

Gay, James ^[1]

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by Richard Walser, 1986

20 Mar 1744–4 Feb. 1819

James Gay, farmer, soldier, and poet, was born in Ulster, Ireland, of Devon forebears. In lieu of a formal education, he avidly read history and the Scottish poems of Allan Ramsay. At age sixteen he was apprenticed to a carpenter at Bangor; three years later he plied his trade in Scotland where his family had moved. In 1765, Gay immigrated to Pennsylvania. He married Margaret Mitchell in 1768, and became the father of a son. In 1771, seeking land, he settled in the Oak Forest community on Fourth Creek in [Rowan](#) ^[2] (later Iredell) County, N.C. During the American Revolution he served in the patriot forces. A highly moral man, he donated the site for a church (subsequently called Gay's Chapel) in 1788. At the turn of the century, he owned more than 1,500 acres in [Iredell County](#) ^[3].

Gay's first poem, written in 1805 at the age of sixty-one, was delivered at a Fourth of July celebration in Statesville. Annually thereafter, he prepared patriotic verses for the occasion. His *Collection* ^[4] (1810), supported by 71 subscribers pledged to purchase 235 copies, contained his Fourth of July toasts, a number of poems expressing his Federalist bias, and a nine-page "poetic sketch of his life," some of it in Scottish dialect. Gay's *Collection* is the first substantial book of poetry written by a resident North Carolinian. He had two sons and two daughters, and to each of his sons he gave a farm and half his books and pamphlets. His wife died in 1796.

References:

James Gay, *A Collection of Various Pieces of Poetry, Chiefly Patriotic, Published at the Earnest Request of a Number of Good Citizens for the Improvement of Patriotic Minds* (1810).

William H. Gay, *A Story of the Gay Family* (1920).

Statesville Record & Landmark, 7 Apr. 1962.

Subjects:

[American Revolution \(1763-1789\)](#) ^[5]

[Biographies](#) ^[6]

[Farmers](#) ^[7]

[Poets](#) ^[8]

[War](#) ^[9]

Authors:

[Walser, Richard](#) ^[10]

Origin - location:

[Iredell County](#) ^[11]

[Statesville](#) ^[12]

[Rowan County](#) ^[13]

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[Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press.](#) ^[14]

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[1] <https://ncpedia.org/biography/gay-james> [2] <https://ncpedia.org/geography/rowan> [3] <https://ncpedia.org/geography/iredell> [4] <https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/15452523> [5] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/us-revolution> [6] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/biography-term> [7] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/farmers> [8] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/poets> [9] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/war> [10] <https://ncpedia.org/category/authors/walser-richard> [11] <https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmont/i> [12] <https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location> [13] <https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmon-13> [14] <https://ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/dictionary-no>