

Culpepper (Culpeper), John ^[1]

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by Sarah McCulloh Lemmon, 1979

1764–Jan. 1841

John Culpepper (Culpeper), Baptist ^[2] clergyman and Federalist ^[3] congressman, son of Samson Culpepper, was born near Wadesboro in Anson County ^[4], in the area later made into Montgomery County ^[5]. Nothing is known of his personal life, although one reference indicates that he may have served in the Revolutionary War ^[6], perhaps in Georgia where he lived for awhile before 1784. He said in 1820 that "he knew what it was to be a soldier himself, and to serve when a morsel of bread was a luxury." He attended local schools and was ordained in the Sandy Creek Association ^[7] some time prior to 1812. It is probable that he preached at Meadow Branch Church in Union County ^[8], where he acquired a reputation as "a great evangelist." By 1815 the number of Baptist congregations had increased, and the new Pee Dee Association, to which Culpepper belonged for the remainder of his life, was created. At the 1816 meeting of the Sandy Creek Association, he was the guest preacher, using as his text for the opening discourse Hebrews 4:16.

Unconcerned over the issue of separation of church and state, Culpepper ran for the General Assembly ^[9] of North Carolina and was elected as one of the two Anson County representatives in 1801. His service was not remarkable; he favored the calling of a constitutional convention for revision of the state constitution, and he favored stricter laws to regulate gambling. On the last day of the session, however, he and two other clerical members were challenged by the House of Commons on the basis of having violated Section 31 of the constitution, which forbade practicing clergy to hold office in the General Assembly. His seat was thereupon declared vacant, he was awarded all his back pay, and a new election in Anson County was called. This even did not discourage him, for in 1807 he ran for Congress as a Federalist against Duncan McFarland ^[10] and won in a contested election. McFarland appealed to the House of Representatives, which, after taking testimony evidencing such irregularities as an insufficient number of judges and failure to administer proper oaths to election officials, declared the seat vacant but would not award it to McFarland. A new election returned Culpepper again, whereupon he took his seat and began the first of six terms in Congress (1807–9, 1813–17, 1819–21, 1823–25, 1827–29).

Philosophically, Culpepper was more nearly an Old Jeffersonian than a Federalist ^[3]. As he himself stated, he "had always been independent enough to disregard precedents in his course, and he should continue to do so." He stood with the Federalists in opposition to the War of 1812 ^[11], averring his willingness to support a defensive war but never a war "for the purpose of invasion of Canada." He voted against the Loan Bill of 1814 in a lengthy speech, referring to "this premature, this ill-advised, this miserably conducted war. . . ."

Culpepper did not follow the nationalist surge that ensued at the close of the war. He voted against the charter of the second Bank of the United States and against the protective tariffs of 1816, 1824, and 1828. Although he initially supported an appropriation for roads and canals, by 1824 he also opposed these expenditures, on the grounds of invasion of states' rights ^[12]. He did not hesitate to vote for appropriations that would benefit the "little man," supporting pensions for all Revolutionary War soldiers, for instance, and salary increases for government clerks.

Although it is not known if he was a slaveholder, Culpepper supported the institution. During the 1820 struggle over the admission of Missouri, he voted consistently for slavery in the new state but was willing to support its prohibition north of 36 degrees 30 minutes. Further, he opposed an authorization for the president to negotiate with foreign countries to abolish the African slave trade, and he also objected to the use of resolutions in the House as vehicles for abolitionist propaganda.

To some, the country preacher was good only for "log-rolling or corn shucking." Indeed, once the members of the House walked off the floor in the midst of a Culpepper speech. To others, he "was deemed a man of sound sense, but not brilliant, useful rather than showy." Not a wealthy man, he did not consider himself able to serve in Congress without adequate compensation. "My family are to be provided for, and I shall vote for the compensation I deem just, and use my wages to support myself, to pay my debts, to support my family, etc., just as I would the avails of my labor on my farm, or any where else. . . ." His socioeconomic status and his views are generally Jeffersonian, and it must remain a mystery why he called himself a Federalist.

Following the end of his sixth term he retired; he died twelve years later, at the age of eighty, at the home of a son in Darlington County, S.C. He was buried in the Welch Neck Church cemetery at Society Hill, S.C.

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