

Glasgow, James ^[1]

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ca. 1735–17 Nov. 1819



Photograph of the James Glasgow Highway Historical Marker near Snow Hill in Greene County, N.C.. Used courtesy of the North Carolina Highway Historical Marker Program, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources.

^[2]James Glasgow, Revolutionary patriot and secretary of state of North Carolina, was born in Maryland, the son of the Reverend James Patrick, native of Scotland but rector of All Hallows Parish, Snow Hill, Md., and Martha Jones Glasgow, daughter of Thomas and Mary Wilson Jones of Cecil County, Md. After receiving his formal education at parish schools and at the College of William and Mary, he became an accounting and corresponding clerk for an import-export house in Suffolk, Va. Its clients included Colonel [Abraham Sheppard](#) ^[3] and his son Benjamin, merchant-planters of [Dobbs County](#) ^[4], N.C. Glasgow became a visitor at Contentnea, Colonel Sheppard's plantation, and in time married the colonel's daughter. Afterwards Benjamin Sheppard became a widower with three small daughters by his first wife and he married Martha Jones Glasgow, sister of James. Both marriages produced large families.

By 1763, Glasgow was studying law at Kinston, N.C., under David Gordon, a former barrister in the Court of King's Bench at Westminster. Glasgow was admitted to the bar [Johnston County](#) ^[5] on 17 July 1764, with license to practice in the inferior courts. He next became a planter. His father-in-law had recently bought the plantation of Dr. James Adair on the northeast side of Great Contentnea at Sheppard's Bridge. On 10 Oct. 1765, the colonel made a deed of gift "to my daughter Pherebe and her husband James Glasgow, Esq., ... a tract of land, ... being the part of Fairfields Plantation where the Houses and Improvements are and where the said Glasgows now live." This remained Glasgow's home until he built a new one in 1790 on a 3,000-acre plantation in the north fork of Nahutna Swamp at its mouth on Great Contentnea Creek.

In 1765 Glasgow, with Timothy Lee and others, established Lee's Chapel (Anglican) east of Fairfields on a branch of Sandy Run. In 1768, he joined the [Masonic order](#) ^[6] at "the First Lodge in [Pitt County](#) ^[7]" (chartered ca. 1766 by the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts). His first political office was county coroner of Dobbs, in 1771. By 1769, however, he was attending sessions of the General Assembly and serving as an assistant. This provided opportunities to establish and maintain friendships with men who would be leaders in the impending [American Revolution](#) ^[8] and in the state. Meantime, he and his Sheppard in-laws were active in the northern Dobbs militia; they stood firmly against a popular sentiment there in favor of the [Regulators](#) ^[9]. In the peaceful interlude that followed the [Battle of Alamance](#) ^[10], he rose to the rank of major as adjutant of the Dobbs County militia. He was reappointed by the Revolutionary Provincial Congress of August–September 1775. Military accounts show that he spent most of the period from October 1775 to February 1776 conducting 22-day training exercises for the ten companies of Dobbs militia and 10-day intensive training exercises at New Bern for all minutemen companies of the New Bern District.

On 12 Feb. 1776, military elements in the New Bern District marched on an expedition against Tory insurgents moving upon the Lower Cape Fear to support a British fleet expected there. On this expedition and in the ensuing [Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge](#) ^[11], Glasgow served as major in the Dobbs regiment. In 1777, when Colonel Abraham Sheppard was given command of the Tenth Regiment in the North Carolina Continental Line, Glasgow succeeded him as colonel of the Dobbs militia. In this capacity he received and befriended [George Farragut](#) ^[12], a Spaniard who had become an officer in the South Carolina Navy and managed to escape from British captors at Charleston. Through Glasgow's recommendation, Farragut was commissioned captain of an independent company of light horse.

During the Revolutionary era, Glasgow was involved in the [provincial congresses](#) ^[13] in North Carolina—usually serving as an officer rather than as a delegate. In the Provincial Congress at Hillsborough in August–September 1775, however, he was a delegate from Dobbs County. This congress had seized the governmental apparatus of the province and the powers of government, as the royal governor had fled to a British warship in May 1775. On 9 September, the Hillsborough congress elected Glasgow a member of the Committee of Safety for the New Bern District.

In December 1776, the [Provincial Congress](#) ^[13] at Halifax adopted a constitution for the state; it also chose state officers to serve until election of a General Assembly the following March. On 20 December the congress elected Glasgow [secretary of state](#) ^[14], and the Assembly of 1777 reelected him and established the term of that office as three years. Other state offices, including that of governor, had terms of one year. This distinction remained and became to some a source of invidious resentment. Successive assemblies reelected Glasgow until he resigned under fire in December 1799 to defend himself against charges of knowingly and willfully committing fraud in his administration of the military land grant program.

