

Erwin, Alexander ^[1]

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6 June 1750–ca. October 1829

Alexander Erwin, Revolutionary soldier, public official, and legislator, was born in Bucks County, Pa., of Scot-Irish ancestry. His parents, Nathaniel and Leah Julian Erwin, moved to Rowan (now Burke) County, N.C., shortly before the American Revolution ^[2] and established their home at Cherryfields on the east side of Upper Creek. During the Revolution Erwin saw much guerrilla service with the Whig forces. As a lieutenant in Captain David Vance's company, he fought against the loyalist militia under Major Patrick Ferguson in the crucial Battle of Kings Mountain ^[3] on 7 Oct. 1780. He subsequently attained the rank of colonel in the Burke County ^[4] militia.

After the Revolution Erwin entertained an undying hatred for those who had been Tories ^[5]. A tradition still survives in Burke County that ex-Tories were allowed to come to Morganton, the county seat, only during court week, and that it was Erwin's habit to make public proclamation on each day of court week for all Tories to leave town before sunset. It is suggested that his proclamation was always obeyed. Erwin's hatred of Tories had its origin in an experience of his first wife, Sarah Robinson Erwin, during the Revolution while he was absent from home with the Whig forces. Having been severely wounded in the service of his country, Samuel Alexander, a neighbor and friend, came to Erwin's home for shelter and care. Sarah Erwin put him in an outhouse near the dwelling, hoping to conceal him from the Tories until his wounds healed. A marauding band of Tories came to the Erwin dwelling in quest of Whigs and searched it over Sarah's protests. After plundering the house, the Tories approached the outhouse where Samuel Alexander lay helpless. Sarah placed herself at the outhouse door and denied them admittance. Thrusting her aside, they entered the structure and discovered the wounded Whig. As one of the men was in the act of striking Alexander with his sword, Sarah Erwin threw herself between the Tory and Alexander with her right arm over the injured man's head. From the descending blade she received a dreadful wound that maimed her for life.

Upon the organization of Burke County in June 1777, Erwin became the first clerk of the County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions ^[6]. He held this office until 1793, when he resigned and was succeeded by his son, James Erwin, who acted as clerk until 1833. James Erwin, in turn, was followed in this post by his son, Joseph J. Erwin ^[7], who served until 1845. Altogether these men held the clerkship for a continuous period of sixty-eight years.

In the legislature of 1781 Alexander Erwin's name was placed in nomination for the office of delegate to the Continental Congress, but he failed to win election. He was again prominently mentioned as a candidate for this post in 1784. The General Assembly of 1781 named him one of the three district auditors for the counties of Burke, Lincoln, Rutherford, Sullivan, Washington, and Wilkes, vesting in these auditors "full power and authority finally to settle and adjust all claims against the state for militia pay and for articles which are or may be purchased for the use of the state." Upon the creation of Morgan District in 1782, Erwin was appointed one of the three auditors for the new district. He also became one of the original trustees of Morgan Academy, which was chartered in 1783 as the first institution of learning in Burke County. When Morganton was incorporated in 1784, Erwin was one of the commissioners of "the said Town of Morgan" who were directed to build "a court-house and a prison in the same for the District of Morgan." Acting under this legislative authority, the commissioners laid out the town of Morganton. In addition, Colonel Erwin was a member of the North Carolina House of Commons from Burke County in 1793–97 and 1804. He ended his public service as a justice of the Burke County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions. He was a member of the Quaker Meadows Presbyterian Church and the Masonic order ^[8], in which he was secretary of Rising Sun Lodge No. 38 at Morganton.

Erwin was married twice. In 1770 he married Sarah Robinson (1750–85), a daughter of James and Catherine Robinson of South Carolina. They were the parents of Catherine, who married her first cousin, John Erwin; Mary ("Polly"), who married ^[9] John McKamie Wilson ^[10], a Presbyterian minister; James, who married Margaret Phifer; Margaret ("Peggy"), who married Hugh Tate; Hannah, who married Major Zebulon Baird; and Joseph, who died unmarried. Major Zebulon Baird and his wife, Hannah Erwin, were the parents of Myra Margaret Baird, who married David Vance, Jr., and became the mother of two famous sons, Zebulon Baird Vance ^[11], war governor and U.S. senator, and Robert Brank Vance ^[12], Confederate general and U.S. congressman.

On 21 Jan. 1786, Erwin married Margaret Crawford Patton, the widow of Joseph Patton, a Revolutionary comrade who fell at Kings Mountain. They were the parents of Sophia, who married William Alexander; Cynthia, who married Dr. Stephen Fox; Sarah Myra, who married Freeland Henson; Abdial Hiempfel, John McKamie Wilson, and Milton Pinckney, all of whom died unmarried; Ulysses Stanhope, who married Eliza G. Tate; and Harriet Dorcas, who married Lewis Dinkins. Lewis Dinkins and his wife, Harriet Dorcas Erwin, were the grandparents of Charles Betts Galloway, a Methodist bishop of Mississippi.

Erwin and his first wife, Sarah Robinson, were buried in adjoining graves in the old Quaker Meadows Cemetery.

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Biographies ^[16]

Military personnel ^[17]

Public officials ^[18]

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Origin - location:

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Morganton ^[21]

Rowan County ^[22]

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