

Lawson, Hugh ^[1]

Lawson, Hugh

by Malcolm Lester, 1991; Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, July 2023

ca. 1697–1772

Hugh Lawson, pioneer settler of Rowan County ^[2] and ancestor of statesmen and patriots, was the son of Roger Lawson of Cecil County, Md. Although the elder Lawson was living in Cecil County as early as 1712, neither the date nor the place of Hugh Lawson's birth are known. It may be inferred, however, that he was at least twenty-one by 1718, when he served as an agent or attorney in a Cecil County land transaction. Hugh Lawson, Gentleman, as he signed his name in later years, was typical of the settlers of more substantial means who moved southwards from Maryland and Pennsylvania to the Carolina Piedmont ^[3] in the mid-eighteenth century. His descendants likewise were typical pioneers, for they continued the trek into the lower South, across the Appalachians, and as far west as Texas.

Lawson's progeny, however, was more distinguished than the average. A grandson, Jared Irwin ^[4] (1750–1818), was twice governor of Georgia; another grandson, Hugh Lawson White ^[5] (1773–1840), was a Tennessee jurist and a member of the U.S. Senate from that state for sixteen years; a great-grandson, James Pinckney Henderson ^[6] (1808–58), was a diplomatic agent from the Republic of Texas to England and France, the first governor of Texas, a general in the Mexican War ^[7], and a U.S. senator from Texas. Another lineal descendant, Admiral James Harrison Oliver ^[8] (1857–1928), was the first governor of the American Virgin Islands after they were acquired from Denmark in 1917. In addition to the impressive public service of these descendants, at least nine of Lawson's grandsons as well as his son Roger served as soldiers in the American Revolution ^[9].

If Hugh Lawson, the patriarch, could have foreseen the accomplishments of his breed, he might have even more confidently claimed the station of gentleman. But without such prescience, he could still survey his broad acres on the banks of Davidson Creek in 1764, the year when he made his will, and rejoice that he and his two sons and five daughters and their growing families were founding a new community. Moreover, he could recall that his father had first become a landowner in Cecil County not yet fifty years before and thereby laid the indispensable foundation for family position in colonial America.

It is not known when the Lawsons migrated to America and whether they came from Ulster. But in view of their settlement along the Maryland-Pennsylvania boundary in the midst of such staunch Presbyterian ^[10] families as the Alexanders, Barrys, Brevards, and McDowells, all of whom would be neighbors or relatives of Hugh Lawson in North Carolina, it is almost certain that the Lawsons were Ulstermen, though Lawson is an English surname often associated with Yorkshire. The flood tide of Scot-Irish emigration to America did not begin until the second decade of the eighteenth century, but a vanguard had reached Maryland and Virginia via the Chesapeake and the port of New Castle in Delaware by the late seventeenth century.

In this vanguard the name of Roger Lawson first appears in the records of Cecil County in 1712. Six years later in 1718, Charles Carroll deeded land in that county to Roger Lawson and other purchasers who apparently were already occupying land for which they had contracted several years earlier. In this 1718 transaction between Charles Carroll and Roger Lawson, the name of Hugh Lawson appears as Carroll's attorney or agent. Both Roger and Hugh Lawson were rising men by the 1720s. In 1724 Hugh Lawson was located at Milford Haven in Cecil County, and in 1740 he was a trooper in the Maryland militia. Roger Lawson in 1726 was an elder in the Upper Elk Presbyterian Church of the New Castle Presbytery. The Upper Elk Church (now known as the Rock Church) had been constituted in 1720 and was first located at the site of what is now the Stone Graveyard at Lewisville in Chester County, Pa., just across the boundary from Cecil County. In that original churchyard Elder Roger Lawson was buried in 1733. Neither the burial place nor the name of his wife, the mother of Hugh Lawson, are known.

