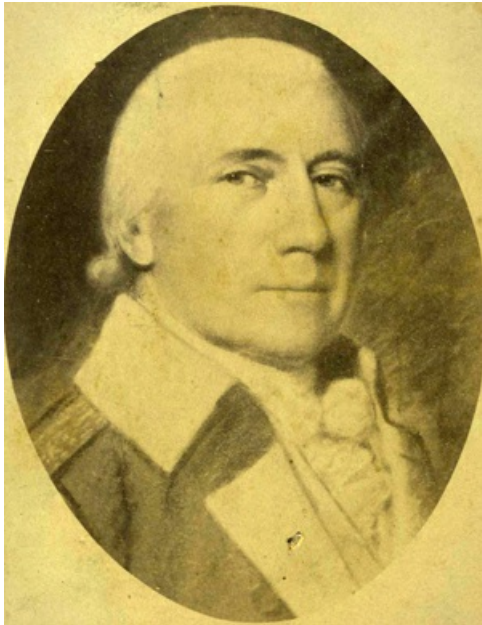


Martin, Alexander ^[1]

Martin, Alexander

by Charles D. Rodenbough, 1991; Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, March 2023

1740–2 Nov. 1807



Photograph of a portrait of Alexander Martin.
Image from the North Carolina Museum of History.

^[2]Alexander Martin, merchant, lawyer, legislator, governor, and senator, was born at Lebanon, Amwell Township, Hunterdon County, N.J., the oldest son of Hugh and Jane Hunter Martin. Hugh Martin was born near Inniskilling, County Tyrone, Ireland, about 1700; Jane Hunter Martin was born in County Antrim, Ireland, about 1720. The two families migrated within a few years of each other in the late 1720s, landing at New Castle, Del., but settling soon afterwards in New Jersey, where Hugh and Jane first met and were married.

Little is known of Alexander Martin's childhood except for a comment of his brother that he did not speak a word until he was four. His father became a moderately prosperous farmer, served as a justice of the peace, and for a period conducted an English school. Alexander attended Francis Alison's academy at New London, Conn., and then Newark College, which, while he was a student, was moved, under the direction of President Aaron Burr, to Princeton, N.J. Martin received A.B. (29 Sept. 1756) and A.M. (1759) degrees from Princeton. After graduation he moved to Cumberland, Va., where, for just over a year, he served as a tutor to the son of N. Davies and conducted a school. He returned briefly to New Jersey, apparently on family business, before making a permanent move south to seek his fortune.

Martin settled in Salisbury, N.C., about 1760, and became a merchant. In 1761 he received a 436-acre grant on the Dan River (in present-day [Rockingham County](#) ^[3]), where eventually he established his home. That year, on learning of the death of his father, he again returned to New Jersey—this time to help settle his father's estate and to arrange for the education of his younger brothers. In 1765 he bought a lot and a storehouse in Salisbury and was appointed a justice of the peace by Governor [William Tryon](#) ^[4]. The next year he was made king's attorney for [Rowan County](#) ^[5].

In 1767 his brother Thomas, an Anglican minister and a 1764 graduate of Princeton, moved to Orange County, Va., to become the rector of the Brick Church and the tutor for the family of James Madison, Sr., at Montpelier. On several occasions on his way to and from New Jersey, Alexander Martin visited his brother. It was probably during such a visit in the summer of 1769 that the two brothers convinced the elder Madison to send young James to Princeton College instead of the College of William and Mary. James Madison and the Martin brothers proceeded to New Jersey, where Madison was enrolled in the college. It was, of course, Princeton that did much to shape the political philosophy of James Madison. So close had the Madisons and Martins become that Alexander's mother and younger brothers went to live at Montpelier. Soon after the Reverend Thomas Martin's death in 1770, however, Alexander situated his mother and family on his own land on the Dan River.

Meanwhile, the Regulator movement had gathered momentum in the upper Piedmont. Much of the discontent focused on the administration of county government, which was frequently capricious if not downright dishonest. In September 1770, during a meeting of the court at Hillsborough, a Regulator mob assaulted several lawyers, including Alexander Martin.

