

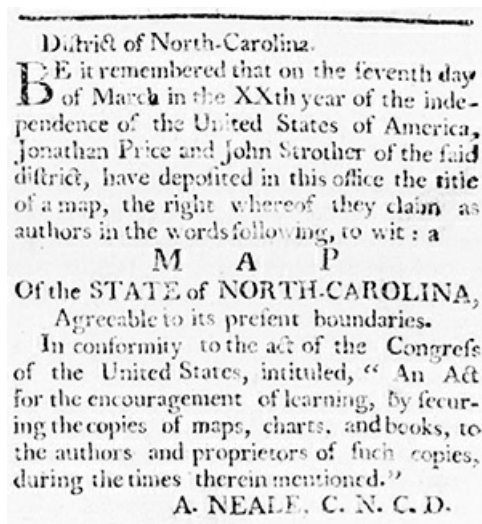
Strother, John ^[1]

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by George Stevenson, 1994

d. 19 Aug. 1815

John Strother, land agent and topographic surveyor ^[2], was born in Culpeper County, Va., the son of George and Mary Kennerly Strother. He is usually confused with his cousin-german ^[3] of the same name, a trustee of the Baptist church on Cain Creek, Orange County ^[4], N.C., and sometimes confused with his second cousin, John Strother, who, like the surveyor, was in the Creek War but whose army career ended in 1815 following the mutinous conduct of soldiers under his command. When George Strother died in 1767, he left provision for the education of his children. His elder son, John, was taught the surveyor's business. Sometime after 1785 young Strother left Culpeper County, Va., for Wilkes County, Ga., presumably drawn there as a surveyor by Georgia's intended opening of the Indian lands lying on its northern and northwestern frontiers. There he met Zachariah Cox, of Georgia, an indefatigable land speculator, and fell in with Cox's scheme to secure a large tract of land at Muscle Shoals in the bend of the Tennessee River.



An announcement of Strother and Price's map in the North Carolina Gazette. April 2, 1796. 1.

^[5]The Muscle Shoals lands were a lodestone to draw the eyes of the covetous, for here the produce of the western country, shipped down the Tennessee River, which held the territory in its embrace, could be gathered and transported a short distance to the Alabama River for shipment to Mobile and the Gulf. The shoals lay well within Indian country, the ultimate jurisdiction over the region in which they were situated being claimed simultaneously by Georgia and South Carolina under their charters, Great Britain through conquest, and Spain through occupation. By the convention of Beaufort, April 1787, South Carolina recognized the superior claim of Georgia to jurisdiction over the territory lying between Fort Prince George and the Mississippi. Georgia, in turn, disdained the pretensions of Great Britain and ignored the claims of Spain. Land speculators welcomed the convention and formed companies to engross as much of the Indian lands as they could persuade Georgia to let them have.

Zachariah Cox and John Strother, with Thomas Gilbert and a small number of associates, organized the Tennessee Company and successfully negotiated a purchase from the Georgia Assembly in 1789 of 3.5 million acres on Muscle Shoals for the sum of \$46,785. (Two other companies, the Virginia Company and the South Carolina Company, purchased grants of 7 million acres and 5 million acres respectively.) Cox, Strother, and Gilbert moved their operation from Georgia into Tennessee Territory in 1790. In September of that year they advertised bounties of 500 acres per family and 250 acres for single men willing to embark with their fleet downriver to Muscle Shoals on 10 Jan. 1791. The company opened a land office at the confluence of the Holston and French Broad river ^[6] (to be moved to Muscle Shoals after embarkation), with a promise to give undoubted fee simple title to lands laid out under authority of the land office.

Despite a proclamation by President George Washington forbidding this projected expedition into Indian lands protected by treaty from incursions by white settlers, the promoters went on with their plans. Their small party of seventeen descended the Tennessee to the bend early in 1791 and built a blockhouse and defense works on an island in Muscle Shoals. In the interim Governor William Blount ^[7] of Tennessee Territory had sent to the Indians word of the Cox expedition. Chief Glass of the Cherokee suddenly materialized at the shoals with a group of warriors from the Lower Cherokee Towns and uttered words that caused Cox and his party to abandon the place. The Indians then burned the blockhouse. This put an end to the immediate hopes of the Tennessee Company.

