

## Osborne, Adlai <sup>[1]</sup>

### Osborne, Adlai

by D. W. Adams, 1991; Revised by Jared Dease, Government and Heritage Library, December 2022

**4 June 1744–14 Dec. 1814**

Adlai Osborne, lawyer and political and educational leader, was the son of [Alexander Osborne](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, of New Jersey, a prominent frontiersman of [Rowan County](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, N.C., and a member of the 1761 colonial Assembly, and Agnes MacWhorter Osborne, the daughter of Hugh MacWhorter of New Castle, Del. Before the spring of 1749 he migrated with his parents from either Delaware or New Jersey to the headwaters of the west branch of Rocky River, then in [Anson County](#) <sup>[4]</sup>, N.C. Alexander quickly attained political office and acquired land. Belmont, the Osborne home, became the religious (Presbyterian) and educational center of the developing community. Adlai and his cousin Ephraim Brevard attended Crowfield Academy nearby, then went to a private school in Prince Edward County, Va. In 1768 both Adlai and Ephraim were graduated from Nassau Hall (Princeton). They returned to North Carolina, where Adlai studied law and married, on 30 Jan. 1771, Margaret Lloyd, the daughter of Major General [Thomas F. Lloyd](#) <sup>[5]</sup> of [Orange County](#) <sup>[6]</sup>.

Osborne early began an active public life in Rowan County. He signed an anti-[Regulator](#) <sup>[7]</sup> petition during that uprising, against which his father and father-in-law assumed commanding positions. On 30 July 1772 he was appointed clerk of the Rowan [Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions](#) <sup>[8]</sup>, and he soon established a law office in Salisbury. As hostilities towards the British grew in the Piedmont, Osborne became more involved in the Revolutionary movement. He was appointed a member of the Rowan [Committee of Safety](#) <sup>[9]</sup> (November 1774) and served as its clerk; with William Kennon, he seized lawyer [John Dunn](#) <sup>[10]</sup>, a suspected traitor, to send him south. On 9 Sept. 1775 he was appointed lieutenant colonel of minutemen in the Salisbury District. The public magazine was lodged at Belmont for four years—until Osborne was appointed a commissioner to erect one with public funds. During this period (1774–77), he was also clerk of the Salisbury District Court of Oyer and Terminer for its duration.

When his parents died in July 1776, Osborne, the only son of six children, inherited a great estate (his father had received various state grants totaling more than 8,000 acres). Through the 1770s and 1780s he used his increased resources to buy and sell town lots in Salisbury and Charlotte to good advantage.

Osborne was a commissioner of forfeited estates for Rowan County (1780–82), inspector of money for the Newington District (1780), and private secretary of Governor [Alexander Martin](#) <sup>[11]</sup> (1780). He was nominated, but not elected, a delegate to the Continental Congress in 1782. In August–September of that year he attempted a move to Georgia, where he had obtained an appointment as register of probates in [Chatham County](#) <sup>[12]</sup>. Due to the unsettled financial conditions prevailing, the move was aborted. Remaining in Rowan, he was elected a delegate to the Continental Congress of November 1784 but, as many did, resigned the commission a year later.

With the formation of [Iredell County](#) <sup>[13]</sup>, in which Belmont was situated, Osborne was appointed attorney for the state in that county (1789–96) and was one of its five delegates to the Fayetteville convention (November 1789), where he voted for ratification of the U.S. Constitution. He did not, however, relinquish his offices in Rowan, serving as county trustee (treasurer, 1795–1802) and de jure clerk of the Rowan County court until 1809, although he stopped attending in 1802. His inactivity, the general disorder of the office and books, and his arrearages in fines and forfeitures prompted an investigatory committee to issue a reluctant though stern censure in May 1809. He resigned the office of de jure clerk the next day.

In the 1790s Osborne turned his attention to land trading, in which he engaged with evident success in Mecklenburg and Iredell counties. In June 1798 he, [David Caldwell](#) <sup>[14]</sup>, and Abner Sharpe of Iredell entered into a speculative partnership to subdivide 19,000 acres they had acquired in northern and western Iredell County. This continued with moderate activity until 1805. From 1795 to 1803 Osborne represented the trustees of [The University of North Carolina](#) <sup>[15]</sup> as attorney in the Salisbury and Morgan districts and as commissioner of confiscated property in the Salisbury and Fayetteville districts. Both positions kept him busy collecting and selling escheats and recovering debts.

A trustee of the university from its inception (1789), Osborne served on committees to read [William R. Davie](#) <sup>[16]</sup>'s educational plan and to report on the building plan for the university. He was a trustee until his death. Four of his sons were graduated from the university. He had previously been a trustee of [Liberty Hall Academy](#) <sup>[17]</sup> in Charlotte (1777–80), of which his uncle, [Alexander MacWhorter](#) <sup>[18]</sup>, was president.

