

Tatham, William ^[1]

Tatham, William

by G. Melvin Herndon, 1996

13 Apr. 1752–22 Feb. 1819

William Tatham, clerk, merchant, soldier, lawyer, legislator, surveyor, engineer, civil servant, author, book and map collector, and cartographer, was born in the County of Cumberland, England. The eldest of five children of Sandford and Elizabeth Tatham, he spent much of his early life with relatives and received little formal education. When he was sixteen his father, rector of Hutton-in-the-Forest and vicar of Appleby, sent him to Virginia to learn the tobacco trade. Young Tatham was apprenticed to the mercantile firm of Carter and Trent, located on the James River in Amherst County. After five years as a clerk with the firm he launched an unsuccessful mercantile venture of his own. Following some military service on the frontier and in Virginia during the [Revolution](#) ^[2], he went to North Carolina and studied law with [William R. Davie](#) ^[3]; he was admitted to the bar in that state in 1784. Later he was licensed to practice law in Virginia and the Southwest Territory. In 1786 Tatham, along with John Willis and others, founded the town of [Lumberton](#) ^[4], N.C. Tatham laid out the town and served as one of the original trustees. The next year the voters in [Robeson County](#) ^[5] sent him to the state legislature, and in 1788 he was commissioned lieutenant colonel of the Fayetteville militia district.

By this time he had developed a keen interest in surveying, canal construction, cartography, and the collection of historical, political, and geographic information. After practicing law briefly in Knoxville in 1793, he journeyed to Philadelphia, where he met Josef de Jaudenes, the Spanish chargé, who had been involved in intrigue to separate the backcountry. Tatham convinced Jaudenes that he possessed much knowledge, influence, and material that would be of interest to the Spanish government. The Spanish chargé provided Tatham with expense money and letters of introduction and sent him to Spain in the latter part of 1795. However, with the ratification of [Pinckney's Treaty](#) ^[6], which represented a change in Spain's policy regarding its possessions in North America, the Spanish government considered Tatham's materials and information of little value and asked him to leave the country in the summer of 1796. That August, instead of returning to the United States, he sailed to England, where he spent the next eight years. During this period he wrote numerous books and essays on agriculture, commerce, canal construction and irrigation projects, and architecture. His most noted, and still a classical work, was *An Historical and Practical Essay on the Culture and Commerce of Tobacco* ^[7] (London, 1800). In 1802 he was elected to membership in the [Royal Society of Arts](#) ^[8].

He returned to Virginia at the beginning of Jefferson's second term as president and spent most of the remainder of his life surveying and drawing up proposals for inland canals, fortifications, lighthouses, and communication systems designed to promote the defense and commerce of the Chesapeake Bay area, including Albemarle Sound. In February 1806 the Treasury Department appointed Tatham, Thomas Coles, and [Jonathan Price](#) ^[9] (both North Carolinians) commissioners to survey the coast of North Carolina from [Cape Hatteras](#) ^[10] to [Cape Fear](#) ^[11]. After completing this task, and immediately following the *Chesapeake* affair off the coast of Norfolk in June 1807, Tatham was employed by Jefferson to observe and report daily on the movements and activities of British ships in the Chesapeake Bay. This episode encouraged Tatham to seek additional public employment and exert greater efforts to provide Presidents Jefferson and Madison with acceptable proposals for coastwise inland navigation, fortifications, and gunboats designed to protect the Chesapeake area. His pleas and proposals fell on deaf ears until war was declared in 1812. Although sixty years old, he hurried to Washington and was employed as topographical engineer in the War Department until 1815.

After the war his health began to fail and he became intemperate in his drinking habits. His frequent requests for public employment were ignored until June 1817, when the secretary of war appointed him military storekeeper at the U.S. Arsenal near Richmond. Unable to serve adequately even in this capacity, he resigned in December. He spent his last few destitute years trying to revive a proposal he had made periodically since 1806—that the federal government purchase his vast collection of maps, documents, and instruments. It has been said that Tatham was the first to define the functions of a national library. In an effort to survive, he apparently sold and lost much of his collection. When the Virginia legislature finally agreed to purchase his collection after his death, little was left. Tatham committed suicide on Richmond's Capitol Square by stepping in front of the muzzle of one of the cannons firing the sundown salute in honor of Washington. He never married and left no children. A portrait painted in 1779 is at the North Carolina Division of Archives and History in [Raleigh](#) ^[12].

References:

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Additional Resources:

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

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