

William Richardson Davie Epitaph

Brief history by William Lee Anderson III.

Epitaph

William Richardson Davie was one of North Carolina and the United States' most influential citizens. Although he was highly esteemed among his contemporaries, his recognition today is incommensurate with his many accomplishments.

Over William Richardson Davie's grave is the elegant epitaph written by his contemporary Judge William Gaston (Robinson 1957, 396–397):



William Richardson Davie
by John VanderLyn
in Paris, France, 1800.

In this grave are deposited the remains of
WILLIAM R. DAVIE,
The Soldier, Jurist, Statesman, and Patriot
In the Glorious War for
AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE.
He fought among the foremost of the Brave.
As an advocate of the Bar,
He was diligent, sagacious, zealous,
Incorruptibly Honest, of Commanding Eloquence.
In the Legislative Hall,
He had no superior in enlarged vision
And Profound plans of Policy,
Single in his ends, varied in his means, indefatigable
In his exertions.
Representing his Nation in an important Embassy,
He evinced his characteristic devotion to her interests
And manifested a peculiar fitness for Diplomacy.
Polished in manners, firm in action,
Candid without imprudence, Wise above Deceit,
A true lover of his Country,
Always preferring the People's good to the People's favour.
Though he disdained to fawn for office,
He filled most of the stations to which ambition
might aspire,
And declining no Public Trust,
Ennobled whatever he accepted
By true Dignity and Talent
Which he brought into the discharge of its functions.
— A Great Man in an age of Great Men. —
In life he was admired and beloved by the virtuous
and the Wise.
In death, he has silenced calumny and caused envy to
mourn.
He was born in Edinburg 1756,
And died in South Carolina in 1820.

William Richardson Davie was born on 20 June 1756 in Egremont, Cumberland, England, at variance with his mistaken birthplace noted in the epitaph. In 1761, Davie, at age 5, moved to America and was raised by his maternal uncle, Reverend William Richardson, minister of Old Waxhaw Presbyterian Church and Providence Presbyterian Church. In 1776, after graduating from the College of New Jersey in Princeton, New Jersey, Davie returned home and began to study law under Spruce Macay (pronounced muh-coy). In 1779, when the British Army invaded Georgia and South Carolina, Davie became active as a cavalry captain in the North Carolina militia. His unit was ordered to Charlestown where it was attached to Brigadier General Casimir Pulaski's Legion. Davie was promoted to major. On 20 June 1779, he participated in the battle at Stono River Ferry where he was badly wounded in the thigh. In early 1780, he used a part of his inheritance to equip a cavalry unit of partisans. His unit was active throughout that summer including the Battle of Ramsour's Mill, and daring raids at Flat Rock, Hanging Rock, and the Battle of Hanging Rock. There he was an inspiration to 13-year-old Andrew Jackson. In early September, he was promoted to colonel of North Carolina cavalry militia and led another raid at Wahab Plantation. On 26 September, he led approximately 150 American militiamen in the Battle of Charlotte against Lieutenant General Charles Lord Cornwallis's army of about 2500 professional soldiers (Anderson 2008a). On 27 September, Davie's unit was supplemented to a strength of 300, a formidable cavalry force. Although Davie was sick for a few days, his unit ran patrols around Charlotte to prevent British foraging and express riders. During 12–21 October, Davie's unit followed Cornwallis's retreat from Charlotte (Anderson 2011). In December 1780, Major General Nathanael Greene appointed Davie the Commissary General of the Continental Army Southern Department. Davie remained on the general's staff until at least May 1781. In 1782, Davie married Sarah Jones, daughter of Allen Jones. After the war, Davie entered law practice. He defended loyalists from retribution including Colonel Samuel Bryan, his previous adversary at the battle of Hanging Rock. In 1787, Davie helped defend Elizabeth Cornell Bayard's constitutional right to a trial by jury in her efforts to recover her father's property. This famous case *Bayard v. Singleton* was the first case in the United States of a court asserting and using its power to declare a law unconstitutional. Davie became active in North Carolina politics. In 1786, he was elected to the North Carolina General Assembly. There he introduced legislation to establish the University of North Carolina. Davie was a member of its original Board of Trustees. He visited the Chapel Hill site and by tradition tied his horse to the Davie Poplar Tree. The university was established in 1789. During the summer of 1787, Davie was a delegate to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As a Federalist, he supported ratification of the United States Constitution. He attended both ratification conventions in Hillsborough and Fayetteville. In 1792, he became Grand Master of the North Carolina Grand Lodge of *Ancient Free and Accepted Masons*, and in that capacity in 1793, officiated the laying of the Old East Building cornerstone. In 1798, he was elected North Carolina Governor. However, he did not complete his term because in 1799, President John Adams appointed Davie one of three special envoys to France to negotiate an end to the *XYZ Affair* with Napoleon Bonaparte. Negotiations achieved Adams' aim of avoiding war with France, but the successful news did not reach America in time to help reelect Adams who lost to Thomas Jefferson in 1800. Davie retired to his *Tivoli* estate on the west side of Land's Ford on the Catawba River in Chester County, South Carolina. He died on 29 November 1820 and was buried in the Old Waxhaw Presbyterian Church cemetery. Judge William Gaston, 1778–1844, wrote a poignant epitaph. In 1927, his remains were moved to an enclosed gravesite. A newspaper article entitled "Remains of Davie Family Taken Up" reported, "There was found a lone silver button, the badge of an officer in the Revolutionary War, and three pieces of board, containing the initials "W.R.D." made with copper head tacks. These were found in the grave of General Davie." (Remains of Davie Family Taken Up about 1927) (M. M. Boyer 2008–2012).