Prevented by the Indians from surveying, subdividing, and selling the land to settlers, Cox, Strother, and Gilbert were unable to raise the full purchase price of the original grant. Consequently the 1789 sale fell through. Cox, in whom the lust for land was deeply seated, persisted in his efforts to secure a defensible title to the land. In 1795, when the notorious Yazoo Land Act ^[8] was pushed through the Georgia Assembly, he secured a fresh grant of the Muscle Shoals land for the Tennessee Company at a cost of \$60,000. It is not clear that Strother remained a member of the company at this time, but investors speculating in other of the 1795 Yazoo lands included William Blount, David Allison, and Judge James Wilson, all of whose careers were to influence the course of Strother's life.



Barker, Price, and Strother's map of the Cape Fear and vicinity, 1798. From the collections of the State Archives of North Carolina. Presented in North Carolina Maps at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

^[9]The Muscle Shoals venture brought Strother under the eye of Governor William Blount, who had himself attempted to procure the same land earlier. When Blount (and his associates) negotiated to purchase by "Indian title" the property in the bend of the Tennessee River in 1784 and 1785, there can be little doubt that he acted both for himself and for his brothers Thomas ^[10] and John Gray. In the early 1790s John Gray Blount ^[11] began speculating in North Carolina lands in earnest. He acquired land for himself and associates in a multitude of entries in various eastern counties and in Buncombe ^[12] totaling more than three million acres. These entries were surveyed individually by the county surveyors and their deputies. Some of the larger entries were for huge tracts that embraced earlier grants to landowners or their predecessors. Blount found that to dispose of his speculation lands to advantage he needed surveyors who were capable of joining these multitudes of surveys into general plans delineating the whole and the watercourses that drained them, or of laying out the great tracts in a manner that showed in correct detail the property lines of those who owned land within the tract under earlier patents of title. For this purpose he employed two men: Jonathan Price ^[13], of Pasquotank County ^[14], who had an established claim to the skills of a topographic surveyor, and John Strother, who probably was introduced to John Gray Blount by Governor William Blount. Strother was characterized by a friendly address and a prudent discretion, and his involvement in the Muscle Shoals venture of the Tennessee Company must have convinced Governor Blount of Strother's intrepidity.

The year in which Strother met John Gray Blount, or how early he was employed by Blount, is unknown. By the beginning of 1795 Strother was in southeastern North Carolina making a comprehensive plan of all of Blount's surveys, totaling more than 850,000 acres in Robeson, Bladen ^[15], Cumberland ^[16], and Richmond ^[17] counties. It was probably at this time that Strother met Jonathan Price, who was surveying Blount's land in Holly Shelter and Whiteoak Pocosin in New Hanover and Onslow counties; by August 1795 Price and Strother were jointly surveying the huge tracts in Carteret County ^[18] owned by Blount's partner, David Allison. Three years earlier Price had entered into an agreement with Nathaniel Christmas of Orange County ^[4] to produce a map of North Carolina. Towards this end he and Christmas had borrowed £290 from the state on a three-year loan. They completed a manuscript draft of their map in 1795. Their work, however, must not have answered expectations, for it is not mentioned after an unsuccessful attempt to find subscribers to underwrite the cost of publication.

Price abandoned the first version of his map after Strother agreed to join his considerable talents to those of Price in preparing a superior map of the state and in making a fresh survey of the coast. Early in September 1795 Price borrowed from the state another £300, which presumably was for the purpose of producing the new version of the state map. If so, he and Strother had reached an accord by that date. On 7 Mar. 1796 the two surveyors copyrighted their projected survey of the coast from Cape Henry to Cape Roman and their intended map of the state by entering their titles in the U.S. Circuit Court for the District of North Carolina. By December of that year Price and Strother had expended over \$3,000 but

had completed draft surveys of only about two-thirds of the counties. Consequently they petitioned the Assembly for another loan and were allowed £500.

