

Dickson, William ^[1]

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Dickson, William

by Charles M. Ingram, 1986

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William Dickson, colonial leader, was born in Chester County, Pa., of English and Irish ancestry. His paternal grandfather, a stern English Puritan, fought with Oliver Cromwell and was rewarded with a grant of land in Ireland; upon the restoration of the Crown, he became a tenant on the same land. His father was John Dickson (1704–74), who emigrated from Ireland to Pennsylvania, thence to Maryland, and finally to North Carolina where he settled about 1740–45. The second in a family of seven sons and one daughter, his formal education, according to family tradition, was limited to about three months.

A prominent leader in the civil affairs of Duplin County ^[2], N.C., Dickson served in the militia under Colonel, later General, James Kenan ^[3], the county's military leader. He saw much service in all fights in the area, including the Battle of Rockfish, and, though wounded only once, he narrowly escaped capture or death three times. He represented Duplin County in the colonial assemblies of 1769 and 1770–71 and in the House of Commons in 1795. He also was a delegate to the provincial congresses ^[4] held at New Bern, 25 Aug. 1774; Halifax, 3 Apr. 1775 and 12 Nov. 1776; and Hillsborough, 21 Aug. 1775. In 1777 he was elected clerk of court of the Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions ^[5], a post he held until 1819, shortly before his death, for the remarkable period of forty-four years.

Dickson is probably best known as the author of the so-called "Dickson Letters." The first four, to a cousin, the Reverend Robert Dickson, a Presbyterian clergyman at Narrow Water, near Newry, Ireland, cover the years from 1784 to 1790. The fifth, and last known in existence, was to a niece, Linda Dickson, while she was visiting her older sister, Mrs. Elizabeth Johnson, in Charleston, S.C., in 1818. Undoubtedly, there were others. He discussed political affairs with an intuitive knowledge and foresight that was remarkable. His fears of the power of the president and the central government were allayed by the early leaders selected. Of the federal Constitution he wrote that "it is formed so as to lay the foundation of one of the greatest empires now in the world." He felt, however, that the southern states would not enjoy equality with the North. "The Southern States will have their vote," he predicted, "but will not be able to carry any point against so powerful a party in cases where either general or local interest are the object." He further wrote that northern actions with regard to the slavery question had alarmed the South and, "though they did not carry their point, they [the North] seemed determined never to drop the matter until they do."

A staunch Presbyterian ^[6], Dickson was devoted to the causes of church and education, and in 1785, by act of the General Assembly, he was made a trustee of the yet-to-be-organized Grove Academy at Kenansville. In 1767 he had married Mary Williams, daughter of Joseph Williams, of Onslow County ^[7]; they had nine children. One son, Dr. William Dickson ^[8], was a three-term member of Congress from Tennessee, where a county is named for him. The exact place of the elder Dickson's burial is not known, but it is highly likely that it was on his plantation on Grove Swamp, near the present community of Summerlin's Crossroads.

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Additional Resources:

William Dickson to Richard Caswell, Duplin, July 8th 1778. Colonial and State Records of North Carolina Volume 13, Page 189 <https://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr13-0239> ^[10] (accessed February 7, 2014).

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http://www.duplincountync.com/rod/hist_list.html ^[12] (accessed February 7, 2014)

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