

Burke, Thomas ^[1]

Burke, Thomas

by John Watterson, 1979; Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, April 2023

ca. 1744–2 Dec. 1783



Woodcut of Thomas Burke, date unknown. Image from the State Archives of North Carolina.

^[2]Thomas Burke, governor and poet, was born in Ireland and grew up in Dublin, probably in a Protestant household. He migrated to the colonies following family quarrels in 1759 or 1760 and settled in Northampton County ^[3] on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. He first practiced medicine but switched to law, which appeared more lucrative. While in Virginia he began to write poetry, and one of his early poems celebrated the repeal of the Stamp Act ^[4]. A number of his poems and essays were published in the Virginia newspapers between 1766 and 1768 (they have been more recently collected by Richard Walser and published as *The Poems of Governor Thomas Burke of North Carolina* [Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1961]). Burke moved to Norfolk in 1769 and in March of the following year married Mary ("Polly") Freeman. As a lawyer he was chiefly engaged in collecting debts for merchants, but his legal activities did include a correspondence with Thomas Jefferson.

In 1772, Burke moved to North Carolina, settling on a farm near Hillsborough. In 1775 he began his political career as a delegate to the second provincial congress ^[5]. He was reelected to succeeding congresses and chaired the committee to draft a constitution in April 1776. As a result of his obvious talents, he was elected to the Continental Congress, where he served from 1777 until 1781. Almost alone among the members of Congress, he perceived the conflict between the continental establishment and the sovereignty of his state, which he vigorously asserted. In the debate over the Articles of Confederation in 1777, Burke introduced a resolution guaranteeing those powers to the states that were not explicitly granted to the Confederation. This safeguard was incorporated into the Articles and later was the basis for the Tenth Amendment to the federal Constitution. With the British invasion of the South, however, Burke became increasingly nationalistic and participated in the campaign to establish import duties in 1780 and 1781.

In June of 1781, Burke was elected governor of war-ravaged North Carolina, and in October he was captured at Hillsborough by the Tory raider David Fanning ^[6]. After he was paroled by the enemy to James Island near Charles Town, his life was threatened by Tory refugees and he was forced to flee. After his return to North Carolina, he resumed his duties as governor, setting off an undercurrent of criticism, especially among officers of the military who felt that his parole violation was an inexcusable breach of honor.

Burke left office in April of 1782, disillusioned with the revolutionary experiment in republicanism and favoring a more aristocratic system. Burdened with debts from his public service and weakened by his ordeal as a captive, he died and was buried on his farm near Hillsborough. He was survived by an infant daughter, Mary Williams Burke ^[7].

Additional information from NCpedia editors at the State Library of North Carolina:

This person enslaved and owned other people. Many Black and African people, their descendants, and some others were enslaved in the United States until the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery in 1865. It was common for wealthy landowners, entrepreneurs, politicians, institutions, and others to enslave people and use enslaved labor during this period. To read more about the enslavement and transportation of African people to North Carolina, visit <https://aahc.nc.gov/programs/africa-carolina-0> ^[8]. To read more about slavery and its history in North Carolina, visit



A photograph of a drawing of Mary "Polly" Williams Burke, the only child of governor Thomas Burke.

[10]References:

Sister Mary Carmelita Barrett, "Thomas Burke, Governor of North Carolina" (M.A. thesis, Catholic University, 1946).

Elisha Douglass, "Thomas Burke: Disillusioned Democrat," *North Carolina Historical Review* 26 (1949).

North Carolina Booklet, vol. 6 (October 1906).

Jennings Sanders, "Thomas Burke in the Continental Congress," *North Carolina Historical Review* [11] 9 (1932).

Ruth Franklin Sutton, "Thomas Burke" (M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina, 1949).

John S. Watterson III, "The Ordeal of Governor Burke," *North Carolina Historical Review* 48 (1971), and "Thomas Burke: A Revolutionary Career" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1970).

Additional Resources:

"Thomas Burke." N.C. Highway Historical Marker G-16, N.C. Office of Archives & History.

<https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program/Markers.aspx?sp=Markers&k=Markers&sv=G-16> [12] (accessed February 22, 2013).

"BURKE, Thomas, (ca. 1747 - 1783)." Biographical Directory of the United States Congress.

