

Duke, William, Jr. ^[1]

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ca. 1720–before 26 Oct. 1793

William Duke, Jr., planter-enslaver and public official, was born in Southside, Va., where his father, William Duke, was a prominent planter. Recent research and records now available support the contention by the Duke family of Warren County ^[2], N.C., that they were descendants of the first Colonel William Byrd of Westover through his youngest daughter, Mary. The twentieth-century publication of the second William Byrd's *Secret Diary* ^[3] makes clear that she was the wife of James Duke of James City County and later of Charles City County, Va. James Duke was himself a son of Colonel Henry Duke of James City County, a member of the council, and a close friend and political associate to both colonels Byrd of Westover. James Duke and his wife Mary (who later married Richard Corbett) had a number of children, among them Anne, who married Joab Mountcastle; Henry, who married Elizabeth (probably a Marston); John; Edmund, who married Jane Gresham and whose children resettled in Granville County ^[4], N.C., after 1787; Sarah, who married Charles Christian; and William, the father of the subject of this sketch.

William Duke, Sr., was the eldest son of James and Mary Byrd Duke. An early nineteenth century genealogy of the Duke family states that he was educated at Westover by his uncle, Colonel William Byrd II. It is likely that the son of James Duke referred to in Colonel Byrd's *Secret Diary* on 3 Aug. 1709, was this William. Like several other of his siblings, William Duke, Sr., moved away from his home in the James River region and settled on Rocky Creek in Brunswick County, Va. In 1742 he deeded to his son, William Duke, Jr., 317 acres of Brunswick County land that had been granted to the senior Duke on 28 Sept. 1728. By this time William Duke, Sr., was remarried to a widow, Elizabeth Bartholomew; his first wife, Tamar Taylor, had died. His known children were by his first marriage: Samuel, the first of the family to remove to North Carolina; John, who married Mary Myrick; Tamar, who married Peter Green; Joseph, who married Mary Eppes and whose descendants became prominent settlers of Georgia and Tennessee; and William, Jr. On 11 May 1744 William Duke, Sr., and his wife Elizabeth, and William Duke, Jr., and his wife Mary, sold their lands in Brunswick County and removed to North Carolina where they settled on Possum Quarter Creek in what was then Edgecombe County—it shortly became Granville County, even later Bute County ^[5], and finally Warren County ^[2] in 1779. The elder Duke acquired an estate of over six hundred acres before 1746 but soon afterward gave much of it to his children or sold part of it, retaining only about fifty acres for his own use for the remainder of his life.

William Duke, Jr., began to amass a large fortune in land and enslave many people. Purchase Patent plantation, as he named it, was the seat of his operations and amounted to several thousand acres. An inventory of his holdings in 1794 shows that he enslaved fifty-three people. A number of other Dukes in Warren County also had large estates.

One of the most interesting aspects of William Duke's residence in Warren County was the house he, or his father, built. Said to date from about 1750, it clearly demonstrates a high standard in domestic Georgian architecture in that section of North Carolina. According to strong, sustained, local tradition, the Duke house was similar to that of Colonel William Byrd II at Westover. On the surface, this assertion seems clearly erroneous. When the facts are more closely examined, however, there appears to be evidence to support the claim. The original house at Westover, which Colonel Byrd built in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, is thought to have been a story and a half in configuration. The main block of the present mansion was raised by Colonel William Byrd I after 1730. Architectural historians now believe that the large chimneys at the ends of the west dependency of the present mansion were built much earlier than the 1730 buildings, and that a story-and-a-half wooden structure stood there. An 1866 photograph of Purchase Patent clearly shows large chimneys, similar in construction to those at Westover, and a house that demonstrates a high degree of sophistication for Georgian style houses in the Carolina Piedmont ^[6] at mid-century. If one adds to this the close ties of kinship between the Byrds and the Dukes, and the statements in the *Secret Diary*, which only came to light in this century, the evidence seems to point with some reliability to the design origins of the Duke house. Purchase Patent was clearly one of the most handsome houses in the region for this period.

William Duke, Jr., Samuel Duke, John Duke, and Joseph Duke—all sons of William Duke, Sr.—were listed with their father on the muster roll of Granville County in 1754. On Friday, 23 June 1775, William Duke was listed as a member of the Committee of Safety. The minutes of the committee show that William and other Dukes were active members. On 8 July 1775 William Duke, along with such notable figures as Jethro Sumner ^[7], Philemon Hawkins, Jr., James Ransom, William Alston, Green Hill, Thomas Eaton, and sundry others, designed a document that virtually endorsed the actions of the Continental Congress then sitting in Philadelphia. This was clearly treasonable to the British authorities, and places all these men in the vanguard of revolutionary activities.

William Duke, Jr., was one of the men in 1779 commissioned to measure the Bute County boundary and to divide the county in two new units to be named Franklin ^[8] and Warren counties. Though he did not serve in the armed forces during

the [Revolution](#) ^[9], the military pay vouchers for the Halifax District indicate that in 1781 the revolutionary government owed him £6,000, probably for supplies furnished the military. In 1779 he was appointed one of six commissioners to lay out the county seat town of Warrenton on the one hundred acres that had been purchased for the purpose. He was clearly interested in the new town and county and its educational facilities, for in 1787 he was appointed a trustee for the Warrenton Academy when it was founded. Duke was later styled "William Duke, Sr.," as his father had died in 1775 and the younger William Duke later had a grandson named William.

Duke's wife, Mary, was a daughter of Edward Green of Brunswick County, Va., who later settled in Granville County, N.C. She is thought to have been a widow when Duke married her and the mother of one daughter, Winnifred. Mary was not married before 17 June 1740 when she witnessed a deed in Brunswick County as "Mary Green." By May 1744 she was the wife of William Duke, Jr., when they, with his parents, William and Elizabeth Duke, sold their land in Brunswick County and moved to North Carolina. William and Mary Duke had five children: Green (m. Mary Parham); Thamar (m. Edward Jones); Sarah (m. Captain Thomas Christmas); Ann, called Nancy (m. Robert Jones); and Mary (m. Isaac Howze). The Green Duke plantation is the site for the Soul City project in Warren County; its handsome mansion house is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Mary Green Duke survived her husband. They are said to be buried on his Purchase Patent plantation, near the town of Warrenton.

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

William Duke, Jr. and his father may not be descendants of William Byrd of Westover. Many family historians, genealogists and historical researchers diverge on the accurate lineage of the Byrd, Duke, and Ward families. James Duke and Mary Byrd Duke (the alleged parents of William Duke, Sr.) resided in James City County and Charles City County, Virginia. Many county records, such as birth and family records, in these counties were destroyed during the Civil War. Constructing accurate genealogical research for families that resided in these counties before the Civil War is problematic due to the lack of records. To read more about "burned counties" in Virginia, please visit https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/rn30_lostrecords.pdf ^[10]. To read more about the contested genealogy of the Byrd, Duke and Ward families, please visit: <https://www.ancestry.com/boards/surnames.duke/2268> ^[11]. - SLNC Government and Heritage Library, June 2023

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Additional Resources:

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