When a similar crowd in March 1771 threatened the court of Salisbury, Martin, Alexander Frohock, and a few others rode out to the Regulator camp, negotiated with the rebels, and signed an agreement by which they would refund any excess fees they had received and adjust any differences. Martin and the others were rebuked by Governor Tryon for their interference, and two months later the governor routed the Regulators at the Battle of Alamance ^[6].

In settling his family on his Dan River land, Martin became more oriented to that locale. In 1773 he established his residence on this property, located in the newly created county of Guilford, and soon named his home Danbury. He retained most of his holdings at Salisbury and moved easily between the two areas.

Elected to the state Assembly from Guilford, Martin rose quickly to prominence. He introduced bills to pardon the Regulators and to attach property of Englishmen who owned land in North Carolina and did not pay just debts. Before long he became embroiled in the growing administrative conflict between the Assembly and Governor Josiah Martin ^[7]. In 1774 he accepted the judgeship of the court of oyer and terminer in Salisbury. Guilford County ^[8] did not send delegates to the First Provincial Congress ^[9], but when the Second Provincial Congress met at New Bern on 3 Apr. 1775, Alexander Martin represented that county. By this time he was recognized as an active Patriot and late that year attended the Third Provincial Congress as a delegate from Guilford.

The third congress formed two regiments of line troops and appointed Alexander Martin as lieutenant colonel in the Second North Carolina Continental Regiment. The regiment was first involved in the "Snow Campaign" against the Scovellites, a band of Tories, in western South Carolina, then fought the Loyalist Scots at Moore's Creek Bridge ^[10] in February 1776. In June Martin, who had been promoted to colonel, led his troops in the defense of Charles Town. In April 1777 he marched his men north to join General George Washington's army. The regiment saw active duty at Chad's Ford and Germantown. During the latter battle on 4 October, the fog was so thick that the Continentals confused their own men for the British. Colonel Martin was accused of cowardice in the wake of the charge and recrimination that followed the fighting. Although cleared by a courtmartial, Martin, fatigued and still hounded by the accusation, resigned from the army and returned home.

In 1778 Guilford County sent Martin to the state senate, where he served in consecutive sessions until 1782. With the fall of Charles Town in 1780, the state lost its entire Continental line and much of the militia had gone home when enlistments expired. It was described as North Carolina's darkest time. To assist Governor Abner Nash ^[11] in dealing with the internal and external pressures, the legislature created a Board of War ^[12], but instead of helping him, the board soon, in effect, superseded him. Five members had been appointed but only three ever served, and of those Alexander Martin was the most active and became its president. The board pushed for the recruitment of troops, corresponded with the generals, and urged that supplies be assembled. Responding to Nash's objections, the Assembly abolished the Board of War and replaced it with a Council Extraordinary ^[13], to which Martin was also named. The council continued the general functions of its predecessor board but on a limited basis until it too was abolished.

Beginning in 1780, Martin was speaker of the senate in three sessions of the Assembly. He was serving in that post in September 1781, when Governor Thomas Burke ^[14] was captured by a band of Tories under David Fanning ^[15] and became a prisoner of the British. As speaker of the senate, Martin became acting governor for four months, serving until Burke escaped his captors at Charles Town and resumed office.

Martin's actions in these years of crisis had gained him much popularity, and although he represented the underrepresented western section of the state, he was elected governor on 20 Apr. 1782. Martin pledged to work for commercial control, public credit, support of the army, proper use of the state's soil and climate, and the education of youth. However, he had difficulty in executing the business of the state because of the utter confusion that prevailed. The Assembly failed to meet in October 1782 and again in January 1783; General Nathanael Greene was pressing Governor Martin for supplies; the Continental Congress was requisitioning troops for the Continental line while the state militia was undermanned; and the British were threatening another campaign.

In spite of these difficulties, Martin sought reelection. It was his support of Fayetteville as the temporary seat of government that garnered for Martin, the westerner, enough eastern votes to be reelected then and a year later, when he won a third term. He supported federal control of commerce and in 1785 issued his manifesto against the state of Franklin ^[16].

