

North Carolina's Founding Fathers

By BJ Davis *

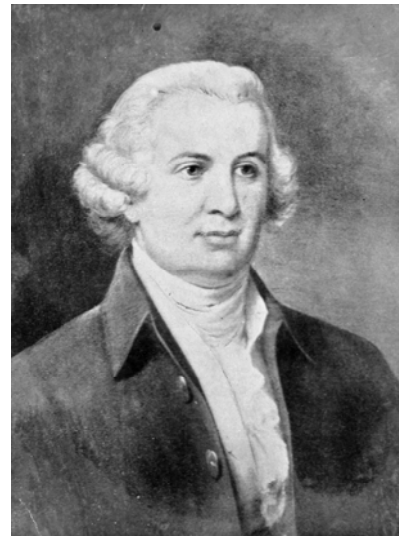
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Chances are you're familiar with the names Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson. I'm sure you have read about James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and George Washington. But who were North Carolina's founding fathers? One was a scientist, doctor, and preacher. Another got thrown out of the U.S. Senate. And a third died from wounds suffered in a duel. They were merchants, lawyers, and soldiers—yet all of them shared a deep commitment to the values and promise of a republic based on freedom, independence, and a new type of government.

During the difficult times of the 1770s, the American colonies struggled with the issue of independence from Great Britain. So starting in 1774, the thirteen colonies sent representatives to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, for a special meeting. They formed a group called the Continental Congress. After months of debating and trying to resolve their differences with the English government and King George III, the leaders of the colonies decided to declare their independence in July 1776. Joseph Hewes, William Hooper, and John Penn represented North Carolina. The next month, they—along with fifty-three other men—officially signed the Declaration of Independence.

The three men worked closely with some of the most famous names in American history. There are many interesting stories and facts that you probably do not know about these Tar Heel patriots.

Hooper (1742–1790) was born in Boston, Massachusetts. After attending Harvard University, he moved to Wilmington and became successful in law and politics. In 1776, as a member of the Continental Congress, Hooper corresponded with Adams. He worked alongside Benjamin Franklin and Robert Livingston, two of the five members of Congress asked to write the Declaration of Independence. In 1781, after General Charles Cornwallis captured Wilmington, the British tried to capture Hooper. Unable to find him, they destroyed his plantation. Hooper and his family managed to make their way to Hillsborough, where he later died and was buried. In 1894 Hooper's remains were moved to a monument honoring the declaration signers at the Guilford Courthouse National Military Park near Greensboro.



William Hooper. *Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.*



John Penn is one of sixteen men who signed both the Articles of Confederation and the Declaration of Independence. *Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.*

Penn (1741–1788) was born in Virginia to a well-to-do family. Although he did not attend university, he trained as a lawyer. He moved to Granville County in 1774 and was elected to the Provincial Congress in 1775 before the Continental Congress. A tireless worker, Penn remained in the Continental Congress until 1780. He served on fourteen committees and eight standing boards. One story has it that Penn was challenged to a duel, but while assisting his much older challenger across a street to the dueling site, convinced him that they should settle their differences. The duel never happened. After his political career, Penn practiced law. His remains also were later moved and reburied at the declaration signers' monument.

Hewes (1730–1779) is known as one of the founders of the Continental Navy, along with his colleague Adams. Born in Princeton, New Jersey, Hewes attended Princeton College and established a successful shipping business in Wilmington, North Carolina, before being elected to the Continental Congress. While in Congress, Hewes supported a ban on importing British goods, even though he knew his business would suffer. One of his most important actions was supporting a little-known sailor named John Paul Jones to become a naval officer. Jones became one of America's most famous naval heroes during the Revolutionary War. Hewes served as secretary of the Naval Affairs Committee until his death. He was buried in a church cemetery in Philadelphia, although the exact site has been lost to history.



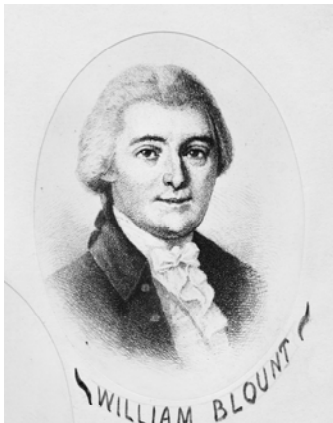
A statue of Joseph Hewes was created for a 1926 Philadelphia exhibition observing the anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Hewes lent his own ships to the colonies' struggling military. *Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.*

North Carolina Signers of the Constitution

After the Revolutionary War some members of Congress, called Federalists, wanted a new constitution that created a strong central government. Others preferred a government in which individual states were strong and independent. North Carolinians played an active role in defining the direction and future of the United States.

