

Hunter, Theophilus ^[1]

Hunter, Theophilus

by Mary Hinton Duke Kerr and Mary Bates Sherwood, 1988

Before 1727–98



"Spring Hill plantation"; Photo is courtesy of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources.

^[2]Theophilus Hunter, colonial officer, Revolutionary ^[3] leader, justice, early Wake County ^[4] planter, and member of the North Carolina Assembly, was born in Nansemond County, Va., but settled in present Wake County, N.C., before 1752. His father, Isaac Hunter, was the son of Nicholas and the grandson of William Hunter of Nansemond County. His mother, Sarah Hill Hunter, was the daughter of Abraham and Sarah Pugh Hill. Nicholas Hunter moved to northeastern North Carolina and settled in Northampton County ^[5].

Between 1752 and 1761 Theophilus Hunter obtained over 2,000 acres in grants in the Granville ^[6] district of what was then Johnston County ^[7], and by 1771 he had extensive holdings south of Crabtree Creek including Rocky Branch and Walnut Creek. His residence, Hunter's Lodge, was about four miles south of the present city of Raleigh ^[8] on the Fayetteville stagecoach road and was one of the earliest homes in the area.

By 1759 Hunter was a justice of the peace in Johnston County ^[7] and in that year was on the committee to lay out ground for a courthouse at Hinton's Quarter, near present Clayton, where in 1760 he and the other justices held court. In 1761 he was on a commission to run the boundary line between Orange ^[9] and Johnston counties.

Wake County was created by the legislature on 27 Dec. 1770 to be effective 12 Mar. 1771. By this act, Hunter was named one of the commissioners to lay off land on which to erect a courthouse, jail, and stocks, as well as one of the commissioners to contract with workmen to erect the buildings. He was also on the commission to run the line between Wake ^[4], Johnston, Cumberland ^[10], and Orange counties as specified by the act to create Wake County.

When Governor William Tryon ^[11] marched against the Regulators ^[12] in the spring of 1771, he made his headquarters during 5–8 May at Hunter's Lodge, and when the colonial militia marched back after the Battle of Alamance ^[13], the Wake County regiment was disbanded at Hunter's Lodge.

On 4 June 1771, when the first Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions ^[14] for the new county was held, Hunter was the presiding judge. He continued as a justice of this court throughout the colonial period and was elected to the same position by the Halifax Provincial Congress ^[15] on 23 Dec. 1776. A major in the Wake County regiment of colonial militia, Hunter was made a lieutenant colonel by the Provincial Congress on 22 Apr. 1776. On the nineteenth he had been made a member of a committee to secure arms and ammunition for the Continental Army.

Hunter was a delegate from Wake County to the Provincial Congress at Hillsborough in 1775, and in 1783 he represented the county in the North Carolina House of Commons. In 1778, he became surveyor for Wake County and served on a committee to contract with workmen to build a new courthouse in Hillsborough. After the creation of Raleigh as the state capital was authorized by an ordinance in 1789, a tract of Hunter's land was offered as a possible site. When his land was not chosen, Hunter purchased four lots in the new capital. In 1793 he and James Bloodworth deeded the property to Wake County on which the present courthouse is located. He also donated a lot on the corner of Dawson and Morgan streets for a Masonic lodge ^[16].

The U.S. census of 1790 indicates that Hunter was the second largest slaveholder in the county. Sometime between 1771 and 1798 Hunter's Lodge burned, and Theophilus and his family moved to Spring Hill plantation. Here his land stretched from Walnut Creek in Raleigh almost to the site of Cary, and his home was situated on one of the most beautiful knolls in the county. The original part of Spring Hill built by Hunter has been demolished, but the larger part added by Theophilus, Jr., still stands on the grounds of Dorothea Dix Hospital ^[17]. In 1940 the Caswell-Nash Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution ^[18] erected a monument to Hunter near the house.

The name of Hunter's first wife is not known, but she was the mother of Delilah and Isaac. His second wife, Jane Smith Williams (widow of Joel Williams of Johnston County), was the mother of Edith, Irene, Mary (Polly), Theophilus, Jr., Osborn, and Henry. Hunter's sons and daughters married into other prominent Wake County families. Theophilus Hunter Hill ^[19], who published volumes of poetry in 1861, 1869, and 1883, was a descendant.

Hunter's will was registered in Wake County on 15 July 1798.

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