

Blackledge, William ^[1]

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by Sarah McCulloh Lemmon, 1979; Revised November 2022.

d. 19 Oct. 1828

William Blackledge, legislator, congressman, businessman, and enslaver of Craven County ^[2], was the third of four sons and three daughters of Richard and Ann Blackledge. Richard Blackledge was extremely wealthy; upon his death in 1776, William inherited property including over a thousand acres of land, the rights to enslave six people, a lot in New Bern, and mills at Beaver Dam.

Nothing is known of Blackledge's education or early life, except that in 1783 he was a student at Princeton ^[3]. He became a friend of Willie Blount ^[4] and of John Gray Blount ^[5], probably the most influential merchant in Eastern North Carolina ^[6] at the turn of the century; and he entered politics in 1802, when he was elected to the state senate from Craven County to fill the unexpired term of Richard Dobbs Spaight ^[7], Sr., who was mortally wounded in a duel. He also served as a member of the House of Commons in 1809 and was elected a councilor of state by the General Assembly ^[8] each year from 1814 through 1827.

He served four terms in the U.S. Congress from the Fourth District as a member of the Democratic-Republican party, from 1803 to 1809 and from 1811 to 1813. He was relatively quiet during his first term but gradually participated more and more. He supported the interests of merchants, since New Bern was a port city, opposing Jefferson ^[9]'s embargo as injurious to trade (1808) and favoring a large navy both in numbers and in size of vessels (1812). His opinion of the abilities of American seamen, in contrast to those of the British, was high. He favored a salt tax because it would encourage local manufacture of salt, a Federalist measure rather than a Jeffersonian. The Eighth Congress, of which he was a member, was active in impeaching Federalist judges; Blackledge was elected (2 Jan. 1804) by the House as one of the eleven floor managers to present to the Senate its case against Judge John Pickering.

Defeated for Congress in the election of 1808 by Federalist John Stanly ^[10], he returned as a War Hawk the following term. He voted yea on the declaration of war, saying, "Rather than submit to pretensions so degrading to our national honor, and which, if submitted to, must lead to consequences so destructive both to the agricultural and commercial interests of the nation, I do not hesitate to prefer war." United, he believed, the nation could defend her rights "against the combined powers of the earth." Because it was a war measure, he voted for the 1812 embargo; he supported fifteen of the sixteen war revenue acts (being absent for one vote) and bills for arming the militia and for building coastal defenses.

New Bern, however, was a wealthy port town containing many merchants and bankers who opposed war with Britain. Because of this opposition, and because of the fumbling ineptitude of the administration in prosecuting the war, Blackledge was defeated in the 1812 election by William Gaston ^[11] of New Bern, a brilliant Federalist attorney who later had a distinguished career as a jurist. Blackledge never returned to Congress, devoting the remainder of his life to state service as an "elder statesman." He died at Spring Hill in Lenoir County ^[12]; his wife, Winifred, died seven days later, 26 Oct. 1828. His son, William Salter ^[13], also served in the U.S. Congress, 1820–23, and in the General Assembly of North Carolina.

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Additional Resources:

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