In 1733 before his death, Roger Lawson deeded his lands in Cecil County to his three sons, Hugh, John, and George. Dower rights in Hugh's portion were held by his wife Margaret, who in 1749 agreed to the sale of the property. According to family tradition, Margaret Lawson was a Barry before her marriage. Hugh and Margaret Lawson remained until at least 1742 in Cecil County, where all of their children were probably born. Although he owned property in that county until 1749, Lawson in 1744 obtained a grant of 250 acres in Brunswick County, Va., and about that time moved south, probably over the Great Wagon Road ^[11] through the Valley of Virginia, the road usually taken by emigrants to the backcountry.

The sturdy qualities of Hugh Lawson were soon recognized in Virginia, for when the new county of Lunenburg was formed from Brunswick in 1746, he became one of the first gentleman justices with a seat on the bench of the county court and served until 1756, which was about the time he moved to North Carolina. In colonial America as in England, the justice, who had important administrative and judicial responsibilities in local government, was generally a man of quality. In addition to Lawson's service as a justice, he was among those frequently designated to compile the lists of tithables for Lunenburg County, and in 1753 the Council of Virginia appointed him coroner for the county.

But despite his status as a Virginia justice, the ambitious Lawson looked beyond the Virginia Southside to the North Carolina Piedmont between the Catawba and Yadkin rivers, where old neighbors from Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, such as the Bakers, Brevards, Davidsons, McConnells, Osborns, and Whites, were settling in the 1740s and 1750s. Among these was the Reverend John Thomson, who went to that region of North Carolina as early as 1751. Thomson was a founder of the Buffalo settlement in Amelia County, Va., adjacent to Lunenburg County, and a pastor of the Buffalo Presbyterian Church as well as a former pastor of churches near Lawson's old home in Maryland. Moreover, Thomson's daughter Hannah married Roger Lawson, Hugh's older son, about 1752. While it was comforting to know that sound Presbyterian ^[10] doctrine was being preached on the North Carolina frontier by his daughter-in-law's father, Hugh Lawson more likely was attracted to North Carolina by land and not by Presbyterianism or religious toleration, which in practice he had enjoyed both in Maryland and Virginia.

Sometime between 1749 and 1753, Lawson was granted 600 acres of land on the south side of Broad River in what was then a part of Anson County ^[12], N.C., but which became Rowan County in 1753. He began negotiations on 27 May 1756 for a second grant of land in North Carolina. This grant of 552 acres from Earl Granville was located on both sides of Davidson Creek a few miles from the Catawba River ^[13] in that part of Rowan County ^[2] that became Iredell County ^[14] in 1788. Although this tract was not granted to Lawson until 22 Feb. 1759, he was apparently occupying the land by 1757, for in July of that year he witnessed a will in Rowan and in December he was named attorney or executor for his friend Samuel Baker of the same county. Lawson's son Roger preceded his father to Rowan County, where in 1753 he obtained land on Fourth Creek by the will of his father-in-law, the Reverend John Thomson. Roger's location on Fourth Creek probably caused Hugh Lawson not to settle on his Broad River lands, which lay much farther west, but to obtain land on Davidson Creek instead. He could have also been influenced by the fact that his son-in-law Thomas Irwin had been granted land in 1754 on McDowell's Creek in Rowan County not far from Roger Lawson's holding.

Whether Hugh Lawson's wife Margaret was still living when he settled in North Carolina is not known, but she was dead when he made his will in 1764. In addition to his son Roger, there was a younger son named Hugh who married Rebecca McConnell. There were also five daughters: Rebecca (m. Thomas Irwin), Catherine (m. George Ewing), Margaret (m. Hugh Barry), Violet (m. James Henderson), and Mary (m. James White).