John Gray Blount encouraged Price and Strother in their work by allowing them to use his own surveys and plans and, apparently, assisted in their surveys of the various counties. For example, in the spring of 1797 Strother completed surveying Wake, Cumberland, Richmond, Anson, Montgomery, Rowan, Cabarrus, Mecklenburg, Lincoln, Rutherford, Burke, and Iredell counties, the southwestern part of Wilkes, and part of Buncombe. Most of this work appears to have been done by Strother while en route to Buncombe County^[12] on Blount's business. (The single surviving example of Strother's county surveys is the one for Robeson County^[19] located in the John Gray Blount Papers in the North Carolina State Archives^[20].) Strother's surveys in the spring of 1797 brought the map so near to completion that Price announced forthcoming publication in an advertisement opening subscriptions to the map in June of that year. By mid-1798 Strother had completed all his county surveys, enabling Price to finish a version of their map in a manuscript that was exhibited to the General Assembly with a request for a further loan in aid of publication in December 1798. The Assembly refused the loan. Despite this setback, Price pushed on with the remainder of his work and in the spring of 1799 completed his survey of roads in the counties lying in the northeastern sector of the state from the fall line to Pasquotank County. This finally brought the work to an end. After that the matter was out of Strother's hands, as Price attended to the details of publication.



Jonathan Price and John Strother's "First Actual Survey," engraved by W. Harrison, published 1808. From the collections of the State Archives of North Carolina. Presented on North Carolina Maps at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

^[21]In May 1797 John Gray Blount gave Price a hint to proceed with publication of the chart resulting from the coastal survey he had undertaken with Strother—and enriched the hint with an order for twenty copies. The next month Price announced in the *Wilmington Gazette* impending publication of the coastal chart from his and Strother's survey. Price supplied plates he had obtained from Philadelphia to William Johnston^[22] of New Bern to be used in engraving the coastal chart. It was published in 1798 in two sheets, each measuring 14 by 23 inches, under the dedicatory legend, "To Navigators This Chart, Being an Actual Survey of the Sea Coast and Inland Navigation from Cape Henry to Cape Roman, is most Respectfully Inscribed by Price and Strother." A companion to the coastal chart, and growing out of their survey of the coast, was "A Map of the Cape Fear River and its Vicinity from the Frying Pan Shoals to Wilmington by Actual Survey." This chart, without publication or copyright date, and measuring 13 7/8 by 18 3/4 inches, was not entrusted to a local artisan for engraving. Instead, it was sent to William Barker, of Philadelphia, the skilled engraver of maps and nautical charts employed by Matthew Carey in producing his *General Atlas* of 1796. Joshua Potts, one of the principal merchants of Wilmington, had the chart of the river reengraved (without date and without acknowledging the authorship of Price and Strother) as a charming business card measuring 5 3/4 by 8 inches by John Scoles, of New York, one of the engravers used by John Payne in his *New and Complete System of Universal Geography* (1798–1800). Publication of Price and Strother's map of North Carolina, however, took ten more years to bring to successful conclusion—so long that Price was obliged to have parts of the plates reengraved in order to show the creation of new counties. By 1808, when "The First Actual Survey of the State of North Carolina" was placed in the hands of the subscribers, Strother had already written his will and left North Carolina for good. No doubt copies of this splendid map were sent to Strother in Tennessee.

The last eight years of Strother's stay in North Carolina were spent essentially in Buncombe County, where he was active on behalf of John Gray Blount and his business associate, David Allison, on behalf of the state, on behalf of local government, and on behalf of his own interests. The decline of American commercial prosperity that set in towards the latter half of 1796 continued to worsen in 1797 after the Bank of England suspended specie payments; it reached its low point during the talk of an impending war between America and France in the middle and latter part of 1798. The great speculators in land, whose schemes and finances were very nearly inextricably linked, began to collapse and then to fall into bankruptcy. The difficulties of the celebrated financier, Robert Morris, created financial woes for David Allison and Judge James Wilson, both of whom were financially committed to John Gray Blount's speculations in land. By late 1796 both Allison and Blount were hard pressed to pay the entry fees on hundreds of thousands of acres they had entered in North Carolina. By 1797 they could not pay the taxes on the hundreds of thousands of acres they held by patent from the state. In 1798 the General Assembly ordered the sale of the speculation lands on which the taxes had not been paid just as Allison was imprisoned for debt in Philadelphia. Allison sent money from prison to Blount to be used by Strother in paying taxes on Allison's land. He further proposed "selling" his land to Strother (so as to defeat the creditors who were trying to ruin him), then sailing to Europe with Strother to sell the three million acres he owned in Georgia and elsewhere. Blount, however, was in no position to let Strother depart for Europe on Allison's behalf. Instead, he sent him to Raleigh with negotiable instruments with which to raise money to pay taxes on the Buncombe lands, then sent Strother on to

Buncombe to salvage what he could.

