

Houston, William Churchill ^[1]

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by Joe O'Neal Long, 1988

[?]1746–12 Aug. 1788

William Churchill Houston, teacher, Revolutionary leader, and attorney, was born in the Poplar Tent neighborhood of present Cabarrus County ^[2], the son of Margaret and Archibald Houston. He studied at the Poplar Tent Academy under Joseph Alexander ^[3], then—with a letter of recommendation from Alexander—rode off to the College of New Jersey where he taught in the grammar school associated with the college to pay for his studies. Houston continued to teach until 1768, when he was graduated with the A.B. degree from Princeton. The same year he became master of the grammar school and served as senior tutor. Continuing his education, he subsequently received the M.A. degree. On 25 Sept. 1771, Houston was elected the first professor of mathematics and natural philosophy at Princeton, where he remained until the Revolutionary War ^[4].

On 28 Feb. 1776 Houston volunteered his services to the colonials. He became captain of the foot militia of Somerset County and saw action in the Princeton area. In August he resigned his commission to return to the college. Soon afterwards, when all activities were disbanded at Princeton, Houston reenlisted and served until 6 Mar. 1777.

Meanwhile, in 1775 and 1776 Houston was elected deputy secretary of the Continental Congress ^[5]. He was a member of the New Jersey Provincial Congress in 1776 and of the New Jersey General Assembly from 1777 to 1779. In 1778 he served as a member of the New Jersey Council of Safety ^[6], as well as resuming his professorship at Princeton.

In 1779 Houston was elected to the Continental Congress where he took a particular interest in supply and finance. He managed to find time to study law and in 1781 was admitted to the New Jersey bar. In the latter year he was appointed clerk of the New Jersey Supreme Court, an office he held until his death. Also in 1781 he was elected by Congress as the first comptroller of the Treasury, but declined to serve. From 1782 to 1785 Houston was receiver of the Continental taxes. In 1782, he also served on the commission to adjust the deficiencies in pay caused by depreciated currency for New Jersey's troops, and on the commission that attempted to settle the Wyoming land dispute between Connecticut and Pennsylvania.

Resigning from Princeton in 1783, Houston proceeded to build up a sizable law practice in the Trenton area. In 1784 and 1785 he was elected to the Continental Congress, where he interested himself in John Fitch and Fitch's steamboat. A year later he was a member of the Annapolis Convention of 1786. One of six New Jersey delegates to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, he took an active part in its deliberations. Although he signed the report of the commissioners to the New Jersey legislature, he did not sign the draft of the Constitution—whether by intention or by accident is not known.

Suffering from tuberculosis, Houston began to travel towards his native North Carolina in the hope of regaining his health. He died suddenly in an inn near Philadelphia and was buried in the yard of that city's Second Presbyterian Church.

Houston married Jean Smith, daughter of Caleb Smith and granddaughter of Jonathan Dickinson, the first president of the College of New Jersey. He was the father of two sons and two daughters. In person, Houston was tall, slender, and dignified.

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