

Brown, William Hill ^[1]

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by Thomas C. Parramore, 1979

1765–26 Aug. 1793

William Hill Brown, novelist and poet, was born in Boston, Mass., the son of Gawen Brown, a noted clockmaker, and Elizabeth Hill Adams Brown. At the age of twenty-three, Brown published a novel entitled *The Power of Sympathy* ^[2], now generally recognized as the first American novel. Published anonymously, the book related in transparent disguise a sordid story of scandal involving a prominent Boston family. During the next several years he wrote another novel, essays, plays, and poems, some of which were published posthumously.

In the summer of 1792, with the apparent intention of studying law in a climate devoid of the recriminations he had evidently aroused in Boston, Brown moved to North Carolina. He was at Hillsborough by 1 Aug. 1792, on which date he received from merchant Thomas O'Neill a promissory note in the amount of £165.6.3, North Carolina currency. Brown's destination in North Carolina was the village of Murfreesboro, in Hertford County ^[3], where O'Neill had a store and where Brown's sister Elizabeth lived with her husband, Murfreesboro merchant John Hichborn, also a Bostonian. Arriving in Murfreesboro before the end of October, Brown soon afterward began reading law with General William R. Davie of Halifax, one of the most eminent lawyers in the state.

Brown seems to have divided his time thereafter between Halifax ^[4] and Murfreesboro. He made small purchases at the latter town in September 1792 and January 1793. Murfreesboro at this time had a flourishing commerce with northern and West Indian ports and was the scene of much speculation by merchant mariners from Massachusetts and Connecticut. Among these were Joseph Vollentine of Boston, brother-in-law of Brown's sister, Ann, and, until his death in 1792, Eli Foote, grandfather of Harriet Beecher Stowe ^[5]. In January 1793, Elizabeth Brown Hichborn died at her husband's plantation near Murfreesboro; she was memorialized soon afterward in a poem written by her brother and published in the *Halifax North-Carolina Journal*.

Abraham Hodge ^[6], editor of the *Journal*, was evidently one of Brown's closest North Carolina friends. During 1793 the *Journal* carried several poems by Brown and apparently one or more essays as well. The most notable of these pieces was a mock-heroic poem entitled "The Lion and the Tarapen," supposedly based on an actual fight once staged in Halifax between a native terrapin and a menagerie lion. The poem was widely reprinted later.

In August 1793 the seasonal fevers struck as usual in Eastern North Carolina, ravaging especially those not yet acclimated to life in the South. Brown died at Murfreesboro and was probably buried in or near that town; the graves of some of his Hichborn kin are still to be seen at Murfreesboro. He had apparently brought with him from Boston some copies of his first novel, withdrawn from sale in Boston after the uproar it caused; the title was listed among those offered for sale at Henry Wills ^[7]'s bookstore in Edenton ^[8] in November 1794. Brown's estate was settled by his brother-in-law John Hichborn and by Ellis Gray Blake, another Bostonian who had taken up residence in Murfreesboro; a suit brought by them in Edenton District Superior Court in 1796 sought and obtained payment of debts to Brown incurred in 1792 by Thomas O'Neill and by Andrew Burke, another Hillsborough merchant.

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