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Steel, Elizabeth Maxwell [1]

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1733–22 Nov. 1790

Elizabeth Maxwell Steel, Salisbury innkeeper, Revolutionary Patriot, and the subject of legend, was born in western Rowan County [2]. The Maxwell family was of Scot-Irish origins and emigrated from Pennsylvania to the Carolina frontier in 1733. Elizabeth's first husband, Robert Gillespie, was scalped by Cherokees [3] following a siege of Fort Dobbs [4] and died in 1760. Their daughter, Margaret, married the Presbyterian preacher and teacher, Samuel Eusebius McCorkle [5].

After the death of her second husband, William Steel, in 1774, Elizabeth continued to operate an ordinary in Salisbury, engaged in local real estate [6] speculation, and managed, despite a lack of formal education, to accumulate a modest estate. In addition, she provided more than adequate parental care for her son, the Federalist statesman John Steele [7].

During the Revolution [8] Elizabeth was an ardent Whig Patriot. This is largely reflected in letters written to her brother-in-law, Ephraim Steel, a resident of Carlisle, Pa. Other correspondence, as well as the opinions of her contemporaries and descendants, indicates that she was a strong-willed, self-sufficient woman of unusual capabilities. According to legend and a number of unverified secondary sources, the "Widow Steel" provided lodging and a gift of three bags of specie to a despondent General Nathanael Greene during the 1780–81 Cornwallis campaign in western North Carolina. But whether or not this incident actually occurred, it is evident that Elizabeth Maxwell Steel was largely responsible for the acquired values and character of her son John.

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