

Hart, Thomas ^[1]

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by Durward T. Stokes, 1988

ca. 1730–23 June 1808

Thomas Hart, merchant, public official, and militia officer, the son of Thomas and Susannah Rice Hart, was born in Hanover County, Va., on a plantation settled in 1690 by his English-born grandfather, also named Thomas. John, Benjamin, David, and [Nathaniel](#) ^[2] were his brothers, and Ann his only sister. The family moved to [Orange County](#) ^[3], N.C., in 1755 after their father died. By 1779, Thomas had received a total of 2,282 acres of land in grants and erected his home, Hartford, near Hillsborough. In addition to farming, he built a [gristmill](#) ^[4] on the nearby Eno River and conducted other business enterprises at the location that became known as Hart's Mill. Later he became a partner with [Nathaniel Rochester](#) ^[5] and James Brown in a mercantile establishment in Hillsborough.

After establishing himself financially, Hart married Susannah Gray, the daughter of the wealthy and politically prominent Colonel John Gray. In 1775, the colonel died and left his entire estate to his son-in-law, including the large plantation Grayfields. With capital resources thus increased, Hart shrewdly expanded his business and by his industrious management accumulated a considerable fortune according to the Orange County tax books for 1779. In addition to his financial prosperity, Hart was successful politically. Shortly after settling in North Carolina, he became an intimate of James Watson, [James Thackston](#) ^[6], [Thomas Burke](#) ^[7], [James Hogg](#) ^[8], [William Johnston](#) ^[9], and [Richard Henderson](#) ^[10], and an acquaintance of Governor [William Tryon](#) ^[11] and [Edmund Fanning](#) ^[12]. This led to his appointment as a vestryman of St. Matthew's Parish as well as county sheriff for a two-year term and another beginning in 1768. In the latter year he was also made a captain in the Orange County militia and commissary for the troops of Orange and Granville counties.

Throughout his tenure of office, the sheriff was in constant controversy with the increasingly active [Regulators](#) ^[13]. In 1765, the Assembly passed a bill introduced by Edmund Fanning to award Hart £1,000 for his losses as sheriff, and the previous legislature had included Hart in a group exempt from the payment of taxes. These acts infuriated the Regulators, who claimed the sheriff had no losses, but was being rewarded at public expense for using his influence in the election of Fanning to office. Hart also displeased the government by his failure to collect the unpopular [poll tax](#) ^[14], either because he disapproved of the law or did not understand it. In 1765, the Assembly ordered him to make the collection. Whether or not he did, he settled his financial account in the colony satisfactorily, which won for him a tribute from Orange County residents because he was the only sheriff ever to do so.

When Governor Tryon decided in 1768 to have [Herman Husband](#) ^[15] arraigned in court for his Regulator activities, Sheriff Hart served the warrant and took the accused into custody. In the same year, and again in 1771, Hart was ordered to raise five hundred troops for the defense of the colony. He was unable to enlist the requested manpower but on both occasions accumulated sufficient provisions to sustain the troops Tryon assembled at Hillsborough. The actions of the royal government increasingly incited the wrath of the Regulators, and the sheriff was one of a group of officials they severely whipped in 1770. In view of such treatment, Hart undoubtedly received considerable satisfaction in serving as quartermaster for Tryon when the governor dispersed the Regulators at the [Battle of Alamance](#) ^[16].

During the relative calm that ensued after the War of the Regulation, Hart was able to concentrate on business enterprises. The role of an entrepreneur appealed to him, and in 1774 he became one of the partners in Richard Henderson's Louisa Company to buy and develop lands in what became Tennessee and Kentucky. Hart journeyed to the Watauga section of Tennessee as one of the company's representatives at a meeting arranged by [Daniel Boone](#) ^[17] with the Cherokee Indians. [John Sevier](#) ^[18] and [Isaac Shelby](#) ^[19], who attended as spectators, saw the Indians accept several loads of "trading goods" in return for their titular rights to a huge area of western land. After this transaction, the company was reorganized as the [Transylvania Company](#) ^[20] with Richard Henderson, Thomas Hart, Nathaniel Hart, William Johnston, James Hogg, John Luttrell, [John Williams](#) ^[21], David Hart, and Leonard Henly Bullock as shareholders. Trading with the Indians for western lands strictly violated the [Royal Proclamation of 1763](#) ^[22], but, as many Americans were engaging in land speculation despite the king's fiat, the Transylvanians ignored it also. The potential profit in the venture was enormous, and the partners lost no time in enlisting settlers to buy or rent land in the territory. Thomas Hart visited the Watauga again in 1775 and his brother, Nathaniel, became a resident agent for the company in the west until he was killed by Indians in 1782.

The outcome of the [American Revolution](#) ^[23] relieved the Transylvania Company of any interference in its affairs from the British government but presented a new dilemma because the states of North Carolina and Virginia claimed Tennessee and Kentucky, respectively, as part of their territory. The partners determined to establish their claim to the western land if possible and years of litigation followed. The final decision rendered that the company's purchase was illegal but a tract was awarded the partners to recompense them for the expenses incurred in the transaction. Hart traded part of his share for land in Kentucky and eventually settled on it.

After the War of the Regulation, Hart continued to fill an important role in political affairs, serving as a juror; member of a commission to build a new jail in Hillsborough; member of the colonial Assembly from Orange County in 1773; and then representative in the First, Second, and Third Provincial congresses ^[24]. When the Revolution began, he was appointed commissary for the Sixth North Carolina Regiment with the rank of colonel. In addition, he was elected a senator in the North Carolina General Assembly for the 1777 session where he became involved in the work of so many committees that he resigned his military commission in order to attend to them.

Although Hart, with many others, could not condone the violent tactics of the Regulators, he felt no compunction in becoming an ardent patriot in the American Revolution when independence was formally declared. In doing so, he incurred the hatred of the loyal Tories who unleashed their persecutions when Lord Cornwallis approached Hillsborough with the British Army. Concerned for the safety of his wife and several daughters, Hart removed to Hagerstown, Md., accompanied by Nathaniel Rochester, one of his former business partners. Shortly after his departure the Battle of Hart's Mill was fought on his property, which the British occupied.

Hart and Rochester built a mill and a nail and rope factory, both of which prospered. The colonel gradually disposed of his North Carolina property and never returned to the state. He sold his homeplace, Hartford, to Jesse Benton, husband of his niece, Nancy, and father of Thomas Hart Benton ^[25]. As the purchaser died before paying for the place, Hart became the mortgagee of the property through a friendly lawsuit and allowed the widow and her family to continue to live there. The mortgage was never fully redeemed, which apparently caused no ill will as Hart left the Bentons an additional tract of land when he died.

In 1794, Hart moved to Lexington, Ky., where he resided for the remainder of his life. He built up his rope and hemp business into a highly profitable commercial enterprise and engaged in various forms of trade and investment. Due to his affluence, pleasing personality, and shrewd mind, Hart soon became one of the most prominent men in Kentucky. His daughter, Ann (Nancy), married James Brown who had engaged in business with the colonel and Rochester back in Hillsborough, and who later became the U.S. minister to France. Another daughter, Lucretia, born after the Harts left North Carolina, married Henry Clay. A niece married Isaac Shelby, and the other members of the family made marital connections in influential circles.

In Maryland, Hart was a communicant of All Saints' Parish (later renamed St. John's), of the Protestant Episcopal church. In Kentucky, he joined an Episcopal society which eventually became Christ Church in Lexington. He was buried in the Old Episcopal Graveyard in that city. No portrait of Hart has been found.

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Additional Resources:

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