The General Assembly of 1783 adopted legislation reserving a large area of its western lands (now in Tennessee) to be granted to Continental veterans (or to heirs of those who had died). The legislation directed the secretary of state to issue to each qualified applicant a warrant of survey for the quantity of reserved western lands due the applicant. The warrant was addressed to the state surveyor of military lands, who was required by the act to maintain a land office and certain records at Nashville. This land office became known as the "Armstrong Office" because the Assembly appointed General [John Armstrong](#) ^[15] to head it and, when he died, his brother Colonel [Martin Armstrong](#) ^[16]. Each warrant of survey eventually found its way to the Armstrong Office where the surveyor recorded the entry, executed the warrant, and returned it with the survey report and plat to the office of the secretary of state. The latter was required by law to make out a military land grant form to be authenticated by the governor, countersigned by the secretary of state, and recorded in a land grant registry book in the secretary's office. The original grant and a copy of the survey and plat were then delivered to the applicant.

This administrative structure was defective in many respects, but two aspects of the system were of dire consequence for Secretary Glasgow, even if he had been scrupulously honest: first the general assembly appointed all officers, including those whom the secretary of state had a theoretical responsibility to supervise and direct; and second, any warrant issued was transferable by endorsement, assignment, or other appropriate writing. It could be transferred repeatedly. Hundreds of them became, in effect, monetized. This greatly increased the likelihood of forgeries, counterfeiting, theft, and other fraudulent activities. The reading public and the General Assembly were well aware of this risk. The incubus of the earlier "Fraud Trials at Warrenton" in the 1780s sprang from a similar act of assembly involving certificates given by the state in partial settlement of Revolutionary War accounts. That experience spilled a taint upon the burgeoning military land grant program. That Glasgow continued to serve at his peril from the time of the Warrenton trials is seen from the fact that the allegations brought against him by the commission in 1799 are based largely on transactions that occurred from 1785 to 1789. The two indictments upon which the petit jury found him guilty were, however, of later date, and it appears that knowledge of wrongdoing was imputed from the fact that in those cases two of his sons-in-law were involved in alleged forgeries on warrants. Both had married daughters of Glasgow while serving as state officials in the military land grant program, and both had become employees by legislative appointment. One of them, Lieutenant Colonel Willoughby Williams, was a gentleman of otherwise unblemished integrity who had served in the Continental line as regimental commissary officer, as deputy secretary of state, as a member of the House of Commons, and as deputy clerk of the county court in Dobbs and later as clerk of the county court in Glasgow County. The other son-in-law, Colonel Stockley Donelson, brother-in-law and confidant to rising political star [Andrew Jackson](#) ^[17], was certainly the most active, charming, accommodating, cunning, and indefatigable practitioner of fraud and deceit to be found in the state service. He was hardly twenty-one years old when appointed by the General Assembly in October 1783 (through the influence of Blount family members) as a field surveyor under the Armstrong Office. Within ten years he had accumulated more than 200,000 acres of western and eastern lands of North Carolina (including the area that became Tennessee). In April 1797 he procured, by what later was perceived to be fraud and deceit, a marriage with Elizabeth Glasgow Martin, a very wealthy widowed daughter of Secretary Glasgow and the mother of two small sons by her deceased husband, John Martin, a merchant of Snow Hill, Md., and Snow Hill, N.C. James Glasgow became Donelson's adversary at the time he was trustee for his daughter's prenuptial deed of marriage agreement. Donelson cultivated a friendship with Andrew Jackson, who came to Nashville in 1788 at age twenty-one as state prosecuting attorney for the western district. Jackson met and fell in love with Mrs. Rachel Donelson Robards, Donelson's sister who by then was separated from her husband. It was known that her husband had petitioned the Virginia legislature for a divorce. Jackson seems never to have suspected Donelson as being the source of the misinformation that the Virginia legislature had granted the divorce, a hoax that beguiled Jackson and Rachel to marry at Natchez in August 1791, some two years before she became divorced.

Both Andrew Jackson and Stockley Donelson played roles in the disaster that befell James Glasgow's public life in the period from December 1797 to June 1800, during which Glasgow's character suffered an almost total eclipse and degradation.

On 6 Dec. 1797, the year he was elected to the U.S. Senate by the Tennessee legislature, Andrew Jackson told North Carolina Senator [Alexander Martin](#) ^[18] an astonishing tale about frauds in the military land grant program of North Carolina. The story, Jackson said, had been related to him by John Love of Virginia who said he eavesdropped in his room at a lodging house in Nashville while the landlord, William Tyrell, and his nephew, William Tyrell Lewis, systematically intoxicated some former officers of the North Carolina Continental line so they would sign fraudulent certificates of Continental military service to be used in procuring land warrants from the office of the secretary of state. At Senator Martin's request, Jackson put his statement in a signed and dated writing for Martin to send to the governor of North Carolina, promising also to get Love before a federal judge to make oath concerning what he had witnessed. Love's oath was never forthcoming. Although he was not clearly identified or officially contacted, the hearsay submitted by Jackson was readily believed by Governor [Samuel Ashe](#) ^[19] and by many members of the General Assembly. It seems to have been a case of everyone being shocked but no one surprised. Ashe placed the onus immediately upon Secretary Glasgow, declaring in biblical paraphrase, "An Angel hath fallen!" That same day (18 Dec. 1797) he reported the matter to the General Assembly, then in session, noting: "From the continued buzzing of these flies about the office, my suspicions have long been awake." Jackson's tale from Love had activated Ashe, and he dutifully managed to activate the Assembly. Both houses rejected a proposed resolution to remove Glasgow from office, although they adopted measures suspending the military land grant business in most respects. A legislative Committee of Inquiry was formed; and, on its report and recommendation, a special commission or board was created and directed to make a thorough investigation, determine who was involved in frauds, if any one, and collect evidence reflecting the particulars relating to any offender.