In Buncombe, Strother purchased 546,880 of the more than one million acres of the speculation lands at a tax sale. He took the deed from the sheriff in his own name and immediately began selling the land in small tracts to local buyers, giving personal deeds of title to the purchasers. He was, of course, acting for Blount in these transactions, as is evidenced by the fact that one of the provisions of his will was to return the unsold balance to Blount. From this time Strother became Blount's principal business agent for western affairs. At the same time, he began acquiring tracts in Buncombe on his own account, eventually purchasing 4,440 acres from the state apart from land bought from private persons. Among the latter were the ferry and adjoining lands at Warm Springs, already attracting people during the sickly season from South Carolina and Tennessee. Here Strother laid out the town of Spaightville, incorporated in 1802. (Following earth changes at the time of the Charleston earthquake of 1886, the temperature of the springs rose, causing their name to be altered to Hot Springs in that year.)

In addition to attending to his own and Blount's affairs, Strother was active in public matters. He served in 1799 as one of the surveyors for North Carolina in determining the boundary with Tennessee. In 1800 he was commissioned one of the marshals for taking the U.S. census in Buncombe, Rutherford, Wilkes, and Ashe counties. In 1805 he was named one of the commissioners to procure a public square in Asheville. Strother did not serve under the latter commission, however, for he was on the verge of leaving North Carolina to enter what would prove to be the third and final decade of his adult life.

In 1804 Strother accompanied John Gray Blount, Jr., to Nashville, Tenn., carrying with him a letter of introduction to Andrew Jackson ^[23] that had been given him by Willie Blount ^[24]. In 1805 Strother made his brother George his agent for the sale of Buncombe lands. In 1806 he entered into a contract with Henry M. Rutledge of Charleston, S.C., to help survey Rutledge's 75,000 acres on Elk River, Tenn., and to act as his agent in leasing the land. Strother immediately wrote his will and left North Carolina. The opening of a land office for middle Tennessee in 1806, the attraction of Duck River lands, and continuing business for John Gray Blount kept Strother in Nashville and Jefferson for some time.

In the spring of 1812 Strother, at the general's request, accompanied Andrew Jackson to Georgia, where Jackson went to secure from the heirs of David Allison quitclaim deeds to 10,000 acres that had come to him by execution of a judgment levied on lands originally patented by Thomas and John Gray Blount, then sold to Allison. Weeks later, when war was declared against Great Britain ^[25], General Jackson employed Strother on a mission to Cherokee Chief John Lowrey, whose help he sought in preventing the spread of British intrigue among the Indians. At the same time, he sent Strother on a scouting expedition to discover Indian strengths. When war against the Creek Indians broke out in earnest following the massacre at Fort Mims on 30 Aug. 1812, Jackson appointed Strother topographic engineer to his army. Strother served well in a triple role of scout, adviser, and topographer. Fort Strother ^[26], built on the Coosa River in October 1813, was named as a compliment to him. In February 1814 he resigned as Jackson's topographic engineer in order to return to middle Tennessee on business (apparently for John Gray Blount). As a result, he was not with Jackson at the Battle of the Horseshoe, which ended in capitulation by the Creeks on 24 March.

Following the Treaty of Fort Jackson, Strother was appointed surveyor to the commissioners to settle the boundary between the Creek and Cherokee Indians, and to lay off the 23 million acres of Creek land (half of the present state of Alabama) taken by the United States under terms of the treaty. In the spring of 1815 he returned to Fort Strother prepared to begin the survey. After waiting vainly for the commissioners to arrive, he began surveying a portion of the boundary unlikely to be subject to dispute and was thus engaged at the time of his death in August. A manuscript map of the Creek country that he had started drawing in 1814 was left unfinished at his death. Strother was survived by Flora Inman of Buncombe County and their two natural daughters, Mary Inman (Mrs. Ninian Edmonston) and Caroline Inman (Mrs. Benjamin R. Edmonston).

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