

Williams, John ^[1]

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by M. M. Edmonds, 1996

14 Mar. 1731–10 Oct. 1799

John Williams, planter, judge, land speculator, and legislator, was born in Hanover County, Va., the son of John and Sarah Henderson Williams, both from long-established Virginia families. Around 1742 the Williamses, along with the Hendersons, Bullocks, and others of the Hanover County area, moved to North Carolina and acquired large tracts of land in eastern Granville (now Vance ^[2]) County near the tiny village of Nutbush. During the next fifteen years the elder John Williams was instrumental in the growth of this town, donating large tracts of land for church ^[3] and civic buildings. After his death, the town was renamed Williamsboro ^[4] in appreciation of his services.

There is no record of young Williams's formal education, if any, but he did study law sufficiently to be granted a license. In 1763 he and his partner (and double first cousin) Richard Henderson ^[5] were handling a considerable practice in the Oxford-Hillsborough area. On 12 Nov. 1759 Williams married the widow Agnes Keeling, formerly Agnes Bullock. They had only one child, a daughter Agatha.

Williams was appointed deputy attorney general for the Hillsborough district in 1768. After the Regulation ^[6] disturbance in Hillsborough on 8 April of that year, he signed the order by which two of the ringleaders, Herman Husband ^[7] and William Butler ^[8], were sent to jail. Perhaps as a result of this action Williams was among those attacked during the Regulator riot of 23 Sept. 1770 in Hillsborough. Beaten with sticks and clubs, he reportedly saved his life by hiding in a storehouse.

Early in his law practice Williams, along with his partner Richard Henderson ^[5] and Thomas Hart ^[9], sheriff of Orange County ^[10], had made the acquaintance of the explorer Daniel Boone ^[11]. As early as 1764 they hired Boone to investigate the western Carolina frontier for possible speculation and development. In 1774 Williams, Henderson, and Hart formed the Louisa Company (soon renamed the Transylvania Company ^[12]) in order to explore, purchase, and settle lands in present-day Kentucky. In connection with the company, Williams spent the winter and spring of 1775–76 in the frontier settlement in Boonesborough.

Just prior to leaving for Boonesborough, he served as a delegate from Granville in the Provincial Congress ^[13] that met in Hillsborough in August 1775. On his return from the frontier he was elected to the state House of Commons in 1777 and again in 1778, when he was speaker of the house. On 28 Apr. 1778 he was elected as a delegate to the Continental Congress ^[14]. Apparently his only activity in the congress was to sign the Articles of Confederation. Williams returned to North Carolina, and on 1 Feb. 1779 he resigned, stating that he felt inadequate for the position.

Elected a judge of the superior court of North Carolina (the predecessor of the state supreme court ^[15]) on 9 May 1779, he served until his death. During his twenty years on the bench he was involved in several precedent-setting decisions, the most important of which was Bayard v. Singleton ^[16]. This decision, upholding the right of judicial review, was one of several used as precedent by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Marbury v. Madison*.

Throughout his career Williams sought to promote education in his community and the state. For many years he was the financial patron of Williamsboro Seminary, and he served as one of the original trustees of The University of North Carolina ^[17]. His personal library of 234 volumes was the largest in eighteenth-century Granville.

In April 1799, while presiding over court in Hillsborough, Williams became ill. After a lengthy sickness he died on his estate, Montpelier, outside Williamsboro, one of the largest and most successful plantations in Granville County ^[18]. Buried there, Williams was survived by his wife Agnes (d. 1803), his daughter Agatha, her husband Colonel Robert Burton ^[19], and their numerous children.

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