

Mearns, William Skipwith ^[1]

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by Claiborne T. Smith, Jr., 1991

6 July 1745–1805

William Skipwith Mearns, eccentric, was the son of William Mearns, clerk of court for Chowan County ^[2] (1748–50) and Currituck County ^[3] (1757–58), and his wife Dorothy Skipwith, the daughter of Sir William Skipwith of Middlesex County, Va. She is mentioned as a sister in the will of Sir William Skipwith of Greencroft, Prince George County, Va., in 1764. While clerk of court for Chowan, the elder Mearns also served as clerk of the vestry for St. Paul's Parish. Taking advantage of this position in 1748, he recorded in the vestry minutes the birth of his only son, William, three years earlier. He stated that his son had been born at Millikins on the Roanoke River ^[4] in the county of Edgecombe. This location, downriver from the town of Halifax, fell in the county of the same name when it was created in 1759. The will of William Mearns of Currituck ^[3], dated 15 Apr. 1769, was probated in Chowan County ^[2]. He devised his estate to his wife Dorothy and son William Skipwith and appointed Neill Snodgrass, a merchant of Norfolk, as executor.

William S. Mearns eventually moved to the Hilliardston section of present-day Nash County ^[5] and settled on Swift Creek. He was preceded to that section by his first cousin, Skipwith Richmond, who, according to the court minutes of Edgecombe ^[6], was operating a store there in 1761 on the old Indian trading route known as "the green path." In Richmond's will, probated in Edgecombe County ^[6] in 1774, mention is made of his aunt Dorothy Mearns and his cousin William S. Mearns, who received the bulk of his estate. After the American Revolution, Mearns represented Nash County in the constitutional conventions of 1788 and 1789 ^[7]. He voted Anti-Federalist ^[8] at the former and Federalist ^[9] at the latter. He is said to have been an attorney.

On 13 July 1793 Hardy Griffin, for five silver dollars, sold to Arthur Arrington, Edmund Drake, Hardy Griffin, William Drake, William S. Mearns, Joseph Arrington, James Hilliard, John Arrington, James Battle, and John Green, commissioners of Nash County, one and three-fourths acres on which to build a meetinghouse called Mearns Chapel, where preachers and people of every denomination could conduct the religious rites and ceremonies of their respective churches.

Mearns was the first registrar of deeds for Nash County after its creation in 1779. But in at least one instance he was remiss in his duties: the court minutes for 1809 refer to an order that the attorney for the state be requested to inquire whether any law would authorize a suit against the representatives of William S. Mearns for his not having registered the deeds.

After Mearns's death, his property went to members of the Skipwith family in Virginia. Writing to another family member on 12 May 1806 about the inheritance, George B. Skipwith, of Hickory Hill, Cumberland County, Va., commented on the deceased: "I will give you a slight introduction to this eccentric genius. His talents were universal. He was the amanuensis of the neighborhood, drew up all the agreements, deeds, wills and etc. for those who were too ignorant to do it for themselves. He was a legislator, having served some sessions in the assembly of his state ^[10]. He was something of a practical botanist and physician, as he would procure plants from the woods and administer them to those who needed his aid and performed some cures which made him be deemed a second Aesculapius, and lastly, being of a religious cast, he would sometimes supply the want of a parson in the parish by holding forth most learnedly on subjects of religion. He died a bachelor at the age of sixty or seventy years and so poor did he live that I am told his little dwelling had more the appearance of the cave of a hermit than the house of a person who had it in his power to live comfortably."

References:

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Wills, Deeds, and Court Minutes of Chowan, Edgecombe, and Nash Counties (North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh).

Additional Resources:

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<https://archive.org/details/northcarolinahis02hath> ^[12] (accessed August 29, 2014).

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