

Davidson, John ^[1]

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15 Dec. 1735–10 Jan. 1832

John Davidson, patriot, ironmaster, and planter-enslaver, was the son of Robert and Isabel Ramsay Davidson who are believed to have come from Scotland on the "Diligance of Glasgow" in January 1729. John was born in Middle Octoraro Settlement, Chestnut Level, Pa. His father died young and the widow migrated to the North Carolina Piedmont in the 1750s. Her second husband was Henry Hendry, a schoolmaster said to have been educated at the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University). John and his sister Mary received exceptional educational advantages from their stepfather, but John chose the trade of blacksmith for a livelihood on the frontier. There is a land grant, dated 17 Apr. 1759, for land on Coddle Creek, Anson County ^[2], N.C., to John Davidson, blacksmith; Henry Hendry is mentioned in the deed.

Davidson chose as his permanent residence a commanding hilltop about a mile east of the Catawba River ^[3] near Toole's Ford in what is now Mecklenburg County ^[4]. Nearby lived Samuel Wilson, a wealthy Englishman who had migrated from Virginia and settled in this area in 1750. On 2 June 1761, Davidson married Samuel Wilson's eldest daughter Violet (13 Aug. 1742–3 Dec. 1818). He built a substantial log house that lasted a hundred and twenty-odd years, and by the time of the Revolutionary War ^[5] he and Violet were the parents of six children. They later had four more; the last, Benjamin, was born in 1787.

During the colonial period, Davidson served as a justice of the peace and as a member of the House of Commons for Mecklenburg County, attending the meetings of the North Carolina Assembly in New Bern in 1773. He and Representative Thomas Polk ^[6] were instrumental in having a bill passed making Charlotte ^[7] the permanent county seat of Mecklenburg (19 Mar. 1774). Apparently Representative Davidson saw nothing in New Bern (including the recently completed palace ^[8] for Governor Tryon ^[9]) to enlist his loyalty to the king. When the Whigs ^[10] and their local committees took over the government in 1775, he was elected a member of the Committee of Safety ^[11] for Mecklenburg County.

Mecklenburg's independence movement has been and will continue for many years to be a subject of controversy among historians. As the last surviving member of the Mecklenburg convention, Davidson's testimony is of special significance. It was given when he was ninety-five years old and living at Beaver Dam with his daughter and son-in-law, Elizabeth and Major William Lee Davidson ^[12]. According to his family, his mind was still clear. He testified as follows:

"There were two men chosen from each Captain's company to meet in Charlotte to take the subject into consideration. John McKnitt Alexander and myself were chosen from one company. . . . When the members met, and were perfectly organized for business, a motion was made to declare ourselves Independent of the Crown of Great Britain, which was carried by a large majority. Then Dr. Ephraim Brevard was appointed to give us a sketch of the Declaration of Independence which he did. Then James Jack ^[13] was appointed to take it on to the American Congress, then sitting in Philadelphia. . . . When Jack returned he stated that the Declaration was presented to Congress, and the reply was that they highly esteemed the patriotism of the citizens of Mecklenburg but they thought the measure to [be] premature.

"I am confident that the Declaration of Independence by the people of Mecklenburg ^[14] was made publick at least twelve months before that of the Congress of the United States." The affidavit mentions neither the exact date nor a "signing," but neither of these were matters of controversy in 1830 and it is said that Davidson called his son Benjamin, who was born 20 May 1787 (d. 25 Sept. 1829), "my Independence Boy."

At the outbreak of hostilities between the colonies and Great Britain, the North Carolina Provincial Congress ^[15] organized its state militia on 9 Sept. 1775. Thomas Polk was appointed colonel for the Mecklenburg troops and Davidson was second major. These troops participated in the "Snow Campaign" against the South Carolina Tories in 1775 and in General Griffith Rutherford ^[16]'s expedition against the Cherokees in 1776. Major Davidson is believed to have participated in both campaigns. He then accepted a transfer from field service to the position of brigade major for the Salisbury militia, commanded first by Rutherford and after his capture at Camden ^[17], by General William Lee Davidson. He rendered service to militia and Continental troops alike. There is a "Field Return of the Southern Army under command of Major General Gates, Camp New Providence, on November 25, 1780," by Brigade Major Davidson listing over a thousand men each for state and national forces. Tradition relates that General William Lee Davidson ^[12] stayed at the home of Major John Davidson while organizing his volunteer army to delay Cornwallis's crossing of the Catawba, and that he was riding a horse from the major's stables when shot on the banks of the river at Cowan's Ford on 1 Feb. 1781.

The major prospered after the war. In 1788 he built what the Charlotte Observer ^[18] described ninety-eight years later when it burned as "the finest country residence in all this section of the State." It was undoubtedly the first notable house on the Catawba River. Davidson named his new home Rural Hill and the older log house was known as Rural Retreat. The latter, inhabited by sons and grandsons, outlasted the mansion that replaced it until it, too, went up in flames in 1898.

In the census of 1790, John Davidson enslaved twenty-six people, an estate exceeded in Mecklenburg only by those of Colonel Thomas Polk and John Springs.

An important contribution to the economic development of North Carolina was made by Davidson in developing the iron industry ^[19] in Lincoln County ^[20]. In 1789 the Big Ore Bank ^[21] had been granted to General Peter Forney ^[22], who sold interests to Davidson and his sons-in-law Captain Alexander Brevard ^[23] and Major Joseph Graham ^[24]. By 1795 the latter three had bought out Forney and were conducting a flourishing business. Davidson furnished the capital and the practical experience in working iron; Graham operated Vesuvius Furnace and Brevard Mt. Tirzah Forge. Iron became practically a medium of exchange in a region where hard money was scarce. Munitions were manufactured for the government in the War of 1812 ^[25].

In the fall of 1823, in his eighty-ninth year, Davidson decided to retire from business; his wife had died five years previously. He appointed his son-in-law Major William Lee Davidson to be his trustee in selling off his property in order to give his children their inheritance. He reserved a room for himself in his mansion house at Rural Hill but apparently spent the remainder of his days at the Beaver Dam plantation of his son-in-law and daughter Elizabeth ("Betsy Lee"). This homestead, still standing, was about two miles east of the future Davidson College ^[26], which was located on land belonging to Major William Lee Davidson. Here Major John Davidson died at ninety-seven. He was taken back to Rural Hill for burial beside his wife in the place selected by himself.

John and Violet Davidson were the parents of ten children who grew to maturity: daughters Rebecca (Mrs. Alexander Brevard), Isabella (Mrs. Joseph Graham), Mary (Mrs. William McLean), Violet (Mrs. William Bain Alexander), Sarah (Mrs. Alexander Caldwell, son of Dr. David Caldwell ^[27]), Margaret (Mrs. James Harris), and Elizabeth (Mrs. William Lee Davidson, II); and sons Robert ^[28], John (inherited Rural Hill), and Benjamin Wilson. All except Robert and Elizabeth left families. The most distinguished of Davidson's more than sixty grandchildren was Governor William Alexander Graham ^[29], who was said to resemble most in appearance and bearing the almost legendary grandfather of this numerous progeny.

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Additional Resources:

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