Five Tar Heels—William Blount, Richard Dobbs Spaight, Hugh Williamson, William Richardson Davie, and Alexander Martin—served as delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787, although only three ended up signing the document. Davie was called away on personal business and never returned. Martin left Philadelphia in August 1787 before the final draft was completed.

Here are some interesting facts about the North Carolinians who did sign the U.S. Constitution:



William Blount. Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.

Blount (1749–1800) was the only founding father from a family with long ties to North Carolina. His great-grandfather, Thomas Blount, came from England, settling in the state sometime after 1660. According to most accounts, William Blount did not actively participate in the convention and signed the Constitution only reluctantly, to help ensure its adoption by all thirteen states. After settling in Tennessee, he was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1796—only to be impeached by the House and dismissed by the Senate because he took part in a plot to help the British capture the Spanish colonies of Florida and Louisiana. Blount later served as governor of Tennessee, and he is buried in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Spaight (1758–1802) was born in New Bern but orphaned at age eight. Sent to Ireland to be educated, he returned to North Carolina in 1778 and quickly became active in the state militia. He left the military in 1781 after being elected to the legislature. In the years after the Constitutional Convention, Spaight would become North Carolina's governor and a congressman. He suffered a fatal wound in a duel with John Stanly, a political rival. His death shocked the state, and as a result, the General Assembly outlawed dueling in North Carolina.

Williamson (1735–1819) was a brilliant scholar whose studies and writings covered a wide range of subjects. Born in Pennsylvania, he entered the College of Philadelphia at age sixteen and earned several degrees. He became a licensed Presbyterian preacher, a professor of mathematics, and a physician following studies in England and Holland. After witnessing the Boston Tea Party in 1773 on his way back to Europe, Williamson warned members of the British government that the colonies would rebel if the English



Hugh Williamson.
*Image courtesy of
the North Carolina
Museum of History.*

did not change their policies. In 1776 he returned to help support the American colonies and eventually settled in North Carolina. As surgeon general of the North Carolina militia, Williamson tended to American and British troops. He prevented the spread of disease using modern methods—carefully examining personal hygiene, nutrition, clothing, and shelter. After the Revolutionary War, he was elected to state office before being chosen as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention. There, he proved to be a skilled speaker and an important and dedicated participant, serving on five committees. Williamson later worked toward the Constitution’s approval in North Carolina. In 1793, after ending his public service career, he moved to New York City and published many writings about politics, education, economics, history, and science.

The story of North Carolina’s founding fathers offers a fascinating look at an important and defining time in the history of our state and nation. I hope you’ll continue to learn more about the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the various personalities and motivations that helped create these truly historic documents.

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To Learn More

The National Constitution Center

<http://constitutioncenter.org/>

The National Archives: Charters of Freedom

<http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/>

Independence National Historic Park

<http://www.nps.gov/inde>

The Avalon Project at Yale University

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/declare.htm>

The Declaration of Independence

<http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/>

Glossary

Articles of Confederation: An agreement written in 1777 and ratified in 1781 by the thirteen original American states. It gave the states independence and created a central government with little power over the states or their citizens.

Congress of the Confederation: met from 1781 to 1789. The Confederation Congress helped guide the United States through the final stages of the American Revolution but in peacetime declined in importance.

Continental Congress: The governing body of delegates representing the American colonies from 1774 to 1780. It issued the Declaration of Independence (1776) and drafted the Articles of Confederation (1777).

Constitutional Convention: A meeting of state delegates to revise the Articles of Confederation. The convention, which met from May 1787 to September 1789, led to the creation of a new document, the U.S. Constitution.

Federalist: A supporter of a type of government in which separate states are united under a central government. Federalism balances power between national and state governments, with the national government acting as the final authority in most cases.

Republic: A political system in which citizens have the power to elect representatives and play an active role in their government. A republic differs from a monarchy or dictatorship, in which a king or other single person holds most of the authority.