

Williams, Robert ^[1]

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Williams, Robert

by Claiborne T. Smith, Jr., 1996

25 Aug. 1758–12 Oct. 1840

Robert Williams, physician, legislator, and Revolutionary patriot, was born near Falkland in [Pitt County](#) ^[2], the son of Richard and Mary Williams. He was the grandson of one Robert Williams who reportedly came from Wales, settling first in Pennsylvania and finally in 1727 on the banks of Tar River at the mouth of Tyson's Creek; Robert, the pioneer, is said to have married four times and to have lived to the venerable age of 105.

The early life of Dr. Robert Williams is obscure. He allegedly obtained his medical education in Richmond and Philadelphia, but his name does not appear in the extant records of the medical school of the University of Pennsylvania. With the advent of the [Revolution](#) ^[3], he early became active in the Patriot cause. In 1832, at the age of seventy-four, Williams made an affidavit before the county court of Pitt concerning his wartime service in order to benefit from a pension that had that year been granted by Congress to veterans of the Revolution.

At age seventeen, young Williams served under Colonel Robert Salter, seemingly as an ordinary soldier, and was present at the [Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge](#) ^[4] early in 1776. When the troops returned home to Pitt County, he was appointed quartermaster. For a short time Williams saw duty in the Continental line of the state as surgeon's mate under a Dr. Usher. It is possible that this experience stimulated his choice of lifework and that he received his medical training shortly afterwards, for in 1779 Williams was appointed surgeon to a regiment raised by the state under the command of Colonel John Herriage.

During his service of nine months he saw duty at various localities in North Carolina. When the South became the major theater of war, he enlisted in a regiment under Colonel [James Gorham](#) ^[5] organized to aid General Horatio Gates. They joined the remnants of Gates's defeated army at Ramsey's Mill on Deep River, then under the command of General [Jethro Sumner](#) ^[6]. Sumner appointed Williams a surgeon in his army. He sensed that the doctor had ability and offered to make him the chief surgeon, but Williams declined on the basis of his youth. After a skirmish with the enemy at [Charlotte](#) ^[7], Sumner's troops retreated to the eastern side of the [Yadkin](#) ^[8], where Williams kept a hospital for some months. When many years later Williams gave this account of his service, an old comrade in arms, one Willis Willson, who had served in the cavalry of Captain [Benjamin Caswell](#) ^[9] in the 1779 campaign and who had also been a lifelong resident of Pitt, appeared in court and testified as to the veracity of the doctor's statement. This statement can be partially substantiated by state records. On 13 Oct. 1779 Colonel Herriage presented a certificate to the [Council of State](#) ^[10], meeting at [Halifax](#) ^[11], showing that Dr. Robert Williams, Jr., had been appointed surgeon to the state regiment on 15 Mar. 1779, and it was directed that he be paid from that date. On 6 April Williams wrote Governor Caswell from Camp Liberty Town asking for medicines for his men.

With the return of peace, Williams settled at Windsor in [Bertie County](#) ^[12] where he practiced for a few years. He then returned to his native county and remained there for the rest of his life. In addition to his busy medical practice he was active in politics and represented Pitt in the [House of Commons](#) ^[13] in 1786 and 1787. A member of the [convention held at Hillsborough](#) ^[14] to consider the federal Constitution in 1788, he was again elected to the House of Commons in 1790 and 1791. Williams was elected senator from Pitt in 1793 and served intermittently in that capacity through 1814. As aide-de-camp to Major General [Stephen W. Carney](#) ^[15], he compiled *A Roster of the Names of the General Officers, and Their Command Respectively, in the North Carolina Militia* (1802). As his last public service, Williams was a member of the [convention held at Raleigh](#) ^[16] on 4 June 1835 to consider changes in the state constitution.

He was buried in the family cemetery near Falkland. A copy of his will had been sent to Washington, D.C., to enable his heirs to obtain his pension prior to the destruction of the Pitt County wills by fire in 1857. From the will it appears that the doctor owned a plantation of several thousand acres and operated a turpentine distillery on the banks of the Tar River. In his will he devised to his youngest son, Dr. Richard Williams, his physic, shop furniture, medical books, surgical instruments, and clock.

Williams married first, on 4 Dec. 1781, Fanny Randolph, the daughter of Mathew Randolph of Virginia. She died on 4 Dec. 1790 leaving two daughters: Harriet (m. first James May and second John Joyner of Pitt County) and Fannie (m. John Hodges Drake of Nash). Williams's second wife was Nancy Haywood, the daughter of Colonel [William Haywood](#) ^[17] of

Edgecombe County ^[18], whom he married on 10 June 1792. She died on 11 Nov. 1800, leaving a son Robert F. J. H. (m. first Priscilla Foreman and second Caroline Drake), a physician like his father, and a daughter Marietta Eliza (m. Rev. John Singletary, an Episcopal priest). Dr. Robert Williams married for the third time, on 18 Mar. 1804, Elizabeth Hines Ellis, the daughter of John and Elizabeth Hines Ellis of Edgecombe County. By her he had four daughters and a son: Elizabeth (m. first William Foreman and second Edmund Freeman of Raleigh), Polly Ann (m. John Haughton of Pittsboro), Emily Adelaide (m. Dr. Noah Joyner of Pitt County), Adeline Edmunds (m. Rev. Nicholas Collin Hughes), and Dr. Richard of Greenville (m. Henrietta Green).

References:

Henry T. King, *Sketches of Pitt County: A Brief History of the County, 1704–1910*(1911). ^[19]

Revolutionary Pension File S-7922 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

John H. Wheeler, *Historical Sketches of North Carolina* ^[20] (1851) and ed., *Reminiscences and Memoirs of North Carolina and Eminent North Carolinians* ^[21](1884).

Dr. Robert Williams Family Bible, in the possession of a descendant.

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