he also apparently concocted a plan involving use of Indians, frontiersmen, and British naval forces to conquer for Britain the Spanish provinces of Florida and Louisiana. A letter he wrote alluding to the plan fell into the hands of President Adams, who turned it over to the Senate on July 3, 1797. Five days later, that body voted 25 to 1 to expel Blount. The House impeached him, but the Senate dropped the charges in 1799 on the grounds that no further action could be taken beyond his dismissal.

The episode did not hamper Blount's career in Tennessee. In 1798 he was elected to the senate and rose to the speakership. He died 2 years later at Knoxville in his early fifties. He is buried there in the cemetery of the First Presbyterian Church.

*Image: Courtesy of Tennessee State Museum, Tennessee Historical Society Collection*

## William Richardson Davie, North Carolina

---



One of the eight delegates born outside of the thirteen colonies, Davie was born in Egremont, Cumberlandshire, England, on June 20, 1756. In 1763 Archibald Davie brought his son William to Waxhaw, SC.. Davie attended Queen's Museum College in Charlotte, North Carolina, and graduated from the College of New Jersey (later Princeton) in 1776.

Davie's law studies in Salisbury, NC, were interrupted by military service, but he won his license to practice before county courts in 1779 and in the superior courts in 1780. When the War for Independence broke out, he helped raise a troop of cavalry near Salisbury and eventually achieved the rank of colonel. While attached to Pulaski's division, Davie was wounded leading a charge at Stono, near Charleston, on June 20, 1779. Early in 1780 he raised another troop and operated mainly in western North Carolina. In January 1781 Davie was appointed commissary-general for the Carolina campaign. In this capacity he oversaw the collection of arms and supplies to Gen. Nathanael Greene's army and the state militia.

After the war, Davie embarked on his career as a lawyer, traveling the circuit in North Carolina. In 1782 he married Sarah Jones, the daughter of his former commander, Gen. Allen Jones, and settled in Halifax. His legal knowledge and ability won him great respect, and his presentation of arguments was admired. Between 1786 and 1798 Davie represented Halifax in the North

Carolina legislature. There he was the principal agent behind that body's actions to revise and codify state laws, send representatives to the Annapolis and Philadelphia conventions, cede Tennessee to the Union, and fix disputed state boundaries.

During the Constitutional Convention Davie favored plans for a strong central government. He was a member of the committee that considered the question of representation in Congress and swung the North Carolina delegation's vote in favor of the Great Compromise. He favored election of senators and presidential electors by the legislature and insisted on counting slaves in determining representation. Though he left the convention on August 13, before its adjournment, Davie fought hard for the Constitution's ratification and took a prominent part in the North Carolina convention.

The political and military realms were not the only ones in which Davie left his mark. The University of North Carolina, of which he was the chief founder, stands as an enduring reminder of Davie's interest in education. Davie selected the location, instructors, and a curriculum that included the literary and social sciences as well as mathematics and classics. In 1810 the trustees conferred upon him the title of "Father of the University" and in the next year granted him the degree of Doctor of Laws.

Davie became Governor of North Carolina in 1798. His career also turned back briefly to the military when President John Adams appointed him a brigadier general in the U.S. Army that same year. Davie later served as a peace commissioner to France in 1799.

Davie stood as a candidate for Congress in 1803 but met defeat. In 1805, after the death of his wife, Davie retired from politics to his plantation, "Tivoli," in Chester County, South Carolina. In 1813 he declined an appointment as major-general from President Madison. Davie was 64 years old when he died on November 29, 1820, at "Tivoli," and he was buried in the Old Waxhaw Presbyterian Churchyard in northern Lancaster County.

*Image: Courtesy of Independence National Historical Park*

## Alexander Martin, North Carolina

---



Though he represented North Carolina at the Constitutional Convention, Alexander Martin was born in Hunterdon County, NJ, in 1740. His parents, Hugh and Jane Martin, moved first to Virginia, then to Guilford County, NC, when Alexander was very young. Martin attended the College of New Jersey (later Princeton), received his degree in 1756, and moved to Salisbury. There he started his career as a merchant but turned to public service as he became justice of the peace, deputy king's attorney, and, in 1774 and 1775, judge of Salisbury district.