Osborne spent his last years at Belmont, which was known for its large library (over one hundred volumes) and second-floor ballroom. This centrally located plantation (twenty miles from Charlotte, Statesville, and Salisbury) of excellent bottomland was, in 1800, worked by twenty-five enslaved people who raised corn, wheat, oats, barley, cattle, hogs, sheep, flax, and cotton. A dairy and an orchard were also tended. Osborne died at Belmont and was buried in Centre Churchyard near Mount Mourne. His wife and eleven children survived him.

## References:

- Samuel A. Ashe, "Adlai Osborne" (Charles L. Van Noppen Papers, Manuscript Department, Duke University Library, Durham).
- Charlotte Observer*, 31 Mar. 1935.
- Walter Clark, ed., *State Records of North Carolina*, vols. 13 (1896), 15–22 (1898–1907), 25 (1906).
- R. D. W. Connor, *A Documentary History of the University of North Carolina, 1776–1799* 2 vols. (1953).
- Archibald Henderson, "Adlai Osborne: A Memorial Tribute," in *Program of the Sixth Annual Convention of the Lloyd Clan* (1941?).
- Iredell County Estate Records (North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh).
- James McLachlan, *Princetonians, 1748–1768: A Biographical Dictionary* (1976).
- Adlai Osborne Papers (Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill<sup>[19]</sup>, and North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh).
- Rowan County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions and Wills (North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh).
- William L. Saunders, ed., *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, vols. 8–10 (1890).
- Statesville Landmark*, 24 July 1914.

## Additional Resources:

- "CSR Documents by Rowan County (N.C.). Committee of Safety." *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/csr10688> <sup>[20]</sup> (accessed November 25, 2013).
- Sloan-Osborne CIPHERING BOOK, PC.1955. State Archives of North Carolina.  
[http://ead.archives.ncdcr.gov/PC\\_1955\\_Sloan\\_Osborne\\_Ciphering\\_.html](http://ead.archives.ncdcr.gov/PC_1955_Sloan_Osborne_Ciphering_.html) <sup>[21]</sup> (accessed November 25, 2013).

## Subjects:

- Biographies <sup>[22]</sup>
- Lawyers <sup>[23]</sup>
- Planters <sup>[24]</sup>
- Political leaders <sup>[25]</sup>
- Public officials <sup>[26]</sup>

## Authors:

- Adams, D. W. <sup>[27]</sup>

## Origin - location:

- Chatham County <sup>[28]</sup>
- Iredell County <sup>[29]</sup>
- Rowan County <sup>[30]</sup>

## From:

- Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press.<sup>[31]</sup>

1 January 1991 | Adams, D. W.

---

**Source URL:** <https://ncpedia.org/biography/osborne-adlai>

## Links

- [1] <https://ncpedia.org/biography/osborne-adlai> [2] <https://ncpedia.org/biography/osborne-alexander> [3] <https://ncpedia.org/geography/rowan> [4] <https://ncpedia.org/geography/anson> [5] <https://ncpedia.org/biography/lloyd-or-loyd-loyde> [6] <https://ncpedia.org/geography/orange> [7] <https://ncpedia.org/history/colonial/regulator-movement> [8] <https://ncpedia.org/court-pleas-and-quarter-sessions> [9] <https://ncpedia.org/committees-safety> [10] <https://ncpedia.org/biography/dunn-john-ross> [11] <https://ncpedia.org/biography/martin-alexander> [12] <https://ncpedia.org/geography/chatham> [13] <https://ncpedia.org/geography/iredell> [14] <https://ncpedia.org/biography/caldwell-david> [15] <https://ncpedia.org/university-north-carolina-chapel-hi> [16] <https://ncpedia.org/biography/davie-william-richardson> [17] <https://ncpedia.org/liberty-hall> [18] <https://ncpedia.org/biography/macwhorter-alexander> [19] <http://www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/o/Osborne,Adlai.html> [20] <https://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/creators/csr10688> [21] [http://ead.archives.ncdcr.gov/PC\\_1955\\_Sloan\\_Osborne\\_Ciphering\\_.html](http://ead.archives.ncdcr.gov/PC_1955_Sloan_Osborne_Ciphering_.html) [22] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/biography-term> [23] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/lawyers> [24] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/planters> [25] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/political-leaders> [26] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/public-officials> [27] <https://ncpedia.org/category/authors/adams-d-w> [28] <https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmont-9> [29] <https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmont/i> [30] <https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmon-13> [31] <https://ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/dictionary-no>