Beginning in 1927, noted Charlotte architect Martin Evans Boyer Jr. designed the present-day enclosed gravesite and described the design in an architectural journal (M. E. Boyer 1929).



Enclosed gravesite of William Richardson Davie

Two years later, Martin Evans Boyer Jr. was commissioned to disassemble, transport, and reassemble the old United States Mint from downtown Charlotte to its present-day location (M. E. Boyer 1931).

Outline of William Richardson Davie's life

- Born in Egremont, Cumberland, England, 20 June 1756.
- Moved with family to America, about 1763.
- After death of father, raised by uncle Reverend William Richardson, minister of Providence Presbyterian Church and Old Waxhaw Presbyterian Church.
- After death of Richardson in 1771, inherited 150 acres.
- Attended Queens College, a school in Charlotte, about 1772.
- Graduated College of New Jersey, now Princeton University, 1776.
- During American Revolution participated in:
 - Joined military expedition led by Brigadier General Allen Jones to South Carolina, December 1778.
 - As North Carolina militia, ordered to Charlestown, South Carolina, attached to Pulaski's Legion, early 1779.
 - Wounded in Battle of Stono River Ferry, 20 June 1779. Recuperated in Charlestown for at least 2 months. Returned to Salisbury by November 1779.
 - Used inheritance to equip a partisan troop of cavalry, early 1780.
 - Arrived with Rutherford after Battle of Ramsour's Mill, 20 June.
 - Established camp at Waxhaw Creek, late June–August.
 - Ambush wagon convoy at Flat Rock, 20 July.
 - Led diversion raid on Hanging Rock, 31 July.
 - Participated in Battle of Hanging Rock, 6 August, inspiration to 13-year-old Andrew Jackson.
 - Supported retreating American soldiers after Gates' Defeat, Battle of Camden, 16 August.
 - Appointed colonel of NC militia cavalry, 1 September. Established camp at New Providence.
 - Raided Wahab's Plantation, 21 September.
 - Led Americans in Battle of Charlotte, 26 September.
 - Trailed Cornwallis's retreat from Charlotte, 12–21 October.
 - Commissary General of Continental Army Southern Department, 11 December.
- Married Sarah Jones, daughter of Allen Jones, 1782.
- After war, as lawyer:
 - Defended loyalist Colonel Samuel Bryan, his antagonist at Hanging Rock, from property confiscation, March 1782.
 - Defended loyalist daughter Elizabeth Bayard against confiscation, in case *Bayard v. Singleton*, the first case in the United States where a court declared a law unconstitutional, creating the principle of judicial review, 1787.

- Elected to North Carolina House of Representatives, 1786–1798.
- United States Constitution
 - Delegate to Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, summer 1787.
 - Attended first North Carolina ratification convention in Hillsborough, July–August 1788.
 - Attended second ratification convention in Fayetteville, November 1789.
- University of North Carolina
 - Sponsored bill for establishment, 1789.
 - One of the original trustees, 1789. Continued until 1807.
 - Credited with selecting Chapel Hill site, origin of Davie Poplar Tree legend, 1792.
 - Laid cornerstone of Old East Building, a Masonic ceremony, October 1793.
- Grand Master of the North Carolina Grand Lodge of *Ancient Free and Accepted Masons*, 1792–1798.
- Active in NC politics as Federalist.
- Commissioned brigadier general, 1797.
- Elected North Carolina Governor, 1798.
- Appointed special envoy to France to negotiate with Napoleon an end to the *XYZ Affair*, and thereby avoided war with France, 1799.
- Disgusted by election of President Thomas Jefferson, 1800.
- Wife died, 1802.
- Ran as candidate for United States House of Representatives, 1804.
- Retired to *Tivoli* estate at Landsford on Catawba River, 1805.
- Wrote *Revolutionary War Sketches of William R. Davie*, 1810.
- Honored as “Father of the University of North Carolina,” 1810.
- Offered command in United States Army but declined, 1812.
- Candidate for Vice President of United States, Federalist Party, 1812.
- Died, 29 November 1820. Buried at Old Waxhaw Presbyterian Church.
- Poignant epitaph written by contemporary Judge William Gaston.
- Remains moved to special gravesite enclosure designed by noted Charlotte architect Martin Evans Boyer Jr., 1929.

Sources

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