

Irwin, Henry ^[1]

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by John Burke O'Donnell, Jr., 1988

ca. 1725–4 Oct. 1777

Henry Irwin, colonial official and Revolutionary War commander, was born of Scottish descent, probably in Virginia. He purchased land in Tarboro, N.C., in 1760 and was chosen a delegate to the Assembly in the initial election held there after royal Governor [Josiah Martin](#) ^[2] granted Tarboro a charter as a [borough town](#) ^[3]. Irwin was later appointed to the Edgecombe committee formed in 1774 to discharge duties imposed by North Carolina's First [Provincial Congress](#) ^[4], at which that county had no representatives. The following year he was a member of the Edgecombe delegation to the Provincial Congress at Halifax, and on 9 Sept. 1775 he was appointed lieutenant colonel of the Halifax District.

Irwin returned to Halifax for the Congress that convened on 4 Apr. 1776. This body, which began drafting a state constitution, also instructed its representatives to the Continental Congress to support independence from Great Britain according to the [Halifax Resolves](#) ^[5] and accepted authority from Philadelphia to raise more soldiers for North Carolina's Continental Line. Despite warnings that delegates had "lost all idea of expense, in the zeal of preparing for defense," four additional regiments were created and Irwin became lieutenant colonel of the new Fifth Regiment. As had been predicted, problems arose when attempts were made to put the recently established military units in the field. Irwin, who had received orders to take charge of public provisions and to sell and receive supplies for war, also faced accounting disorders, insurgents, and severe health problems.

In a letter of 19 May 1777 to Governor [Richard Caswell](#) ^[6], Irwin reported that he had been sick and unable to go to Halifax or move northward with his assembled regiment, but had recovered sufficiently to do so. He also stated that, during this illness, treason was discovered in the eastern counties. Irwin and twenty-five Continentals reacted by disarming some thirty Tories and [Loyalists](#) ^[7] who had "made an attempt" on Tarboro, and Irwin forced them to take an oath of allegiance to forestall their further mutiny. Evidence of difficulty with the expanded forces and his continued poor health reappeared in another letter to Caswell later that summer. On 15 August, Irwin wrote the governor that he was doubtful of success in the further recruitment of men to strengthen the Fifth Regiment. He mentioned a recent bout with smallpox, but stated his continuing desire to be granted permission to rejoin the Continentals.

Irwin eventually resumed command as his troops fought in Pennsylvania. At the Battle of Germantown, he was killed in heavy fighting that also claimed the life of Brigadier General [Francis Nash](#) ^[8]. A monument to Irwin and several other North Carolina soldiers now marks their common grave on the battlefield, although his death was not immediately known. He was at first thought unharmed but captured by the British, as letters to Caswell from [John Penn](#) ^[9], [Cornelius Harnet](#) ^[10], Captain Cosmo de Medici, and Colonel Abraham Shephard reveal. This mistaken idea was apparently due to poor communication within General George Washington's army after the battle and because Irwin's recent ailments were presumed to have made him "lame."

He left several children in North Carolina. His daughter, Mary, married Lovatt Burgess, son of Anglican priest [Thomas Burges](#) ^[11]; another daughter, Elizabeth, married Governor [Montfort Stokes](#) ^[12]. A son, John Alexander, married Sarah Sessums, daughter of Judge Solomon Sessums of [Edgecombe County](#) ^[13]; among their children was Thomas Burgess Irwin, the first husband of Leah Caroline Arrington of [Nash County](#) ^[14].

References:

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Additional Resources:

"CSR Documents by Irwin, Henry, ca. 1725-1777." Colonial and State Records of North Carolina. Documenting the American South, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/creators/csr10894> ^[15] (accessed May 13, 2014).

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Subjects:

[Biographies](#) ^[18]

[Military personnel](#) ^[19]

[Public officials](#) ^[20]

Origin - location:

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[Halifax County](#) ^[22]

[Halifax](#) ^[23]

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[Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press](#).^[24]

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