

Martin, Joseph ^[1]

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by Richard A. Shrader, 1991

1740–18 Dec. 1808

Joseph Martin, soldier, pioneer, and Indian agent, was born near Charlottesville in Albemarle County, Va., the son of Joseph, a farmer, and Susannah Childs Martin. Instead of pursuing an education as his father wished, young Martin chose to hunt and roam the woods near his hillside home. In such an environment, he developed a strong, athletic frame, standing over six feet and weighing about two hundred pounds.

In 1756 Martin's father insisted that he serve an apprenticeship in carpentry, but the youth became dissatisfied with this trade and ran away to join the British army at Fort Pitt. How long he remained at the fort and what part he played in the French and Indian War ^[2] is not known. When the elder Martin died in 1760, Joseph was present to receive a small inheritance, using it to purchase a farm in Orange County, Va.

Martin became restless with farm life and in 1763 decided to make a living as a "long hunter," staying for long periods of time in the remote areas of western North Carolina (present-day eastern Tennessee). His hunting career ended in 1768, when he accepted an offer by Dr. Thomas Walker of Virginia to establish a supply station in Powell's Valley about twenty miles east of the Cumberland Gap. However, in the late summer of 1769, before the first harvest could be gathered, Indians destroyed the small settlement and its inhabitants returned to Virginia. Martin made other attempts to settle Powell's Valley—in the summer of 1775, the spring of 1783, and the fall of 1783. His final effort proved successful. By 1788, when he sold his interest in the valley settlement, it was a thriving supply station; subsequently, it became the nucleus from which several permanent towns developed.

When Lord Dunmore's War erupted in 1774, Martin enlisted as a captain in the militia of Pittsylvania County (his new residence), Va., but commanded a separate unit of scouts for the duration of the conflict. The following year, after British-inspired Indians attacked American settlements along the Appalachian frontier, he again accepted a captain's commission in the Pittsylvania County militia, which in June 1776 marched into western North Carolina for a successful six-month campaign against the Cherokee Indians ^[3]. He remained in this area until the Treaty of Long Island was concluded in July 1777.

The fall of 1777 marked a turning point in Martin's career as he began to serve the Patriot cause in another capacity. In November Governor Patrick Henry of Virginia appointed him the state's agent to the Cherokee; Martin established his headquarters at Long Island on the Holston River. During the fall of 1780, when British forces under Captain Patrick Ferguson began to move towards North Carolina, Martin kept a large segment of the Cherokee peaceful, allowing the frontiersmen of western North Carolina to participate in the Patriot victory at Kings Mountain.

In the spring of 1783 Martin won a seat in the North Carolina Assembly ^[4] from Sullivan County ^[5], a newly formed county that included Long Island. While attending the May session of the Assembly, he was commissioned North Carolina's agent to the Cherokee and Chickamauga Indians. Before the end of the year he represented both North Carolina and Virginia in treaties with the Chickamauga and Chickasaw Indians. By 1785 Martin had gained the respect of Congress, which appointed him one of four commissioners to hold the Treaty of Hopewell with the Cherokee. The November treaty served to lessen hostilities between the Indians and frontiersmen for one year.

In 1787 Martin was again elected to represent Sullivan County in the Assembly. Because of his loyalty to the state and his leadership experience, the legislature appointed him brigadier general of the North Carolina militia in the Western or Washington District of the state. In the summer of 1788, after the Chickamauga attacked several frontier settlements in western North Carolina, Martin led an army of eight hundred frontiersmen against the Chickamauga stronghold near present-day Chattanooga, Tenn. Due to strategic deployment of the Chickamauga along mountain perches and timely reinforcements, the Indians quickly defeated Martin's army. Absolved of any blame for the military disaster, Martin was granted full pay for his service by the 1789 Assembly.

Also in 1789 the Assembly ceded its western counties to the United States and repealed its law establishing an agent to the Indians. After being relieved of his appointment, Martin returned to Henry (formerly Pittsylvania) County, Va., and, at age forty-nine, became a private citizen for the first time since 1774.

Martin was married twice: in 1762 to Sarah Lucas, who died in 1782, and in 1784 to Susannah Graves; he had seven children by his first wife and eleven by his second. During the time he served as Indian agent, he also maintained an Indian "wife" named Betsy Ward, the daughter of the highly regarded Cherokee council-woman, Nancy Ward. Neither of his legal wives seem to have objected to their husband's Indian "marriage," which actually increased his influence with the Cherokee and on a number of occasions saved his life.

Though leaving an eventful frontier life, Martin remained active until his death. He served in the Virginia legislature from 1791 to 1799, was commissioned brigadier general of the Twelfth Brigade of Virginia militia during the Whiskey Rebellion of 1793–94, and was appointed a commissioner to survey the Kentucky-Virginia boundary in 1795 and the Tennessee-Virginia boundary in 1802. He died at age sixty-eight and was buried near Martinsville, Va., named in his honor in 1791. A portrait of Martin hangs in the local high school.

In serving his contemporaries through public office, Martin never hesitated to sacrifice his popularity for the causes he felt to be just. As with individuals who seek moderation in the midst of conflict, he was not always popular. But as history reveals, no nation can survive long without such people.

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