As hostilities ended, one of the major considerations of the Assembly was the confiscation of Tory and Loyalist property. Martin was conciliatory, favoring the return of all property except that of the most offending Tories. He himself had acquired some of David Fanning's land in Guilford County. In 1785 he founded the town of Martinville on land adjoining Guilford Courthouse and built his home there, expecting to profit from the development of the town. The following year Guilford was divided and the opportunity was lost.

After his term as governor, Martin was a delegate to the Assembly and became speaker of the senate each year until 1788, with the exception of 1786, when he was not in the Assembly. In December 1786 he was elected a delegate to Congress but resigned without attending. In 1787 the legislature named him as one of the five North Carolina delegates to the Philadelphia convention to consider the revision of the Articles of Confederation. Martin was not active in debate, but as William Pierce of Georgia observed, he was "a Man of Sense, and undoubtedly a . . . good politician." He left the convention in August and thus was not a signer of the Constitution. He was not elected to the state ratifying convention that failed to ratify the Constitution.

In 1787 Martin was again elected governor; he also served three consecutive terms from 1789 to 1792. Although he

campaigns as a Federalist, his views were those of a moderate. The state's spirit of accord with the central government waned, and not even the staunchest Federalists in North Carolina supported the extreme national program of Alexander Hamilton. President Washington's visit in 1791 helped restore some support; on that occasion, Martin entertained the president at his home in Martinville.

Throughout his public career Martin had advocated the establishment of a system of higher education for the state. This led to the creation in 1789, under his governorship, of The University of North Carolina^[17]. Soon after the university received its charter, he was elected a trustee, and he served on the board until his death. From 1791 to 1793 Martin was the first president of the board of trustees. Also while he was in office the permanent seat of government was located in Wake County^[18] and called Raleigh.

At the end of his final term as governor, Martin was elected to the U.S. Senate over incumbent Samuel Johnston^[19]. He entered that chamber with strong approval at home for his increasingly anti-Federalist actions. He attacked the secret sessions of the Senate and in 1794 guided the passage of the resolution that threw open its doors to the public. He voted regularly for economy, was generally pro-French, and opposed the administration's foreign policy, voting against the Jay treaty. By 1797 actions taken by France, such as rejecting Charles C. Pinckney as minister and the insult represented in the XYZ affair, caused Martin's sentiments to shift. He voted to establish a Navy Department, to arm the navy heavily, and to raise an army, but he hesitated for a time before voting for the Alien and Sedition Act.

Anti-Federalist feeling in North Carolina weakened, and although Martin sought bipartisan support from the Federalists, he failed to win reelection to the Senate in 1799. He retired to his home, Danbury, on the banks of the Dan River and spent a quiet five years with his elderly mother, enjoying the life of respect that fame had earned him. In 1804 his neighbors elected him to the state senate, and the next year he again became speaker. This single term was his last. He died at Danbury.

Throughout his life Martin aspired to write poetry, and several of his funeral odes survive. While a U.S. senator he wrote a patriotic play, *A New Scene*, dedicated to George Washington. Elected to the American Philosophical Society in 1797, he also was a member of the Society of the Cincinnati^[20] and a Mason^[21].

Although Martin never married he had a natural son, Alexander Strong Martin, whom he always acknowledged during his lifetime as well as publicly stating the relationship in his will.

A portrait of Martin, which is believed to have been executed in 1793 in Philadelphia, is owned by the state of North Carolina.

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

This person enslaved and owned other people. Many Black and African people, their descendants, and some others were enslaved in the United States until the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery in 1865. It was common for wealthy landowners, entrepreneurs, politicians, institutions, and others to enslave people and use enslaved labor during this period. To read more about the enslavement and transportation of African people to North Carolina, visit <https://aahc.nc.gov/programs/africa-carolina-0>^[22]. To read more about slavery and its history in North Carolina, visit <https://www.ncpedia.org/slavery>^[23]. - Government and Heritage Library, 2023

References:

Irving Brant, *James Madison: The Virginia Revolutionist, 1751–1780*, vol. 4 (1941).

