

Caldwell, David ^[1]

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Caldwell, David

by Blackwell P. Robinson, 1979

22 Mar. 1725–25 Aug. 1824

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David Caldwell, [Presbyterian](#) ^[3] minister, educator, physician, and statesman, was born in Lancaster, Pa., of Ulster Scot ancestry. He was the oldest of four sons of Andrew and Martha Caldwell, who were respectable farmers. David served as an apprentice to a house carpenter for four years and then carpentered on his own for four more years until he was twenty-five.

Deeply intent on becoming a Presbyterian minister, he made a contract with his three younger brothers, whereby he relinquished all claims to the parental estate in exchange for their help in securing enough money to send him through college. Accordingly, at the age of twenty-five, he entered the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University, from which he was graduated in 1761 at the age of thirty-six. After teaching a year and serving a year as a tutor at his alma mater, while he studied theology, he was licensed as a clergyman in 1763 by the Presbytery of New Brunswick. He served the next two years as a supply minister in various places in his native colony. His first definite assignment came on 16 May 1765, when he was appointed "to labor at least one whole year as a missionary in North Carolina." Ordained in July 1765, at the age of forty, he became one of the earliest Presbyterian divines in the sparsely and recently settled North Carolina back country.

Caldwell's move to what is now [Guilford County](#) ^[4] came through the invitation of members of the Nottingham Colony of Pennsylvania, an Ulster Scot Presbyterian group who had asked him, before they came to North Carolina in the 1750s, to become their pastor after his ordination. In present central Guilford County he became pastor of Buffalo and Alamance churches, established by the Nottingham Colony. He was married in 1766 to Rachel Craighead, the daughter of the [Reverend Alexander Craighead](#) ^[5] of [Mecklenburg County](#) ^[6], generally recognized as the most prominent Presbyterian minister west of the Yadkin River. The couple settled on a tract of land about three miles west of the center of present-day [Greensboro](#) ^[7], and two years later, in 1768, Caldwell was officially installed as pastor of Alamance and Buffalo congregations, which he served for nearly sixty years.

Meanwhile, in 1767, he established what came to be known as Dr. David Caldwell's Log College, a theological and classical school for young men that was soon recognized as one of the most outstanding schools in the South. His biographer, the [Reverend Eli Caruthers](#) ^[8], who succeeded him as pastor of Buffalo Church, wrote that "five of his scholars became governors of different states; many more members of Congress, some of whom occupied high standing . . . and a much greater number became lawyers, judges, physicians, and ministers of the gospel." Training from fifty to sixty students each year, he was, in the words of one of his pupils, "probably more useful to the church than any other man in the United States."

Aware also of the physical needs of his pioneer flock in the absence of a physician, Caldwell secured medical books from Philadelphia and soon became a self-taught, practicing physician. Because his doctor's fees, if there were any, and his two hundred dollar per year ministerial salary fell far short of providing for the Caldwell family of eight sons and a daughter, he turned to the successful cultivation of his land, eventually amounting to 550 acres on which he ran a successful plantation-type business.

In addition to these varied pursuits, Caldwell championed the cause of freedom in the War of the Regulation, the [American Revolution](#) ^[9], and the [War of 1812](#) ^[10]. In the [Regulator movement](#) ^[11], culminating in the nearby [Battle of Alamance](#) ^[12], 16 May 1771, he was present on the battlefield and tried valiantly but in vain to persuade [Royal Governor William Tryon](#) ^[13] to settle the matter without bloodshed. With the coming of the Revolution, he represented [Guilford County](#) ^[4] at the [Halifax provincial congress](#) ^[14] that wrote and adopted the constitution of 1776 and also at the Hillsborough constitutional convention that refused to ratify the U.S. Constitution. Caldwell, along with a majority of the delegates, insisted on a Bill of Rights.

As an ardent patriot during the Revolution, he exhorted his congregations to take up the sword; his biographer stated that every adult male member of Buffalo and Alamance churches joined in the fight when [Lord Cornwallis](#) ^[15] invaded the area in March 1781. News of Caldwell's activities provoked the British general to offer a two-hundred-pound reward for his capture, and Caldwell was forced to hide out in the swamps before and during the [Battle of Guilford Courthouse](#) ^[16], 15 Mar. 1781. After Cornwallis's departure, Caldwell went to the battlefield and aided a British physician in caring for the sick and wounded and burying the dead. When he returned to his home nearby, he found that Cornwallis's army had camped on his property and had destroyed what could not be devoured. The family Bible, private papers, sermons, and library—all were maliciously burned by the British officers who used the Caldwell house for their headquarters. Mrs. Caldwell and her children were forced to retire to a smoke house, where they survived for two days and nights with no food other than a few dried peaches she had happened to have in her pockets. Caruthers reported that when the British army left, "every panel of fence on the premises was consumed or carried away; every living thing was destroyed except one old goose."

After the war, Caldwell returned to his school, his churches, his medical practice, and his farm. In 1794 he was offered the first presidency of [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[17], because "beyond a doubt he was recognized as the leading educator of the state." Declining this offer, he continued to teach at his Log College until old age compelled him to retire, though as late as 1816 he was instructing a number of private students, among whom were [John Motley Morehead](#) ^[18] and [Archibald Debow Murphey](#) ^[19], and he continued his ministry until 1820, when he was ninety-five.

Caldwell performed his last service to his country at the age of eighty-eight. When the United States entered the War of 1812, a meeting was held at the Guilford County Courthouse to round up volunteers, but none rallied to the cause. In order to avoid a draft, Caldwell was invited to preach at the courthouse on the subject of volunteering. So feeble that he had to be helped up the steps to the judge's bench, he nonetheless displayed a patriotic fervor equal to the occasion, taking as his text: "He that hath no sword, let him sell his garment, and buy one." When he finished speaking, there were more volunteers than were needed.

Caldwell died in his hundredth year and was buried at Buffalo Church. Perhaps [Stephen B. Weeks](#) ^[20] best summarized Caldwell's great contributions when he wrote that, in the early days, "none did a nobler or more enduring work toward the greatness of the state than the Rev. David Caldwell, D.D., preacher, teacher and physician, counsellor and guide for his friends and neighbors, servant of the people in many ways, state builder and protagonist of learning in the wilderness of North Carolina."

No portrait of Caldwell was painted from life, but Mrs. Lottie P. Leonard, former art teacher at Claude Kiser Junior High School, painted one from written descriptions. It hangs in the Buffalo Presbyterian Church, Greensboro.

Caldwell's house and Log College, which were located on present Hobbs Road, just off Friendly Road, have long since disappeared, though recent excavations by the [North Carolina Department of Archives and History](#) ^[21] have revealed the exact sites. On 6 Jan. 1975, the [City Council of Greensboro](#) ^[22] voted unanimously to appropriate about ninety thousand dollars to help the David Caldwell Log College Corporation purchase about ten acres of the original site of these two structures (including his dam site and three springs); the city manager was authorized to negotiate for the purchase of an additional eight and a half acres of adjacent property to form a David Caldwell Memorial Park. It is hoped that approximately thirty acres will eventually comprise this historical and ecological project.

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