



serve his country again. Charleston, S.C., was being threatened by British forces, and he joined a detachment under General Allen Jones in 1777. He returned after three months without having seen combat and resumed studying law.

But his studies were soon interrupted again when Congress called for additional forces in North Carolina in 1778. William Barnett, a friend of Davie's, responded by raising a troop in 1779, and Davie was commissioned as a lieutenant in this force. After Barnett resigned, Davie took over as captain, earning a promotion to major shortly thereafter.

Portrait of Davie by Gilles Louis Chretien, Paris, circa 1800

Davie saw his first military action on June 20, 1779, at the Battle of Stono Ferry near Charleston. He was wounded and fell from his horse, but a soldier carried him off the field, preventing his capture and possibly saving his life. During his long recovery, he finally obtained his license to practice law.

In 1780 and healthy again, Davie raised his own cavalry troop along with two companies of mounted infantry. Davie, who had inherited 150 acres of land from his uncle, sold his inheritance to equip the soldiers, and he immediately began military operations on the South Carolina border during the summer. North Carolina Governor Abner Nash soon promoted him to the rank of colonel.

Scholar, Soldier, Statesman

The *Revolutionary Roles* of William Richardson Davie

By Chris Honiball

The “greatest son” of North Carolina was, ironically, not born there. William Richardson Davie, son of Archibald Davie, was born in Egremont, Cumberland County, England, on June 20, 1756. But he left England as a child and grew up to have a profound impact on his adopted state and the new nation.

After coming to America at the end of the French and Indian War in 1763, Davie was well educated. He attended Queen's Museum, later Liberty Hall, in Charlotte, N.C., and then the College of New Jersey, later known as Princeton University. In 1776, before his graduation, he volunteered with several other students to join the Patriot cause in New York. He served in the Continental Army for several months during the summer before returning to college in the fall and earning a master of arts degree.

After graduation, Davie moved to Salisbury, N.C., to study law. His studies were interrupted when he felt compelled to

After participating in the Battle of Hanging Rock (near present-day Heath Springs, S.C.), Davie and his forces spent the next several months continually harassing the British with small, mounted attacks. Although they inflicted little damage, the raids wore down the British and reduced morale. For these actions he was sometimes called “the Hotspur of the Southern Army,” as 20th-century historian J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton wrote in *William Richardson Davie: A Memoir* (University of North Carolina, 1907). A “hotspur,” from the name of an English soldier killed in a rebellion against Henry IV, is another word for a rash and impetuous person.

Rash or not, Davie's most memorable military accomplishment came at the Battle of Charlotte at the Mecklenburg County Courthouse on September 26, 1780. With a small force, Davie denied Cornwallis and his entire army entrance to Charlotte for several hours before being forced to retreat.

In January 1782 he was approached by General Nathanael Greene to serve as commissary. By all accounts, he fulfilled the role ably and was appointed the Commissary General of North Carolina during the Siege of Ninety Six, S.C.

Around this time Davie married Sarah Jones, the daughter of his former commanding officer, General Allen Jones. Relinquishing the position of commissary at the close of the

... A true lover of his Country, Always preferring the People's good to the People's favor ... A Great Man in an age of Great Men ...

★ EXCERPT FROM BRIGADIER GENERAL DAVIE'S TOMBSTONE

war, he relocated to Halifax, N.C., and resumed his law practice in 1783. He was reportedly a talented lawyer—James Iredell, one of the original justices of the Supreme Court, ranked him one of the top two lawyers in North Carolina, according to the North Carolina History Project. His success was perhaps due in part to his height and demeanor. Hamilton writes, “In appearance he was very tall with fine features and eyes full of fire. His voice was resonant, yet melodious and capable of every inflection, and his speeches were distinguished for their fiery eloquence.”

Davie was appointed to the North Carolina delegation to the Constitutional Convention in 1787, and he played a role in helping secure the Great Compromise, which provided equal representation in the Senate and proportional representation in the House.

He returned home for the fall court term before the convention ended, and so did not sign the Constitution. But he immediately began supporting it in North Carolina. His motion resulted in its ratification in a convention at Fayetteville, N.C., in November 1789.

Education was important to Davie. On November 12, 1789, he proposed a bill to the North Carolina House of Representatives, then known as the House of Commons, that established the University of North Carolina. He was closely involved in selecting the first instructors, curriculum and location for the university,

John Pettigrew's
1797 sketch of UNC's
Old East Building



and, as a Masonic Grand Master, he officiated at the laying of cornerstones for two of its buildings. The board of trustees named him “Father of the University” in 1810, and awarded him a doctor of laws degree the following year.

Davie also remained active in the military after the end of the Revolutionary War. He held various appointments, culminating in an appointment by President John Adams to brigadier general in 1798.

Returning home in the winter of 1798, he defeated Benjamin Williams to become the 10th governor of North Carolina. He would not complete his term, however, as Benjamin Franklin appointed him a commissioner to France the next year to help negotiate a treaty to end the conflict known as the Quasi-War. (For more on the Quasi-War, see the January/February 2010 issue of *American Spirit*.) He spent several months overseas, and, along with his fellow delegates, was successful in negotiating the Convention of 1800, also known as the Treaty of Mortefontaine.

Davie returned home and tried to resume public service in North Carolina, but the nation was moving away from his federalist ideals, and he lost a race for Congress in 1802. This loss, coupled with his wife's death that same year, caused him to grow tired of politics and the public eye. He retired to his estate in South Carolina in 1805, and remained there until his death in 1820.

With his contributions to both the war in the South and post-war efforts to develop the new nation, Davie played an important role in the foundational era of America. He was a brave soldier, an inspired and accomplished lawyer, a successful diplomat, and an unceasing advocate for education. His tombstone reads: “In the Glorious War for American Independence he fought among the foremost of the Brave ... A true lover of his Country, Always preferring the People's good to the People's favor ... 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.”

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