Although he had served in Virginia as a justice, Lawson never held any office in North Carolina. Already approaching an advanced age for his time when he became a North Carolinian, he apparently directed most of his attention to increasing his worldly possessions, which his will indicates were considerable for that section of North Carolina. Token sums of five shillings were left to each of his four sons-in-law as well as to his son Roger, who by 1764 had moved to Georgia along with Hugh Lawson's daughter Rebecca and her husband Thomas Irwin. The token bequests suggest that he had already given portions to Roger and the married daughters. Provision was made in Lawson's will for his then unmarried daughter Mary, and the remainder of the estate was left to his younger son, Hugh, Jr. In 1767 Lawson was listed as the enslaver of four enslaved people. While there is no record of his having been involved in the Regulator ^[15] crisis, it is possible that as a man of considerable property whose neighbor, Colonel Alexander Osborn ^[16], opposed the Regulators in 1768, he frowned on the rioters in Rowan County.

As Hugh Lawson neared the end of his more than three score and ten years, he had witnessed the settling of the North Carolina frontier between the Yadkin and Catawba rivers for nearly two decades. Not only had he observed at first hand the migration of pioneers into a virgin territory, but also he had seen the growth of families and landholdings, both his and others. Some of the land would remain in the possession of his descendants for two centuries until it was covered by the waters of Lake Norman. Lawson had also seen in his immediate neighborhood the beginning in 1760 of a classical school, the Crowfield Academy ^[17], and the organization in 1765 of Centre Presbyterian Church. He died aware that a hardy pioneer stock had taken firm root in the North Carolina Piedmont. It is fitting that Lawson's dust found a final resting place in the churchyard of Centre after lying undisturbed for nearly two centuries in Baker's Graveyard, which was flooded by the Catawba River impounded at Cowan's Ford Dam. Nearby were buried the Reverend John Thomson and many other friends and relatives. A fragment of the slate marker on Lawson's original grave with the crudely joined letters "HL" has been carefully preserved at the base of a new gravestone to the memory of "Hugh Lawson, Gentleman and Ancestor of Patriots."

References:

Landon C. Bell, *The Old Free State*, 2 vols. (1927).

Cecil County: A Reference Book of History, Business, and General Information(1956).

Deed Books of Cecil County, Md. (Cecil County Courthouse, Elkton).

Deed Books, Inferior Court Minutes, and Will Books of Rowan County (Rowan County Courthouse, Salisbury).

Executive Journals, Council of Colonial Virginia, November 1, 1739–May 7, 1754 vol. 5 (1945).

J. H. Johns, *History of Rock Presbyterian Church* (1872).

George Johnston, *History of Cecil County, Maryland* (1881).

North Carolina Land Grant Records (North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh).

Robert W. Ramsey, *Carolina Cradle: Settlement of the North West Carolina Frontier, 1747–1762*(1964).

Jethro Rumble, *A History of Rowan County, North Carolina* (1881).

Subjects:

Biographies ^[18]

Public officials ^[19]

Authors:

Lester, Malcolm ^[20]

Origin - location:

Anson County ^[21]

Iredell County ^[22]

Rowan County ^[23]

From:

Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press,^[24]

1 January 1991 | Lester, Malcolm

Source URL:<https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/lawson-hugh>

Links

[1] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/lawson-hugh> [2] <https://www.ncpedia.org/geography/rowan> [3] <https://www.ncpedia.org/geography-part-3-piedmont-region> [4] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/irwin-jared> [5] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/white-hugh-lawson> [6] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/henderson-james-pinckney> [7] <https://www.ncpedia.org/mexican-war> [8] <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/hec2008002285/> [9] <https://www.ncpedia.org/american-revolution> [10] <https://www.ncpedia.org/presbyterian-church-0> [11] <https://www.ncpedia.org/great-wagon-road> [12] <https://www.ncpedia.org/geography/anson> [13] <https://www.ncpedia.org/rivers/catawba> [14] <https://www.ncpedia.org/geography/iredell> [15] <https://www.ncpedia.org/history/colonial/regulator-movement> [16] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/osborne-alexander> [17] <https://www.ncpedia.org/crowfield-academy> [18] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/biography-term> [19] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/public-officials> [20] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/authors/lester-malcolm> [21] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmon-25> [22] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmont/i> [23] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmon-13> [24] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/dictionary-no>