

Davis, Oroondates ^[1]

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by George Stevenson, 1986

ca. 1750–81

Oroondates Davis, lawyer, legislator, and member of the Board of War ^[2] of North Carolina during the American Revolution ^[3], was born in what is now Halifax County ^[4], the sixth and youngest son of Thomas and Hastwel Davis. He was named after a fictitious Persian soldier of the fifth century B.C. who figures in the popular French romance by La Calprenède, Cassandra ^[5] (Cotterell's translation of which ran through ten English editions between 1652 and 1737). Late in 1743 Thomas Davis moved from Virginia to North Carolina with other members of his family and began acquiring land on Looking Glass Swamp in Halifax County. By the time of his death in 1764 he owned a town lot in Halifax and approximately 9,000 acres in Halifax, Bute ^[6], and Edgecombe ^[7] counties.

Young Davis was put to reading law, possibly in the office of Joseph Montfort ^[8], clerk of the Halifax County court and vice-auditor and custodian of the records of the Granville Proprietary land office. He was licensed to practice as an attorney-at-law in North Carolina by Governor Josiah Martin ^[9], and in April and May 1775 he presented his credentials preparatory to conducting business in the courts of Edgecombe and Bute counties. Upon the death of Montfort on 2 Apr. 1776, Davis briefly succeeded him in the clerkship of the Halifax County court until Benjamin McCulloch was appointed as the regular clerk at the November 1776 term.

Upon the outbreak of the American Revolution, Davis joined other members of the Halifax County squirearchy in supporting the American cause. Two of his neighbors, Willie Jones ^[10] and Benjamin McCulloch, were members of the Halifax County Committee of Safety ^[11], and late in 1774 Davis was chosen clerk of the committee. Consequently, when the records of the Granville Proprietary land office (which had been surrendered earlier by Montfort to an agent of Governor Martin) were seized by the committee, the records were entrusted to Davis for safekeeping.

In 1778 Davis was elected one of the representatives of Halifax County in the General Assembly; in 1779, 1780, and 1781 he served in that body as senator from Halifax County. He faithfully attended sessions of the Assembly and was active in its service, especially as it related to the revenues of the state. His bill to extend the North Carolina–Virginia boundary was passed into law, and he was named one of the commissioners to extend the line early in 1780. While he served in the General Assembly a land office was open in Halifax County for the first time in fifteen years. Taking advantage of the new office, he immediately made entries on approximately 16,000 acres of vacant land. Presumably as custodian of the records of the Granville Proprietary, he knew where many of the vacant lands in the county lay. For reasons no longer clear, only a handful of the entries made by Davis in February 1779 ripened into grants.

At the opening of the autumn session of the 1780 General Assembly, Governor Abner Nash ^[12] complained to the legislature that the executive office was crippled by a lack of councillors of state willing to perform their duties. The governor recommended that the Assembly fill vacancies in the council and appoint a body of military advisers to aid the executive. Adopting his recommendation, the legislature created a Board of War ^[2] with extensive powers to raise, organize, equip, and provision the militia force of the state. This board virtually functioned as a "department of the army." Its two most senior members (Archibald Maclaine ^[13] and Thomas Polk ^[14]) declined to act, leaving execution of the board's duties to Alexander Martin ^[15], John Penn ^[16], and Oroondates Davis. Immediately upon the rising of the Assembly on 13 Sept. 1780, the Board of War sat. After its initial session at Hillsborough, Martin and Davis departed briefly for their homes to attend to private business that had been neglected during the General Assembly's spring and summer sessions. In their absence sole exercise of the board's powers was left in the hands of Penn until Martin assumed his duties as senior member on 9 October. Davis rejoined the board on 15 October.

Much disliked by some leaders of the state, the Board of War has frequently been described as extra-constitutional, interfering, confusing, and a nuisance. A third of a century later William R. Davie ^[17] retrospectively excoriated the board and characterized Oroondates Davis as a fribble ^[18] "who knew nothing but the game of Whist." One admires the neatness with which General Davie skewered a dead enemy while wondering about the justness of it. Davis frankly described himself as "having no pretensions to military knowledge," and his responsibilities on the board appear chiefly to have been those of equipping and provisioning the state's army of militia rather than planning defense strategy, ordering troop movements, and so forth. Nevertheless, his legislative experience with the revenues of the state and his earlier work with the committee to furnish the state with arms and ammunition must have stood him in good stead. Davis's candid assessment that the board would not be able to furnish suitable mounts for Davie's cherished project of a personal cavalry unit apparently earned him the general's lasting wrath.

Davis incurred Governor Nash's anger by importuning him to use the weight of his executive office to remove the state supply of salt (essential for the preservation of pork and beef rations for the army) from the control of the state's commissioners of trade and to place it at the disposal of the Board of War. "Shall the Independence of this State be

endanger'd by the want of a few Thousand Bushells of Salt?" he inquired of Nash at one critical juncture, adding "If your Ideas correspond with mine Your Excellency will give the necessary directions [to release the salt]." Nash, stung by the tenor of the question and the rhetorical rider to it, retaliated by accusing Davis of using "arts or undue methods to enhance the respect due to the Board or occasion a Diminution of that due to our first Magistrate." Within a few weeks the cause for the quarrel was removed; in January 1781 the General Assembly abolished the Board of War and replaced it with a Council Extraordinary ^[19] to which Davis was not appointed.

That the Board of War operated efficiently in carrying out many of its functions will be admitted by the objective observer. Indeed, the American success at the Battle of Kings Mountain ^[20] was owing in part to its effectiveness. In acknowledging the accomplishments of the board, it is necessary to give Oronodes Davis the credit that is due him.

Davis, a member of the Anglican church ^[21], died in Halifax. He was survived by his wife Mary and their two minor daughters, Mary and Elizabeth Ann.

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