

Bethell, William ^[1]



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by Lindley S. Butler, 1979

1744–April 1804

William Bethell, [revolutionary](#) ^[2] soldier and legislator, was born in Virginia and settled in northern [Guilford County](#) ^[3] before the [American Revolution](#) ^[2]. During the war he was a captain in the [Guilford County](#) ^[3] militia, which was commanded by Colonel [James Martin](#) ^[4]. In the [Moore's Creek Bridge](#) ^[5] campaign in 1776, Bethell took part with the militia in the occupation of Cross Creek. He was in service again in 1779 when the county militia was called to disperse a Tory force in the Yadkin River Valley. In the summer of 1781 he was in command of a troop of mounted infantry from Guilford County in [General Griffith Rutherford's](#) ^[6] successful campaign to force the British evacuation of [Wilmington](#) ^[7]. In this campaign, Bethell served under the command of Colonel Robert Smith in the skirmish at Moore's Plantation.

After the war, Bethell returned to his sizeable plantation on Lick Fork and Hogan's Creek. On 29 Dec. 1785, the new county of [Rockingham](#) ^[8] was created from the northern part of [Guilford County](#) ^[3]. Appointed as one of Rockingham's first justices of the peace, Bethell also was elected as one of the county's first members of the [General Assembly](#) ^[9]. He served four terms in the House of Commons, from 1786 to 1789, and one term in the state senate in 1790. In this period the leading issue facing the General Assembly was the ratification of the federal Constitution. Bethell and the [Rockingham County](#) ^[8] legislative delegation were solidly anti-Federalist, voting against the two constitutional conventions held in North Carolina in 1788 and 1789. In the General Assembly of 1788, Bethell seconded a motion by [Thomas Person](#) ^[10] of [Granville County](#) ^[11] to reconsider a resolution for a second convention, but the motion was defeated. In this same session, Bethell served on a house Committee on Public Revenue. In the 1790 session of the state senate, he was on the Committee of Propositions and Grievances, a committee to consider the division of [Caswell County](#) ^[12], and a committee to examine the engrossed bills.

When the [constitutional conventions](#) ^[13] of 1788 ^[13] and 1789 ^[14] were held to consider ratification of the U.S. Constitution, Rockingham County elected anti-Federalist delegates. Bethell was a delegate to both conventions. In the first, which met at Hillsborough 25 July–4 Aug. 1788, Bethell and the Rockingham delegation voted with the majority to offer a declaration of rights and twenty-six amendments. At [Fayetteville](#) ^[15], where the second convention met 16–22 Nov. 1789, he and his colleagues voted with the minority against ratification of the Constitution.

From 1790 until his death fourteen years later, Bethell was active in the county government. By 1792 he was clerk of court, and he retained that position until his death. He served on various special committees; in 1799 he was appointed a trustee responsible for promotion of the new town at the county seat, Wentworth. He continued to be a captain in the county militia for the remainder of his life. By 1800 he was the third largest slaveholder in the county with thirty slaves and had accumulated an estate of over eight thousand acres of land.

Bethell married Nancy Stubblefield (d. 1826). They had four daughters, Suky, Jeany, Nancy, and Sine; and four sons, William, John, Alfred, and Pinckney. The Bethells attended the Lick Fork Primitive Baptist Church, near their home. After the death of her husband, Nancy Bethell married George Roberts. The eldest son of William and Nancy Bethell, William, Jr. (1764–1834), was as active as his father in state politics. He became a brigadier general in the state militia (1818–29), served five terms in the House of Commons (1815–20), and served two terms in the state senate (1828–29).

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Additional Resources:

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