At the September 1770 session of the superior court at Hillsboro, 150 Regulators armed with sticks, switches, and cudgels crowded into the courtroom. They had come to present a petition to the judge demanding unprejudiced juries and a public accounting of taxes by sheriffs. Violence erupted, and several, including Alexander Martin, were beaten. In 1771 Martin signed an agreement with the Regulators to refund all fees taken illegally and to arbitrate all differences.

From 1773 to 1774 Martin served in the North Carolina House of Commons and in the second and third provincial congresses in 1775. In September 1775 he was appointed a lieutenant colonel in the 2d North Carolina Continental Regiment. Martin saw military action in South Carolina and won promotion to a colonelcy. He joined Washington's army in 1777, but after the Battle of Germantown he was arrested for cowardice. A court-martial tried and acquitted Martin, but he resigned his commission on November 22, 1777.

Martin's misfortune in the army did not impede his political career. The year after his court-martial he entered the North Carolina Senate, where he served for 8 years (1778-82, 1785, and 1787-88). For every session except those of 1778-79, Martin served as speaker. From 1780 to 1781 he also sat on the Board of War and its successor, the Council Extraordinary. In 1781 Martin became acting governor of the state, and in 1782 through 1785 he was elected in his own right.

After his 1785 term in the North Carolina Senate, Martin represented his state in the Continental Congress, but he resigned in 1787. Of the five North Carolina delegates to the Constitutional Convention, Martin was the least strongly Federalist. He did not take an active part in the proceedings, and he left Philadelphia in late August 1787, before the Constitution was signed. Martin was considered a good politician but not suited to public debate. A colleague, Hugh Williamson, remarked that Martin needed time to recuperate after his great exertions as governor "to enable him again to exert his abilities to the advantage of the nation."

Under the new national government, Martin again served as Governor of North Carolina, from 1789 until 1792. After 1790 he moved away from the Federalists to the Republicans. In 1792 Martin, elected by the Republican legislature, entered the U.S. Senate. His vote in favor of the Alien and Sedition Acts cost him reelection. Back in North Carolina, Martin returned to the state senate in 1804 and 1805 to represent Rockingham County. In 1805 he once again served as speaker. From 1790 until 1807 he was a trustee of the University of North Carolina. Martin never married, and he died on November 2, 1807 at the age of 67 at his plantation, "Danbury," in Rockingham County and was buried on the estate.

*Image: Courtesy of Independence National Historical Park*

# Richard Dobbs Spaight, Sr., North Carolina

---



Spaight was born at New Bern, NC of distinguished English-Irish parentage in 1758. When he was orphaned at 8 years of age, his guardians sent him to Ireland, where he obtained an excellent education. He apparently graduated from Scotland's Glasgow University before he returned to North Carolina in 1778.

At that time, the War for Independence was in full swing, and Spaight's superior attainments soon gained him a commission. He became an aide to the state militia commander and in 1780 took part in the Battle of Camden, SC. The year before, he had been elected to the lower house of the legislature.

In 1781 Spaight left the military service to devote full time to his legislative duties. He represented New Bern and Craven County (1781-83 and 1785-87); in 1785 he became speaker. Between terms, he also served in the Continental Congress (1783-85).

In 1787, at the age of 29, Spaight joined the North Carolina delegation to the Philadelphia convention. He was not a leader but spoke on several occasions and numbered among those who attended every session. After the convention, he worked in his home state for acceptance of the Constitution.

Spaight met defeat in bids for the governorship in 1787 and the U.S. Senate 2 years later. From then until 1792, illness forced his retirement from public life, during which time he visited the West Indies, but he captured the governorship in the latter year (1792-95). In 1793 he served as presidential elector. Two years later, he wed Mary Leach, who bore three children.

In 1798 Spaight entered the U.S. House of Representatives as a Democratic-Republican and remained in office until 1801. During this time, he advocated repeal of the Alien and Sedition Acts and voted for Jefferson in the contested election of 1800. The next year, Spaight was voted into the lower house of the North Carolina legislature; the following year, to the upper.

Only 44 years old in 1802, Spaight was struck down in a duel at New Bern with a political rival, Federalist John Stanly. So ended the promising career of one of the state's foremost leaders. He was buried in the family sepulcher at Clermont estate, near New Bern.

