

## Owen, Thomas <sup>[1]</sup>

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## Owen, Thomas

by William S. Powell, 1991

**1735–2 Nov. 1806**

Thomas Owen, Revolutionary officer, was born of Welsh ancestry in Chester County, Pa., but moved to North Carolina with his father when he was about five. The family may have lived first in [Granville County](#) <sup>[2]</sup> but soon was established in [Bladen County](#) <sup>[3]</sup>. Nothing is known of Owen's early training and education, but over time he acquired three thousand acres of land and in 1790 owned thirty-seven slaves. In August 1775 he was elected a justice of the Bladen County [Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions](#) <sup>[4]</sup>, and on 9 Sept. 1775 he was made major of the local militia company.

During the [American Revolution](#) <sup>[5]</sup> he was promoted to colonel of state troops, and at the [Battle of Camden](#) <sup>[6]</sup> on 16 Aug. 1780 he earned a reputation for bravery. A year later he saw action at the [Battle of Elizabethtown](#) <sup>[7]</sup>, where the Tories were routed and their commander, [John Slingsby](#) <sup>[8]</sup>, was killed. A contemporary who knew him well said: "Tom Owen was a warm-hearted friend, generous to a foe, and as brave a soldier as ever wore a sword."

Owen represented Bladen County in the Third [Provincial Congress](#) <sup>[9]</sup> in 1775 and in the Fifth Provincial Congress in December 1776, when the state constitution was adopted. He early demonstrated his Revolutionary sentiments as a member of the county [safety committee](#) <sup>[10]</sup>. Owen also served in the House of Commons in 1777 and in the state senate in 1778–79, 1779–80, 1784–85, 1787, and 1790. Intermittently during the war, he was a member of a legislative committee to consider ways of bringing the Tories of the Cape Fear section "to justice" and of a committee concerned with obtaining material from the [Wilcox Iron Works](#) <sup>[11]</sup> on Deep River in [Chatham County](#) <sup>[12]</sup>. On one occasion he was reimbursed for expenses in connection with taking four Continental army deserters to headquarters. At the [Hillsborough convention of 1788](#) <sup>[13]</sup>, when North Carolina declined to approve the new U.S. Constitution, he was a delegate from Bladen County. Reelected to the [Fayetteville convention of 1789](#) <sup>[14]</sup>, he voted with the majority to adopt the Constitution.

Owen's wife was Eleanor Porterfield, the daughter of James Porterfield and the sister of Captain Dennis Porterfield, who was killed at the Battle of Eutaw Springs, S.C., in September 1781. Thomas and Eleanor Owen were the parents of [John](#) <sup>[15]</sup>, governor of North Carolina; [James](#) <sup>[16]</sup>, a general and congressman; and Mary, who married Elisha Stedman.

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