<http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=B001098> (accessed February 22, 2013). [13]

Thomas Burke papers. North Carolina State Archives [14], Raleigh, NC, USA. <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/collections/governors-papers-historical?search=burke%2C%20samuel%2C%201747-1783&searchtypes=Metadata|Full%20text&applyState=true> [15]

"Controversy Over a Prisoner Exchange: Thomas Burke and the Question of Unruly Congressmen." *Documents from the Continental Congress and the Constitutional Convention, 1774-1789*. Library of Congress.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/continental/exchange.html> [16] (accessed February 22, 2013).

"CSR Documents by Burke, Thomas, ca. 1747-1783." *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*. Documenting the American South, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/creators/csr10872> [17] (accessed February 22, 2013).

Thomas Burke Papers, 1763-1852 (collection no. 00104). The Southern Historical Collection. Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/b/Burke,Thomas.html> [18] (accessed February 22, 2013).

Parramore, Thomas C. "Doctors Whig and Tory: Dr. Thomas Burke." *North Carolina Medical Journal* 29, no. 2 (February 1968). 66. <https://archive.org/stream/ncmed291968medi#page/66/mode/2up> ^[19] (accessed February 22, 2013).

Watterson, John. "Poetic Justice; or, an Ill-Fated Epic by Thomas Burke." *North Carolina Historical Review* 55 (July 1978): 339-346. [Poem on smallpox inoculation riot, Norfolk, Va., June 1768.]

Watterson, John. "Revolutionary Nonconformist: Thomas Burke of North Carolina." *South Dakota History*, Volume 6, Number 3. June 27, 1976. Pierre, SD: South Dakota State Historical Society Press. Accessed April 14, 2023 at <https://www.sdhspress.com/journal/south-dakota-history-6-3/revolutionary-nonconformist-thomas-burke-of-north-carolina/vol-06-no-3-revolutionary-nonconformist.pdf> ^[20].

Image Credits:

"Thomas Burke, 1781 - 1782 From the General Negative Collection, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, NC.; call #: N_75_1_280 Thomas Burke. Available from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/north-carolina-state-archives/8407659227/in/set-72157631785870204> ^[2] (accessed February 22, 2013).

"Photograph, Accession #: [H.1952.61.13](#) ^[10]." 1890-1910. North Carolina Museum of History.

Subjects:

[Biographies](#) ^[21]

[Governors](#) ^[22]

[Lawyers](#) ^[23]

[Physicians, Dentists, Pharmacists, and other Medical Professionals](#) ^[24]

[Poets](#) ^[25]

Authors:

[Watterson, John](#) ^[26]

Origin - location:

[Hillsborough](#) ^[27]

From:

[Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press](#) ^[28]

1 January 1979 | Watterson, John

Source URL: <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/burke-thomas>

Links

[1] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/burke-thomas> [2] <https://www.flickr.com/photos/north-carolina-state-archives/8407659227/in/set-72157631785870204> [3] <https://www.ncpedia.org/geography/northampton> [4] <https://www.ncpedia.org/stamp-act> [5] <https://www.ncpedia.org/provincial-congresses> [6] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/fanning-david> [7] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/burke-mary> [8] <https://aaahc.nc.gov/programs/africa-carolina-0> [9] <https://www.ncpedia.org/slavery> [10] <http://collections.ncdcr.gov/RediscoveryProficioPublicSearch/ShowItem.aspx?40837+> [11] <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/north-carolina-historical-review-1932-january/3705513?item=4504521> [12] <https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program/Markers.aspx?sp=Markers&k=Markers&sv=G-16> [13] <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=B001098> [14] <https://archives.ncdcr.gov/> [15] <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/collections/governors-papers-historical?search=burke%2C%20samuel%2C%201747-1783&searchtypes=Metadata|Full%20text&applyState=true> [16] <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/continental/exchange.html> [17] <https://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/creators/csr10872> [18] <http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/b/Burke,Thomas.html> [19] <https://archive.org/stream/ncmed291968medi#page/66/mode/2up> [20] <https://www.sdhspress.com/journal/south-dakota-history-6-3/revolutionary-nonconformist-thomas-burke-of-north-carolina/vol-06-no-3-revolutionary-nonconformist.pdf> [21] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/biography-term> [22] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/governors> [23] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/lawyers> [24] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/physicians> [25] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/poets> [26] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/authors/watterson-john> [27] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmont-6> [28] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/dictionary-no>