

DeBow, John ^[1]

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by Durward T. Stokes, 1986

ca. 1745–8 Sept. 1783

John DeBow, Presbyterian ^[2] minister and chaplain in the American Revolution ^[3], was born in either Monmouth or Hunterdon County, N.J. He was a descendant of migrants from Amsterdam, Holland, who changed their surname from deBoog to DeBow after arriving in America about 1649. In 1753 his parents, Solomon and Hannah DeBow, moved from New Jersey to a farm on Hyco Creek in present Caswell County ^[4], N.C. When the father died in 1767, he left a respectable estate to his wife and nine children: John, Frederick, Benjamin, Hannah, Jane, Ann, Mary, Sarah, and Elizabeth.

Aided by his patrimony, DeBow was able to enroll in the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) where he was graduated in 1772. Having elected to become a Presbyterian minister, DeBow was licensed under the Synod of New York and Philadelphia and for a short time was assigned to the New Jersey churches of Oxford and Mount Bethel. On 17 May 1775, the Synod sent him to North Carolina to supply vacancies there. This work brought him to Orange County ^[5], where in February 1776 he promptly joined Colonel John Butler ^[6]'s militia as chaplain and accompanied it on the expedition to the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge ^[7]. Later the same year, the Provincial Congress ^[8] of North Carolina awarded him fifteen pounds and ten shillings for his services.

On 22 May 1776, DeBow was fully ordained into the Gospel ministry by the New Brunswick Presbytery and accepted a call to become the official pastor of the Hawfields and Eno churches in North Carolina. By this transfer, he became a member of the Presbytery of Orange and devoted as much time as he could spare from his official duties to minister to the congregations at New Hope, Little River, Stony Creek, and other places where no resident pastors were available. Like most of his Presbyterian colleagues, DeBow conducted a school; with unusual foresight, he petitioned the General Assembly for financial aid in its operation until a state university was established. The latter event, he concluded, was inevitable.

The lengthy journeys on horseback, regardless of weather, that were necessary to serve a territory so widespread made rigorous physical demands on the clergyman, but he kept apace of his duties and his ministry proved influential. William Hodge ^[9] was so inspired by DeBow that he joined the Hawfields church and determined to become the first son of that congregation to enter the ministry. However, his dismay at the sudden death of the pastor caused him to abandon his plans, and they were only revived successfully many years later under the influence of James MacGready.

The date is unknown of DeBow's marriage to Lucy Rice, to whom the clergyman gave the name of "Liney" in his will. She was the sister of John Rice, perhaps best known as the founder of Memphis, Tenn. The only known children of the couple were two sons, Solomon and Stephen. The Hawfields minister owned a respectable estate and his concern for his family is evident in provisions set forth in his will for the education of his sons. DeBow's sister, Jane, married Archibald Murphey and became the mother of Archibald DeBow Murphey ^[10]. Another sister married Jacob Lake, who followed his brother-in-law as pastor of the Hawfields and Eno churches.

DeBow was only thirty-eight when he died of smallpox, contracted while nursing soldiers who fought in the closing days of the Revolutionary War. His grave was the first in the new cemetery at Hawfields, the church having been moved from its original location to where it now stands in Alamance County ^[11]. None of his sermons nor any portrait of DeBow have been found. He is remembered for his untiring efforts to serve a large area of North Carolina as a Christian minister, for his promotion of public education in the state, and for his patriotism in the American Revolution.

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[Stokes, Durward T.](#) ^[21]

Origin - location:

[Alamance County](#) ^[22]

[Caswell County](#) ^[23]

[Orange County](#) ^[24]

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1 January 1986 | Stokes, Durward T.

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