

Our Yesterda

History — Biography — Genealogy

(By A. T. OUTLAW)

Kenansville, N. C.

WILLIAM HOUSTON:

A brief account of the life of Dr. WILLIAM HOUSTON, of Sarecta, Duplin County, appeared in this column on April 1, 1937. It was written purposely to show that some historians have left a wrong impression of Dr. Houston. Since that time it has been found that Dr. Houston's name was ably defended in an address delivered by J. O. Carr, Esq., of Wilmington, before the North Carolina Society of Colonial Dames, at Old Brunswick, several years ago. He spoke of Dr. Houston in substantially the following words:

"One hundred and fifty years have elapsed since the Houston episode, and it is not too early to begin to do justice to the victim; nor will it detract from the heroism of the patriots of 1765, who were inspired by a righteous indignation against every form of oppression.

By a careful, discriminating reading of all the subject-matter at our command, it will be easily seen that the indignation of the people of 1765 was not directed against Houston, nor against any conduct of his, but against the principle of the British stamp tax.

In order to get a comprehensive view of Houston as a man it is necessary to consider him before 1765 and after 1765.

William Houston did not live in Wilmington nor in Brunswick, but resided in Duplin County on the Northeast River, about sixty miles north of Wilmington in a direct line. He was an associate of Henry McCulloch in his attempt to colonize North Carolina, and was one of the original settlers who came to this community some time between 1737 and 1748. This locality was then a part of the county of New Hanover.

Houston was a man of unusual ability and was known as an "honorable gentleman." By profession he was a surgeon and apothecary. A tradition, too well founded in the community in which he lived to be seriously disputed, at least forms the basis for a well-established belief that royal blood flowed in his veins. The General Assembly of 1749 and 1750 established the county of Duplin and St. Gabriel's parish, and William Houston was named as a member of the vestry of that parish. From 1751 to 1761, inclusive, he was a member of the General Assembly from Duplin County, and following that date was a justice of the peace, along with other leading citizens of his county; and in those days the office of justice of the peace was a position of considerable importance.

When he was appointed stamp agent for the port of Brunswick, he was residing on his farm in Duplin County, on a high elevation on the Northeast River, at a place known as "Sarceta"—so called, no doubt, from the mountain by that name in Italy on which was built the ancient Temple of Appollo.

On the 19th of October, 1765, after he had been appointed stamp agent and notice of such appointment had reached Brunswick direct from England, Houston was hanged in effigy in the town of Wilmington, the only reason given for such action being that the several hundred citizens who participated were informed of his having several times expressed himself much in favor of the stamp duty—and it is possible that he honestly favored such a tax, but there is no evidence that he favored it without the people's consent.

Again, on the 31st of October, 1765, a large number of people met in Wilmington and placed an effigy in a coffin and moved under the beat of drums to the churchyard—no doubt St. James' Church—where the interment was to take place; but after feeling its pulse, decided that Liberty still survived, and no burial took place. Also, Dr. Houston was hanged in effigy at New Bern and at Fayetteville about the same time.

During all of these exhibitions of patriotism, Dr. Houston was pursuing his duties as surgeon and apothecary at "Sarceta", now known as "Sarceta," and he afterwards protested that he had not solicited and did not even know of his appointment as stamp agent at the time of such demonstrations. It was not until Saturday, the 16th day of November, nearly a month after his first hanging and demise, that Dr. Houston came to town, where

now known as "Sarceta," and he afterwards protested that he had not solicited and did not even know of his appointment as stamp agent at the time of such demonstrations. It was not until Saturday, the 16th day of November, nearly a month after his first hanging and demise, that Dr. Houston came to town, where three hundred people, with drums beating and flags flying, proceeded to his lodging place and inquired whether he intended to execute the office of stamp agent. Without hesitation he informed them that he "should be sorry to execute any office disagreeable to the people of the province"; and as an exhibition of good faith voluntarily signed the famous promise, which was done of his own free will and accord; and he was not even required to take an oath, as has been generally believed. If this promise had been signed under force or duress, he would hardly have been given an ovation; but after he had indicated his sentiments on this matter there was a love feast and he was put in an arm-chair and carried around the courthouse and around one of the chief squares of the city of Wilmington and finally put down at his lodging place.

A careful and discriminating reading of the entire story must convince the thinking man that instead of a riot and a lynching in the city when Dr. Houston came to town, there was something in the nature of a banquet in his honor, on the discovery by the people that the sentiments of the man selected by the Crown to sell stamps were in harmony with theirs; and no doubt Dr. Houston enjoyed the eats and drinks as much as any one, though the drought in those days around "Sarceta" was doubtless not as marked as it is today.

The episode in Wilmington did not in any way affect the standing of Dr. Houston in his own county, where he was highly honored and respected by his fellow-citizens. In 1768 he was appointed a justice of the peace in Duplin County, and likewise again in 1771. In 1777 he was chairman of the "Court Martial" in Duplin County, whose duties were to hunt down Tories and deserters and to bring to justice Americans who were not faithful to our cause; and together with James Kenan and Joseph Dickson, whose names were synonymous with patriotism in that community, he acted in this capacity, and as chairman of the commission. He continued to serve his county in public positions, and as late as 1784 was appointed a justice of the peace by Alexander Martin, in which capacity he served for some time thereafter. The time of his death or the place of his burial can not be stated with certainty, but it is thought that he was buried in the community in which he lived. His descendants to this day have exhibited the same elements of brilliancy and patriotism seen in Dr. Houston."

Dr. Houston's wife was Ann Jones, daughter of Squire Griffith Jones of Bladen County. Their children were as follows: (1) WILLIAM HOUSTON, Jr., born about 1740. He was a surveyor for Henry McCulloch who owned a large amount of land in Duplin County. About the year 1767 he located in Wilmington and entered the mercantile business. There is a tradition in the family that he was shot and killed in Wilmington when a young man and his body brought to Duplin County for burial. (2) EDWARD HOUSTON, lived and died in Duplin County. His wife was Mary Miller, daughter of Margaret (McCulloch) and Captain George Miller. Their children were as follows: (a) Henry Houston, Jr. (b) Rebecca Houston, married Williams. (c) Winifred Houston. Apparently others. (3) GRIFFITH HOUSTON, lived and died in Duplin County. His wife's name was Ann Martha (Patsy) but her full maiden name cannot now be given. Their children were: (a) William Hubbard

Houston, married Tobitha Smith, daughter of Frederick and Winifred Smith. (b) Mary Houston, married John Maxwell, son of William and Elizabeth Maxwell. (c) Elizabeth Houston, married Zachens Smith, son of Frederick and Winifred Smith. (d) Penelope Houston. (e) Nancy Houston. (4) BERRY HOUSTON, married Sarah Miller, daughter of Margaret (McCulloch) and Captain George Miller. Their children were: (a) Major George E. Houston, married Tobitha Williams. (b) William Houston, married Chelly Williams. (c) Stephen Houston. (d) Nancy Houston. (e) Jane Houston. (f) Mary Houston. (g) Sarah Houston. (h) Estey Houston. (i) Margaret Houston. (j) Possibly Henry Houston who married Mary Williams. (5) A DAUGHTER, married Captain William Hubbard who was an outstanding American patriot during the Revolutionary War.