

Redeeming the Fathers of America

William Blount 1749-1800

William Blount was born at Rosefield, Bertie County, North Carolina. He possessed the intellect and drive to succeed in the areas of business and politics, and he understood the necessity to protect the lands of his adopted home state. But he believed there was much more to achieve and so he dedicated much of his life to develop his dream of land speculation in the western frontiers of North Carolina. He also knew that to achieve that vision it required the creation of a strong central government, one that would not only sustain his Carolina home and the other colonies, but provide opportunity for western expansion beyond the Appalachian Mountains, something critical in his mind to America's future.



Blount's military experience provided him with foresight into various political and economic promises, that independence could only be fully realized by the effective union of all the states. This is why he led the fight for the endorsement of the new Constitution.

On March 26, 1749, William Blount was born into a life of wealth and privilege. He was the oldest son of Jacob and Barbara Gray Blount, a family of merchants and planters who owned extensive properties along the banks of the Pamlico River. Although William received no formal education, his father's wealth and position granted William and his brother, Thomas Blount, with generous learning through private tutors. This enabled the brothers to ease into careers managing specific aspects of their father's mercantile interests.

William's early years of aristocratic upbringing gave him little sympathy for the aspirations of the un-fashioned settlers of North Carolina's western region. He became

influenced by the Whig planter class, which opposed the demands of the Regulators. The Regulators were a people of German, Scotch-Irish, or Welsh decent, and their religious convictions were likely that of Presbyterian, Quaker, Lutheran, or German Reformed, beliefs that stressed a simple, independent lifestyle. They migrated from the mid-Atlantic colonies, seeking less expensive, more productive, and self-sufficient lands. The Regulators were countrymen that could trade or work for most items they needed, but occasionally they would have to travel to the east to buy items such as salt or needles. They were a hard-working, yet less-affluent and less educated people who fought for economic and political equality with their neighbors on the eastern plantations. They sought to accomplish this through reform of the colonial taxes, land regulations, election laws, and the judicial system.¹

Increased tensions arose between those choosing the self-sustaining lifestyle of the western countrymen and their peers on the eastern farms and plantations. When their differences turned to violence, the North Carolina militia was called upon by the royal governor. In May 1771, William Blount joined the forces loyal to the governor against approximately 2,000 mostly unarmed Regulators, on the banks of the Alamance River. Although largely bloodless encounters, the leaders of the movement were mercilessly jailed and executed. These were trying times in the development of the colony.

Keep in mind that history has a way of making past enemies into allies. Such was the case when the British passed a proclamation closing off western expansion. The Whig leaders responsible for defeating the Regulators were faced with opposition to their interests along the eastern seaboard and now the British threatened their hopes of land speculation into the western frontier. In addition, the royal governor began to reassert British control over local affairs, something the colonial assembly had managed adequately for almost a century. For the first time the east and west had a common purpose when meeting in the assembly. Their choice to unite their causes brought increasing political pressure against North Carolina's royal governor and led the colony to move forward in the pursuit of freedom. As leading members of the moderates in North Carolina, the Blount's were poised to play an important role in shaping the colony's future.

When these differences with the royal governor moved beyond any hope of reconciliation, the North Carolina assembly began recruiting troops in the Summer of 1775, ultimately contributing ten regiments of infantry and several separate companies of artillery and calvary to the Continental Army. This mobilization attracted many prominent citizens including six members of the Blount family. During a general reorganization of the colonial military in December of 1776, William Blount accepted an appointment as the regimental paymaster for the 3rd North Carolina Regiment. Although this title was that of a non-commissioned officer without battlefield responsibilities, he drew the same pay as a captain. He also marched north in late Spring of 1777 to join Washington's main army in defense of Philadelphia against Sir William Howe's royal forces.

General Howe was a talented and experienced soldier from a family that produced skilled and seasoned leaders. Nonetheless, William Howe was soon to become the scapegoat for the British army's failure. Howe had several crushing victories over General Washington, but he did not capture or shatter the hopes and determination of the Continental Army. One such victory brought Howe into the colonial capital city of Philadelphia. Outside the city Howe encountered Washington's renewed forces at the Battle of Brandywine on September 11, 1777. This was the single largest engagement of troops, over 30,000 troops were involved, and outflanked Washington's troops. This allowed the British to occupy Philadelphia without a fight.²

What happened next? Instead of marching north to aide General Burgoyne in his fight against the northern colonies, General Howe took to fraternizing with the city's high society. While Howe was at ease in Philadelphia the French decided to enter the war. This along with General Washington's renewed forces brought about Britain's ultimate defeat in the war.

Weakened by the first major military campaign, the 3rd North Carolina Regiment returned home to reorganize and recoup its fighting strength. William Blount became the Chief Paymaster of the state forces and later Deputy Paymaster General for North Carolina. Blount was also instrumental in helping other colonies reorganize troops into units. This time the

regiment they would face the British, Hessian, and Loyalist troops under General Charles Cornwallis. Blount successfully organized the troops and joined them in the field of battle. His North Carolina unit served under General Horatio Gates. General Gates had a good plan, but he miscalculated the use of the militia's fatigue and inexperience in the face of battle. General Cornwallis brought about a great defeat that day. This was the second great loss in the south, one that provided the young Blount with a lesson that would benefit him in later years. Even so, this marked the end of Blount's active military career.

