

## **Rabun, William** <sup>[1]</sup>

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by Douglas J. McMillan, 1994; Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, January 2023

**8 Apr. 1771–24 Oct. 1819**

William Rabun, planter, Baptist <sup>[2]</sup> lay leader, legislator, state senator, and governor of Georgia, was born in Halifax County <sup>[3]</sup> of Scottish-English ancestry, the son of Matthew and Sarah Warren Rabun. The parents, William, and four sisters moved to Wilkes County, Ga., in 1785, when William was fourteen. In 1786 the Rabun family moved to an area later known as Horeb Baptist Church, four miles south of Powellton, in Greene (later Hancock) County, Ga. William probably was educated at local academies in both North Carolina and Georgia, but it is also likely that he received most of his formal education at home.

William Rabun, like his father, became a planter and a prominent Baptist layman at age seventeen and remained so throughout his life. William Northen reports that "he was a man of fine physique, tall and large, with no surplus flesh. He had brown hair and blue eyes, with a countenance full of kindness." Hancock was the county of his continuing residence and eventual death and burial. He married Mary Battle on 21 Nov. 1793, and their children included a son, John William, and six daughters.

From 1802 to 1810 Rabun was a justice of the Inferior Court for Hancock County, and in 1805 and 1806 he won a seat in the Georgia House of Representatives. Beginning in 1810, he served six one-year terms in the Georgia Senate, of which he was president from 1812 to 1816. In 1812, his plantation consisted of five hundred acres and he enslaved fifteen people. On 4 Mar. 1817, at age forty-five, he became, as president of the senate, ex officio governor of Georgia when Governor David B. Mitchell resigned to accept the post of U.S. agent to the Creek Indians offered to him by President James Madison <sup>[4]</sup>. In November 1817 Rabun was elected governor by the General Assembly with a vote of 62 to 57, defeating John Clark by 5 votes. He never lost an election.

Governor Rabun, who died a few days before his term was to expire, served for two years in a period of considerable prosperity for Georgia: funds were appropriated for schools, roads, canals, and other waterways; the penal code was revised; the state penitentiary was completed; and a steamboat company was chartered. Also during his governorship there was a notable exchange of correspondence between Rabun and General Andrew Jackson <sup>[5]</sup> concerning an attack on Cheha, an Indian village. And according to James Z. Rabun in Coleman and Gurr's *Dictionary of Georgia Biography*, "The continued smuggling of slaves from Africa into inlets on the Georgia coast made Rabun indignant. He denounced it and was pleased when the American Colonization Society in 1818 agreed to return a shipload of captives to Africa."

After a brief illness identified only as "a malignant autumn fever," Rabun died at home and was buried privately on his estate four miles south of Powellton in Hancock County. At the request of the state legislature, he was publicly eulogized by the Reverend Jesse Mercer <sup>[6]</sup> (Rabun's friend and Georgia's leading Baptist minister at the time) at the Baptist church in Milledgeville, then the state capital, on 24 Nov. 1819. Rabun County, Ga., was formed and named in 1819 in honor of Governor William Rabun.

#### **References:**

John Spencer Bassett, ed., *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, vol. 2 (1926–35).

Kenneth Coleman and Charles Stephen Gurr, eds., *Dictionary of Georgia Biography*, vol. 2 (1983).

*History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia: With Biographical Compendium and Portrait Gallery of Baptist Ministers and Other Georgia Baptists* (1881). <sup>[7]</sup>

William J. Northen, ed., *Men of Mark in Georgia*, vol. 2 (1910, reprint, 1974). <sup>[8]</sup>

William Rabun Papers (Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta).

Robert Sobel and John Raimo, eds., *Biographical Directory of the Governors of the United States* vol. 1 (1978).

#### **Additional Resources:**

"William Rabun (1771-1819)." *Governors of Georgia, Government & Politics*, New Georgia Encyclopedia. <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/government-politics/william-rabun-1771-1819> <sup>[9]</sup> (accessed May 19, 2014).

**Subjects:**

Biographies <sup>[10]</sup>

Planters <sup>[11]</sup>

Public officials <sup>[12]</sup>

**Authors:**

McMillan, Douglas J. <sup>[13]</sup>

**Origin - location:**

Halifax County <sup>[14]</sup>

**From:**

Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press.<sup>[15]</sup>

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