The special commission found the record books in the Armstrong Office were in such worn and dilacerated condition that transporting them the great distance to Raleigh, over the rough routes and by the rude vehicles available, involved risk of even greater disaster. The problem was resolved by sending to Nashville special agents who made exact copies of all records, proofread and certified their accuracy, and delivered them to the investigation commission. The commission was equally careful and resourceful in recording its findings and in preparing its recommendations. The evidence of any overt wrongdoing by Secretary Glasgow was found to be weak and scarce. The commission specifically declined to suggest whether impeachment proceedings ought to be instituted against

him, and it found no grounds for prosecuting him for a felony. Rather, it recommended that he be charged with a misdemeanor—dereliction or neglect of duty as a public officer—in twelve cases. These cases were summarized in the commission's report which, after some debate as to whether the report should be kept secret, the General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to make public. The editor of the *Raleigh Register* permitted Glasgow to publish each of these together with his answer to the charge. The court before which he would be tried on a misdemeanor would ordinarily have been the county court, but the Assembly enacted legislation requiring trial before a court comprised of superior court judges *en banc*. In this court defense lawyers were not allowed to address the court orally with argument, present witnesses for the defense, or question state witnesses. Adversary proceedings had not become standard practice in criminal courts of those times, at least not in North Carolina. The allegations made against Glasgow by the commission were considered by a grand jury drawn from several counties specified in the legislation. A number of the allegations were dismissed. Indictments were brought on about five cases. A petit jury gave the verdicts on the basis of the state's evidence only. Glasgow was found guilty in two cases and fined £1,000 on each.

The course of his fortune from decade to decade during approximately forty years in North Carolina can be indicated approximately. When he came to North Carolina, he owned no land and enslaved no people. He married Pherebe Sheppard in about 1762. By 1769, he enslaved three people and owned about 250 acres of land in Dobbs County. Based on the findings of a tax census, sixty Dobbs County planters enslaved more people and thirty enslaved an equal amount of people. By 1780, however, the Dobbs County tax assessment roll valued Glasgow's taxable estate in lands and enslaved people in the county at £26,150, a figure nearly equaled by six other Dobbs taxpayers but exceeded by only two. In 1790, his comparative wealth-status indicators among Dobbs County enslavers had changed little since the 1780 report. He was third largest in people enslaved, but at least six Dobbs planter-enslavers owned more land in the county. In March 1800, he enslaved twenty-two people. Eight Greene County enslavers owned more. His son James, then married with a family, also enslaved twenty-two people. Glasgow's home plantation at Nahunta still consisted of nearly 3,000 acres.

Within a few months after his trial, Glasgow left North Carolina with a wagon train of his kindred and friends, bound for a new home in Tennessee. The popular fable that he had accumulated vast land holdings there does not find a factual basis in the records. On the way, his son-in-law Willoughby Williams died suddenly while the train was encamped at Dandridge, Tenn. A few months later Glasgow and his widowed and unmarried daughters were living at a home on the Emory River in Roane County. By 1810, however, he was settled on a plantation about seven miles from Nashville on the old Nolensville Road in the direction of Murfreesboro. He was residing there at the time of his death, six days after he had written his last will and testament and had it witnessed by family members—children and grandchildren. He was eighty-five years old.

Ten of Glasgow's children are known to have lived to adulthood. Two daughters were wives of justices of the supreme court of Tennessee, and one married a Tennessee governor. His children were Elizabeth (b. ca. 1763), Patrick (b. ca. 1765), Nancy Ann ("Annie," b. 22 Apr. 1770), Phereby Sheppard ("Freddy," b. ca. 1775), James (b. ca. 1776), John (b. ca. 1791), Susan (b. ca. 1793), Maria Anderson, Clarinda Jones, and Mary. Census evidence indicates the last three were born after 1800. If so, they certainly had to be children by a second wife, as his first wife was born about 1744. He had no wife to survive him, but the three last-named children were living with him at his death and are among those named as children in his will. His son James and his grandson James Glasgow Martin were named executors. His grave has not been located, and no picture of him has been found.

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Additional Resources:

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