

Robeson, Thomas, Jr. ^[1]

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by Maud Thomas Smith, 1994; Revised December 2021

11 Jan. 1740–2 May 1785

Thomas Robeson, Jr., revolutionary hero, legislator, and landowner, was the first son of Thomas and Sarah Singletary Robeson of Bladen County ^[2]. His grandfather, Andrew Robeson, had immigrated around 1690 from Scotland to Pennsylvania, where he became a member of the Council in Philadelphia; he also served on the Council of West Jersey and as chief justice of Pennsylvania. Andrew was a graduate of Oxford and married Mary Spencer of the Stuart family. His fourth son, Thomas Robeson, Sr., left his home for North Carolina soon after his father's death in 1719. In Bladen County, on the Cape Fear River ^[3], he built a home called Walnut Grove, where his children Thomas, Jr., Peter, and Mary grew up.

Thomas Robeson, Jr., married Mary Bartram, daughter of Colonel William Bartram and niece of John Bartram, the botanist. Active politically early in the rebellion movement in the colonies, he was a member of the Third Provincial Congress ^[4], held at Hillsborough in August 1775, which appointed him colonel for the Bladen militia. He also served in the Fourth Provincial Congress that declared for independence at Halifax in April 1776, and at a November meeting in the same town he was appointed to a committee to bring the Bladen Tories to justice. In 1777 at New Bern he was a member of the first Assembly ^[5] after the colony became a state.

Colonel Robeson was a Whig officer in an area where the Tories outnumbered the Whigs as much as five to one during the Revolution ^[6]. The Scottish population was very large in the Cape Fear area. Some Scots appeared before the 1715 Jacobite uprising, many came after it, and many more arrived after the Battle of Culloden in 1746. Before the latter were allowed to leave Scotland, they had to take an oath that they would support the king. The oath ended with the grim declaration: "and should I break this, my solemn oath, may I be cursed in all my undertakings, family, and property; may I never see my wife, children, father, mother or other relations; may I be killed in battle as a coward and lie without Christian burial in a strange land, far from the graves of my forefathers and kindred. May all this come to me if I break my oath."

In 1775 Governor Josiah Martin ^[7] fled the colony to a British ship, from whence he convinced the British that he could raise an army of three thousand in North Carolina. The call went out to the Scots who followed General Donald McDonald, who was to join British forces that would arrive at Wilmington. On the way, McDonald's forces ran into Colonels Richard Caswell ^[8] and Alexander Lillington ^[9] at Moore's Creek Bridge ^[10] and were defeated and scattered. Thomas Robeson fought with the Whigs in this battle.

During the remainder of the war Robeson and other leaders were fighting primarily a civil war in which the area around Lumber River changed hands several times. This was one of the places in which General Francis Marion was very active, although he and Robeson did not fight in the same skirmishes.

When the Tories ^[11] gained control, many of the Whig leaders escaped to friendly areas. One small group of Whigs was hiding out in Duplin County ^[12]. When their numbers dwindled to only seventy, they agreed to Robeson's plan to make a do-or-die march on the Tories and British at Elizabethtown in Bladen County. Colonels John Slingsby ^[13] and "Godden" [Robert Godwin?] were there with four hundred troops, and Colonel David Fanning ^[14] was only four miles away with more. According to tradition, Sally Musslewhite Salter, the wife of one of the soldiers, had gone into the British camp selling eggs and was able to tell Robeson the camp's layout. On the night of 28 Sept. 1781 the small band reached a point on the Cape Fear ^[3] across from Elizabethtown. A couple of hours before dawn the moon went down. One man was left with the horses. The other sixty-nine waded the river and quietly covered the ground to Elizabethtown. Their attack was sudden and furious as they charged yelling "Washington!" Colonel Robeson called out from the center of the line: "On the right! Colonel Dodd's Company! Advance! . . . On the left! Colonel Gillespie's company! Advance! . . . On the right! Colonel Dickinson's company! Advance! . . . On the left! Major Wright's company! Advance!" The main body of the small band rushed madly from one position to another, reloaded, and fired. Both Tory colonels were killed along with fifteen others. Their army was in disorderly flight, and many of them fell into a ravine still known as the Tory Hole. Soldiers who were there reported that they had been attacked by George Washington ^[15]'s whole army. This battle ended Tory activity in the area and gave the Whigs confidence to organize and plan attacks, but only a few skirmishes were left because the war was winding down.

Colonel Robeson was considered a fair and just man even by his enemies. After the war he and his brother, Captain Peter Robeson, offered protection to Tories who were sincere in taking the oath of loyalty to their new country. Robeson paid all his men out of his own pocket with the understanding that if they were paid by the government, the soldiers would return the money. This \$80,000 was never repaid, and Robeson wrote into his will a request that no member of his family would ever try to collect it.

After the Revolution he again served in the state legislature. There, in 1786, was created a new county out of western Bladen that was to perpetuate posthumously the name of Thomas Robeson, the favorite hero of that area in which civil war raged fiercely for so many years.

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