William Blount resigned his military responsibilities to accept a seat in the North Carolina assembly. He served in Carolina's lower house from 1780-1784, including a period as the speaker. Later he served in the upper house from 1788-1790. In 1787, at the age of 38, Blount was appointed as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention. His absence was noted for more than a month as he chose to attend the Continental Congress on behalf of his state. His desire to focus on issues at home did not deter him from the larger issue of freedom for all, as Blount joined with his colleagues from other colonies in the signing of the Constitution of the United States.

During Blount's adult life he engaged in significant land speculation. One such opportunity came to pass while serving in Carolina's upper house (the Senate). Here Blount planned for North Carolina to cede all lands west of the Appalachian Mountains to satisfy North Carolina's debt. After the ratification of the Constitution of the United States the plan was implemented.

In 1790, President Washington appointed Blount as first Governor of the new Territory South of the River Ohio (which included Tennessee). While governor of this Southwest Territory, William Blount was instrumental in making Tennessee the nation's 16th state, in 1796. In that same year William was elected as the first U.S. Senator to represent Tennessee.

The timing here was strategic. President Washington appointed William Blount as the Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Southern Department from 1790-1796. His broad knowledge and experience gained while serving in the business and political sectors of North

Carolina, serving as a U.S. Senator, coupled with his deep desire to see the western frontier develop all seemed to be coming together. However, this new responsibility would stretch Blount's skill to the utmost. He had to balance his own expansionist interests against the government's protection policies toward the Indians. William successfully negotiated a series of treaties with the Creeks, Cherokees, Choctaws, and Chickasaw Indian tribes. He drew from his military experience during the war, organizing territorial militia who were trained and deployed to protect and defend settlers from roving bands of hostile Indians. All of this was accomplished while the Regular Army's regiment was committed to operations in the Northwest Territory, and William Blount's actions gained him the respect of the settlers who were multiplying throughout the region.

William Blount was a critical part of the overall strength and character that brought this nation into being. Throughout his life successful land speculations had been front and center in his business and political ambitions. But his life was about to take a turn for the worse. In 1797 his speculations in the western lands presented him with serious financial difficulties. He sought to use his political influence in the U.S. Senate to correct the situation, but was refused. This is apparently where Blount planned to contract the Creek and Cherokee Indians and conspire with British naval forces to attack and drive the Spanish from Florida and Louisiana. When a letter detailing his plan fell into the hands of President Adams, it was turned over to the Senate on July 3, 1797. Five days later, the Senate voted 25 to 1 to expel William Blount on a charge of a "high misdemeanor." The House impeached him, but the Senate dropped the charges on grounds that no further action was required.^{3, 4}

William Blount's career seemed over, yet not so. In 1798, Blount rose from the ashes and was elected to the Tennessee Senate and then to the speakership. However, this upward turn ended all too soon when Blount died two years later at Knoxville, in his early fifties.

The lineage of William Blount is yet another example of God's plan for this fledgling nation. We can trace it back to Sir Walter Blount who emigrated to Virginia around 1669. His son Thomas then moved to North Carolina where his son Thomas Blount Jr. married Anne

Elizabeth Reading and brought Jacob Blount into the world. Jacob married Mary Grainger who bore William Blount, the signer of the Constitution. Our founder, William Blount married Barbara Gray on February 12, 1778 and birthed seven children. As stated above, just when William Blount was achieving a restorative period in his life he contracted a fever, and less than a week later he was gone. He was laid to rest at the First Presbyterian Church of Knoxville, Tennessee.

Thus was the life of William Blount, businessman, husband and father, land speculator, having served in the militia against the Regulators, and again during the Revolutionary War, in the Carolina lower and upper houses, presided over the Constitutional Convention, signer of the U.S. Constitution, the chief negotiator between the southwest Indian nations, in 1794 elected governor of the Territory South of the River Ohio, which included Tennessee, and in 1796, transforming the western frontier and helping to bring into the union, the beautiful State of Tennessee. Lastly, William Blount was honored by election as one of that state's first U.S. Senators (1796-97).

This has been Redeeming the Fathers of America

References:

- 1) Information on the Regulators: The American Historical Register Vol III, 1895; The Eclectic History of the United States, In North Carolina; Lossing's Outline of History of the United States for Public and Other Schools page 156, and Lossing's New History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent to the Present Time, page 223
- 2) Life of Timothy Pickering by Octavius Pickering Vol 1, 1867; Pennsylvania Magazine Vol 1 No. 1, 1877 The Diary of Robert Morton; Pennsylvania Magazine Vol I No. 4, 1877
- 3) Senate Resolution on William Blount, [4 July 1797]
- 4) <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/founding-fathers-north-carolina>.

Additional Resources:

- 5) Annual Report of American Historical Association Vol I.
- 6) Letters of Delegates to Congress, Vols. 19, 21, 22, and 24.
- 7) Encyclopedia Americana Vol I., Library of Congress
- 8) Compilation of Messages and Letters of Presidents Vol XIX.