

Gorham, James ^[1]

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by Claiborne T. Smith, Jr., 1986

1745–24 Dec. 1804

James Gorham, legislator and officer in the American Revolution ^[2], was born in Barnstable, Mass., the son of Captain Isaac Gorham and his wife, Mary Cobb. The Gorham family was prominent among the early settlers of Cape Cod. As the youngest son, James inherited the family homestead by the will of his father in 1751. At an undetermined date he moved to North Carolina and settled in Pitt County ^[3]. Active early in the patriot cause, he was chairman of the Committee of Safety ^[4] for Pitt County in 1775. He represented the county at the Provincial Congress that met at New Bern in April 1775 and, at this session, he was appointed major of militia. Gorham again represented Pitt County at the provincial congresses ^[5] in Hillsborough in August 1775 and in Halifax on 12 Nov. 1776. According to the proceedings of the safety committee of Pitt County, meeting at Martinborough (Greenville) on 23 Mar. 1779, a petition was received from Major Gorham on behalf of the county "to discharge Mr. Carson from teaching dancing." This may be a reflection of the major's Puritan youth in New England. In 1779, he was elected to the House of Commons where he was placed on the Committee for Public Accounts. Gorham was again in the General Assembly for the sessions during 1781–82.

When the scene of conflict in the American Revolution shifted from North to South, Gorham soon saw active combat and began to appear in the records as a colonel. In the spring of 1781, Cornwallis marched north from Wilmington to Virginia with Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton as an advanced guard. On 6 May 1781 General Jethro Sumner ^[6] informed General Nathanael Greene, commanding the southern campaign, that a party of Tarleton's horse and fifty Tories had "put to route" 400 militia under Colonel Gorham at Peacock's Bridge on Contentnea. On 27 August of the same year, Richard Caswell ^[7] wrote Governor Thomas Burke ^[8] that the enemy had evacuated New Bern and gone up the Neuse to Bryans Mills and almost surprised the post there under command of Colonel Gorham. The colonel advanced on the enemy, but the party of horse ordered to protect his right flank had not done so—"which was attributed to their finding some liquor and most of them got intoxicated." Gorham was forced to withdraw and conducted an orderly retreat of two miles across the Neuse.

There are few facts regarding Gorham's life with the return of peace. According to his obituary in the *Raleigh Register* of 21 Jan. 1805, he "was attacked at 2 o'clock in the morning by a quimcey [quinsy] and died within four hours. He was an old Revolutionary officer, a firm Republican, a kind parent and husband." Before leaving Massachusetts, Gorham married a widow, Mrs. Mary Baker. There is no record of children by her. In 1792, he married Mrs. Sarah Davis McClure, the daughter of James Davis ^[9], the New Bern printer. They were the parents of four children: John Churchill (b. 1793); George Franklin (b. 10 July 1794); Penelope (b. 1800), the wife of R. G. Green; and Edwin (b. 1802). Franklin Gorham represented Pitt County in the House of Commons in 1811, and John C. Gorham served in the same capacity in 1824, 1825, and 1838.

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