*Image: Courtesy of Independence National Historical Park*

# Hugh Williamson, North Carolina

---



The versatile Williamson was born of Scotch-Irish descent at West Nottingham, PA., in 1735. He was the eldest son in a large family, whose head was a clothier. Hoping he would become a Presbyterian minister, his parents oriented his education toward that calling. After attending preparatory schools at New London Cross Roads, DE, and Newark, DE, he entered the first class of the College of Philadelphia (later part of the University of Pennsylvania) and took his degree in 1757.

The next 2 years, at Shippensburg, PA, Williamson spent settling his father's estate. Then training in Connecticut for the ministry, he soon became a licensed Presbyterian preacher but was never ordained. Around this time, he also took a position as professor of mathematics at his alma mater.

In 1764 Williamson abandoned these pursuits and studied medicine at Edinburgh, London, and Utrecht, eventually obtaining a degree from the University of Utrecht. Returning to Philadelphia, he began to practice but found it to be emotionally exhausting. His pursuit of scientific interests continued, and in 1768 he became a member of the American Philosophical Society. The next year, he served on a commission that observed the transits of Venus and Mercury. In 1771 he wrote *An Essay on Comets*, in which he advanced several original ideas. As a result, the University of Leyden awarded him an LL.D. degree.

In 1773, to raise money for an academy in Newark, DE., Williamson made a trip to the West Indies and then to Europe. Sailing from Boston, he saw the Tea Party and carried news of it to London. When the British Privy Council called on him to testify as to what he had seen, he warned the councilors that the colonies would rebel if the British did not change their policies. While in England, he struck up a close friendship with fellow-scientist Benjamin Franklin, and they cooperated in electrical experiments. Moreover, Williamson furnished to Franklin the letters of Massachusetts Royal Governor Thomas Hutchinson to his lieutenant governor that created a sensation and tended to further alienate the mother country and colonies.

In 1775 a pamphlet Williamson had written while in England, called *The Plea of the Colonies*, was published. It solicited the support of the English Whigs for the American cause. When the United States proclaimed their independence the next year, Williamson was in the Netherlands. He soon sailed back to the United States, settling first in Charleston, SC, and then in Edenton, NC. There, he prospered in a mercantile business that traded with the French West Indies and once again took up the practice of medicine.

Williamson applied for a medical post with the patriot forces, but found all such positions filled. The governor of North Carolina, however, soon called on his specialized skills, and he became surgeon-general of state troops. After the Battle of Camden, SC, he frequently crossed British lines to tend to the wounded. He also prevented sickness among the troops by paying close attention to food, clothing, shelter, and hygiene.

After the war, Williamson began his political career. In 1782 he was elected to the lower house of the state legislature and to the Continental Congress. Three years later, he left Congress and returned to his legislative seat. In 1786 he was chosen to represent his state at the Annapolis Convention but arrived too late to take part. The next year, he again served in Congress (1787-89) and was chosen as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention. Attending faithfully and demonstrating keen debating skill, he served on five committees, notably on the Committee on Postponed Matters, and played a significant part in the proceedings, particularly the major compromise on representation.

After the convention, Williamson worked for ratification of the Constitution in North Carolina. In 1788 he was chosen to settle outstanding accounts between the state and the federal government. The next year, he was elected to the first U.S. House of Representatives, where he served two terms. In 1789 he married Maria Apthorpe, who bore at least two sons.

In 1793 Williamson moved to New York City to facilitate his literary and philanthropic pursuits. Over the years, he published many political, educational, economic, historical, and scientific works, but the last earned him the most praise. The University of Leyden awarded him an honorary degree. In addition, he was an original trustee of the University of North Carolina and later held trusteeships at the College of Physicians and Surgeons and the University of the State of New York. He was also a founder of the Literary and Philosophical Society of New York and a prominent member of the New-York Historical Society.

In 1819, at the age of 83, Williamson died in New York City and was buried at Trinity Church.

*Image: Courtesy of National Archives, Records of Exposition, Anniversary, and Memorial Commissions (148-CCD-70a)*

[◀ Back to Main Founding Fathers Page](#)