

Tatum, Howell ^[1]

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by Curtis Carroll Davis, 1996

1753–9 Sept. 1822

Howell Tatum, officer in the Revolution and [War of 1812](#) ^[2], merchant, engineer, and lawyer, attorney general, and superior court judge in Tennessee, was the son of Joshua and Amey Tatum of [Halifax County](#) ^[3]. There was a younger son James, who rose to a lieutenancy in the North Carolina Continental Line.

Howell Tatum's combat career was entirely with the First Regiment, North Carolina Continental Line, elements of which saw service in both the Northern and Southern Departments under Colonel [Thomas Clark](#) ^[4]e. His ratings were as follows: ensign, 1 Sept. 1775; second lieutenant and lieutenant, 4 Jan. and 28 Mar. 1776; and second captain, 3 Apr. 1777. Captured at Charles Town with other North Carolina officers and men on 12 May 1780, Tatum was exchanged on parole on 14 June 1781. He accepted command of a troop of horse in the First Regiment about January 1782 but on 20 May resigned from the army. Ironically he had attempted to do so on 3 Apr. 1780—five weeks prior to his capture: in a letter to Brigadier General [Jethro Sumner](#) ^[5] he pointed out that his originally adequate patrimony at the war's beginning had become so dissipated through lack of pay that he was reduced "to little better than Poverty." Nevertheless, Tatum emerged from the conflict with a major's brevet, and in due course Military Land Warrant number 340 allotted him 3,565 acres for seventy-eight months' service. A charter member of the North Carolina [Society of the Cincinnati](#) ^[6], founded at Hillsborough in October 1783, Tatum early in 1787 succeeded the Reverend [Adam Boyd](#) ^[7] as the society's secretary, a post that he probably retained until he left the state.

During this period Tatum may have taken up surveying, and he must have studied law, for on 17 Dec. 1787 his name was among several put forward by the House of Commons for the position of judge in Davidson County [Tenn.]. He was not appointed and at about this time migrated to the new Territory South of the Ohio (Tennessee). On 28 May and 5 June 1790 Congressman [Hugh Williamson](#) ^[8] and [Timothy Bloodworth](#) ^[9] of North Carolina endorsed Tatum's name to President Washington as a proper man for secretary of the territory, and on the latter date a onetime superior officer in the First North Carolina Regiment, Congressman John B. Ashe, recommended him warmly for a territorial judgeship, with the suggestion that Washington might himself recollect this ex-Continental. Nothing resulted from these overtures. But at Nashville on 5 Dec. 1790, Tatum's former Revolutionary compatriot, Governor [William Blount](#) ^[10], made him one of the initial appointees licensed to practice law in the new territory. On 27 Oct. 1792 the governor also named Tatum lieutenant colonel of Davidson County (Tenn.).

From at least 1793 to perhaps the outbreak of the War of 1812 Tatum engaged in general merchandising at Nashville, with transactions extending as far afield as eastern North Carolina. Some of his more than 150 accounts included those of such regionally prominent personalities as Andrew Jackson, John McNairy, and [James Robertson](#) ^[11]. From January 1802 he operated in partnership with George M. Deaderick.

At the first [General Assembly](#) ^[12] of the territory, staged at Knoxville in August 1794, a treasury department was established, and Tatum was made treasurer for the Mero (western) District of Middle Tennessee, a post he filled until sometime in 1796. In that year the legislature appointed him attorney general for Mero District, to succeed Andrew Jackson, a position that Tatum held until 12 May 1797. On that date he was named to a judgeship in the superior court of law and equity at Nashville, succeeding John McNairy—a post for which Jackson had recommended him to President Washington the preceding 8 February in these words: "Mr. Tatum is an old officer who has faced all the stormy showers of war, and faithfully served and fought for his Country, his Abilities equal to any other Charactor [*sic*] in the state Except [John] Overton and I may add [John] Rea, he is a man of great firmness and much Esteemed by all who know him." Tatum occupied this bench until his resignation on 20 Sept. 1798 (to be succeeded by Jackson).

In November 1803 Tatum at Jackson's request was witness to an altercation between the judge and William Maclin, the Tennessee secretary of state. The encounter, which degenerated into a caning and brick heaving, constituted one of the episodes resurrected in the anti-Jackson campaign leaflet by Dr. James L. Armstrong, *Reminiscences: or, An Extract from the Catalogue of General Jackson's Juvenile Indiscretions* . . . ^[13] (ca. 1827). From about 1807 Tatum held from the legislature an appointment as commissioner of land claims in disputes arising between North Carolina and Tennessee.

In December 1812 Jackson as major general of Tennessee militia appointed Tatum his chief engineer for the march towards Natchez. He does not seem to have been with Jackson during the Creek campaign but was with him at Camp Jackson in the Creek Nation during the summer of 1814, when the commander was fashioning the treaty with those Indians. Upon Jackson's appointment as major general, U.S. Army, he picked Tatum as his topographical engineer for the New Orleans campaign, subordinate to the chief engineer Major Arsène L. Latour. Tatum's own journal, embodied in his report to the secretary of war pro tem, James Monroe, covered the period from 6 July 1814 to 20 Jan. 1815. Tatum called the artillery bombardment of 1 Jan. 1815 before New Orleans the worst he had experienced, surpassing that of the British forces against Charles Town in 1780.

On 21 Jan. 1815 Jackson wrote the secretary of war that Tatum, nearing age sixty-two, had "exhibited all the ardor of youth in the hour of peril." Tatum dated his field report at New Orleans, 20 Feb. 1815, and on 15 June resigned from military service. In a dispute over certain events of the New Orleans campaign Jackson in 1817 referred his interrogators to Tatum's journal as the work of a man "whose impartiality is proverbial."

Returning to the Nashville area, Tatum settled on his lands in [Rutherford County](#) ^[14]. At this juncture he was appointed military storekeeper for the national government, in Nashville, and held the post for a year or so. His brother-in-law Stephen Cantrell later declared: "I heard him refuse to apply for a pension when requested by his friends, on the ground that he was then Military Storekeeper and receiving pay from the Government for his services in that Capacity and that he did not want to receive pay from the Government in two Capacities at the same time."

On 24 Dec. 1795 Tatum married Rosannah Wendel (ca. 1777–post–1854) in Davidson County, Tenn., and took up residence in Nashville. The couple had several children, of whom the name only of Edwin M. Tatum is known. On 28 Sept. 1812 the parents were divorced by act of the General Assembly. In 1828 Mrs. Tatum married Anderson Claxton and with her son moved to Fort Smith, Ark. Tatum died in Nashville of rheumatism and palsy. His estate, administered by Stephen Cantrell, was appraised at \$11,839.28. He was interred with military honors by the Nashville Guards, but the gravestone in City Cemetery is marked simply "H. T." There is no known likeness of Tatum, nor are his religious and political affiliations known.

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