Adelaide L. Fries, ed., *Records of the Moravians in North Carolina*, vols. 2–4 (1925–30).

James McLachlan, *Princetonians, 1748–1768: A Biographical Dictionary* (1976).

James Martin, "A History of the Martin Families as Received by Tradition from One Generation to Another" (typescript, possession of Mrs. W. T. Lauten, Madison).

Rockingham County Wills (North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh).

Elizabeth Winston Yates, "The Public Career of Alexander Martin" (M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina, 1943).

Additional Resources:

"Alexander Martin 1783-1807." N.C. Highway Historical Marker J-15, N.C. Office of Archives & History. <https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program/Markers.aspx?sp=Markers&k=Markers&sv=J-15>^[24] (accessed February 22, 2013).

"Alexander Martin (1740–1807)." LearnNC.org. <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/4294>^[25] (accessed February 22, 2013).

Rodenbough, Charles D. *Governor Alexander Martin: Biography of a North Carolina Revolutionary War Statesman*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co. 2004 http://books.google.com/books?id=MHaGx2kX524C&dq=portrait+of+alexander+martin&source=gbs_navlinks_s&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false^[26] (accessed February 22, 2013).

Fanelli, Doris Devine. "Alexander Martin (1740–1807) by James Sharples Senior, probably from life, 1797." *History of the Portrait Collection, Independence National Historical Park and Catalog of the Collection*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2001. 224. <http://books.google.com/books?id=UWvU0cjtJVEC&lpg=PA224&pg=PA224#v=onepage&q&f=false> ^[27] (accessed February 22, 2013).

Alexander Martin Papers, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC, USA. https://digital.ncdcr.gov/collections/governors-papers-historical?filter_7=Martin%2C%20Alexander%2C%201740-1807.&applyState=true ^[28]

Image Credits:

Hough, S.E. "Photograph, Accession #: [H.1946.14.80](#) ^[2]." Winston-Salem. 1892. North Carolina Museum of History.

Subjects:

[Biographies](#) ^[29]

Authors:

[Rodenbough, Charles D.](#) ^[30]

From:

[Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press.](#) ^[31]

1 January 1991 | Rodenbough, Charles D.

Source URL: <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/martin-alexander?page=0>

Links

[1] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/martin-alexander> [2] <http://collections.ncdcr.gov/RediscoveryProficioPublicSearch/ShowItem.aspx?23718+> [3] <https://www.ncpedia.org/geography/rockingham> [4] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/tryon-william> [5] <https://www.ncpedia.org/geography/rowan> [6] <https://www.ncpedia.org/alamance-battle> [7] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/martin-josiah> [8] <https://www.ncpedia.org/geography/guilford> [9] <https://www.ncpedia.org/provincial-congresses> [10] <https://www.ncpedia.org/moores-creek-bridge-battle> [11] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/nash-abner> [12] <https://www.ncpedia.org/board-war> [13] <https://www.ncpedia.org/council-extraordinary> [14] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/burke-thomas> [15] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/fanning-david> [16] <https://www.ncpedia.org/franklin-state> [17] <https://www.ncpedia.org/university-north-carolina-chapel-hi> [18] <https://www.ncpedia.org/geography/wake> [19] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/johnston-samuel> [20] <https://www.ncpedia.org/society-cincinnati> [21] <https://www.ncpedia.org/freemasons> [22] <https://aahc.nc.gov/programs/africa-carolina-0> [23] <https://www.ncpedia.org/slavery> [24] <https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program/Markers.aspx?sp=Markers&k=Markers&sv=J-15> [25] <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/4294> [26] http://books.google.com/books?id=MHaGx2kX524C&q=portrait+of+alexander+martin&source=gb_s&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false [27] <http://books.google.com/books?id=UWvU0cjtJVEC&lpg=PA224&pg=PA224#v=onepage&q&f=false> [28] https://digital.ncdcr.gov/collections/governors-papers-historical?filter_7=Martin%2C%20Alexander%2C%201740-1807.&applyState=true [29] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/biography-term> [30] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/authors/rodenbough-charles> [31] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/dictionary-no>