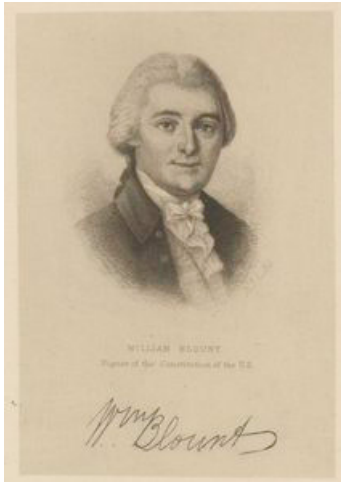


Blount, William ^[1]

Blount, William

by Stanley J. Folmsbee, 1979; Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, March 2023

26 Mar. 1749–21 Mar. 1800



William Blount, Signer of the Constitution of the U.S. Courtesy of The New York Public Library

Digital Collections

^[2]William Blount, governor, senator, and land speculator, was born in Bertie County ^[3], the first son of Jacob ^[4] and Barbara Gray Blount, one of the colony's earliest families. He obtained a good education in the private schools of the colony and served as paymaster of Continental troops during the Revolution ^[5]. His four terms in the state's lower house, beginning in 1781, were followed by two terms in the senate. He also represented his state in the Continental Congress ^[6] and in the convention of 1787 that drafted the Constitution ^[7] of the United States. After North Carolina at first refused to join the new government, Blount won election to the second convention, in which he helped bring about the state's ratification of the federal Constitution. He also supported the cession of the state's western lands to the United States, and when that area was organized as the Territory of the United States South of the River Ohio, he was named governor (in 1790) and also superintendent of Indian affairs for the entire region south of the Ohio River. In the latter capacity, he negotiated the Treaty of the Holston ^[8] of 1791 with the Cherokee ^[9] tribe, by which they ceded to the United States a large amount of territory, much of which had already been occupied by white settlers.

During the first stage of the territory's history, Blount had autocratic authority. He proclaimed laws, created new counties, and appointed civil officials. Blount did not call a territorial legislature into session for over three years after his initial appointment. By 1794, the population was sufficient for the election of a territorial assembly, which in its first session chartered three colleges; one of these, the forerunner of the University of Tennessee ^[10], was named Blount College in honor of the governor. When a territorial census revealed a population adequate for statehood, Blount arranged for a constitutional convention, over which he presided as chairman, which drafted the state's first constitution. He was then elected as one of the state's first two members of the U.S. Senate.

His political career was mired by the Expulsion Case of William Blount of Tennessee ^[11] (1797). A rumor that Spain was about to cede New Orleans and the Louisiana country to France is alleged to have started the affair. The alleged land cession would deny the Americans the right to use the Mississippi River for the export of their surplus products. Blount therefore took over the leadership of a scheme, already being developed, to organize an expedition of frontiersmen and Indians to help the British, then at war with Spain and France, take New Orleans, Louisiana, and Florida away from Spain. Great Britain was bound by the treaty of peace of 1783 to permit free navigation of the Mississippi River by Canadians and Americans. Before the plan could be put in operation, a letter Blount had written about it fell into the hands of federal authorities, namely President John Adams ^[12], and as a result he was expelled from the Senate. He was also impeached by the House of Representatives but was acquitted in trial before the Senate, because of lack of jurisdiction. Blount remained popular in Tennessee, where he was elected to the state senate and its speakership. He did not run for reelection and was out of office at the time of his death.



Blount Mansion in Knoxville, Tennessee. March 28, 2019. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

^[13]Blount was also an enumerated enslaver. The recorded number of people Blount enslaved varied by account and year. According to the 1790 Census ^[14], William Blount of Tyrell County is listed as the enslaver of 22 people. When Blount was appointed to his position as governor and superintendent in 1790, he established a temporary capital at Rocky Mount in upper east Tennessee (present-day Piney Flats, north of Johnson City). While there, his family remained in North Carolina and did not move to the territory until late 1791. The family's Blount Mansion ^[15] in present-day Knoxville, Tennessee was built within the next year. William's wife, Mary, brought three of their five children, as well as the people they enslaved, from Greenville, North Carolina to Rocky Mount (TN), and then Knoxville. The number of enslaved people brought by Mary to the territory is recorded as high as 27 and includes two named individuals, Hagar and Venus.

On 12 Feb. 1778, Blount married Mary Molsey Grainger, the daughter of Caleb Grainger of the Cape Fear ^[16] region of North Carolina. They had seven children: Cornelius, Ann, Mary Louisa, William Grainger ^[17], Richard Blackledge, Barbara, and Eliza. Mary died around March 10, 1800, and William died soon on March 21 of the same year. They both died at the Blount Mansion in Knoxville are buried ^[18] in the churchyard of the First Presbyterian Church, Knoxville, Tennessee. A marble slab marks his grave.

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"William Blount Mansion in Knoxville." User "M." *Wikimedia Commons*. Photograph. March 28, 2019. Accessed March 8, 2023 at: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:BlountMansion.jpg> [13]

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