

White, James ^[1]

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by William S. Powell, 1996

16 June 1749–10 Dec. 1809

James White, physician, legislator, congressman, and western pioneer, was born in Philadelphia, the son of James and Ann Willcox White. His father was a native of Ireland, and Jesuits established their first mission in Pennsylvania at the home of his maternal grandfather about 1730. Nothing is known of young White's early education, but he later attended a Jesuit school at St. Omer, France. After returning home he studied medicine at the University of Pennsylvania and read law in Philadelphia. His brother Thomas, two years younger, was a merchant in Philadelphia who, by early January 1775, had moved to Cross Creek (later [Fayetteville](#) ^[2]), N.C.

It is not known precisely when James White settled in North Carolina, but he represented [Currituck County](#) ^[3] (where he lived on Bells Island) in the three [Provincial Congresses](#) ^[4] that met between August 1775 and November 1776. In 1777 and between 1784 and 1789 he represented [Chatham County](#) ^[5] in one and Currituck County in four sessions of the state legislature, and between November 1785 and May 1786 he was a member of the [Continental Congress](#) ^[6]. He also was a justice of the peace in Currituck County prior to 1787. Some of White's correspondence was dated from Chatham County, and he was a trustee of an academy chartered there in January 1787. He also sometimes was in Wilmington, where he may have had relatives, and he owned property in Fayetteville that was described as still productive rural land at the time of his death.

Sometime after October 1786 White relocated in that part of far western North Carolina that became [Tennessee](#) ^[7]. The move followed his appointment by Congress on 6 Oct. 1786 as superintendent of Indian affairs in the southern district composed of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, a post he filled only briefly as it interfered with his duties in the Continental Congress. Nevertheless, on 1 June 1787 he wrote Governor [Richard Caswell](#) ^[8] that he had made a tour of the Creek Indian nation and was submitting a report to Congress that he showed to the governor first. In 1789 he was elected to the November session of the North Carolina General Assembly to represent the recently created Hawkins County beyond the mountains. White was involved in soothing the fears of residents of the state living along the Mississippi River, where settlers were being murdered by Indians believed to have been inspired by the Spanish. White's inquiries revealed that this was not the case—that isolated Indian hunting parties had encountered whites who had intruded into their territory and acted entirely on their own. White received assurances from Spanish officials that they would do their utmost to establish good relations.

Neither North Carolina nor the Continental Congress was doing anything to protect the western frontier. Many people in the Tennessee country were about ready to yield to the enticements of one Colonel Stark and withdraw from the United States in favor of seeking "refuge under a foreign government." White, however, was able to convince them to abandon this idea.

About the same time that White reported to Governor [Samuel Johnston](#) ^[9] the results of his negotiations with the Spanish minister, he was named a North Carolina delegate to the [Convention of 1789](#) ^[10], which approved the U.S. Constitution. White voted with the majority. North Carolina shortly thereafter ceded its western lands to the new national government, but this was a step that White opposed in the legislature.

In November 1789, when the legislature drew up a list of names from which to select the state's first nominees for U.S. senators, James White's was third on the list and other names followed his. A few days later, for reasons not stated, White's name was withdrawn. The first two names—Samuel Johnston and [Benjamin Hawkins](#) ^[11]—were then nominated and elected.

White represented [Davidson County](#) ^[12] in the legislature of the Territory South of the Ohio in 1794 until he was elected to Congress. He served from 3 Sept. 1794 to 1 June 1796, when the territory was admitted to the Union as the state of Tennessee. In 1799 he moved to Louisiana, where he was judge of the Attakapas District in 1804 and afterwards of St. Martin's Parish.

A [Roman Catholic](#) ^[13], he died at Attakapas near New Orleans. He had married Mary Willcox, presumably his cousin, and they were the parents of one son, [Edward Douglas White](#) ^[14], born in Nashville, Tenn., in March 1795; the son served three terms in Congress and was governor of both Tennessee and Louisiana. This White's son, also [Edward D. White](#) ^[15], represented Louisiana in the Senate and was chief justice of the Supreme Court of the United States.

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Albert V. Goodpasture, "Dr. James White: Pioneer, Politician, Lawyer," *Tennessee Historical Magazine* 1 (December 1915).^[16]

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Additional Resources:

"White, James, (1749 - 1809)." *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*. Washington, D.C.: The Congress. <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=W000377>^[17] (accessed March 19, 2014).

"White, Edward Douglass, (1845 - 1921)." *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*. Washington, D.C.: The Congress. <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=W000366>^[15] (accessed March 19, 2014).

"White, Edward Douglass, (1795 - 1847)." *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*. Washington, D.C.: The Congress. <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=W000365>^[14] (accessed March 19, 2014).

Subjects:

[Biographies](#)^[18]

[Public officials](#)^[19]

Authors:

[Powell, William S.](#)^[20]

Origin - location:

[Cumberland County](#)^[21]

[Fayetteville](#)^[22]

[Currituck County](#)^[23]

[Chatham County](#)^[24]

[Davidson County](#)^[25]

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1 January 1996 | Powell, William S.

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