

# William Blount



*Tennessee State Museum,  
Tennessee Historical Society Collection, Nashville, TN*

William Blount, the eldest son of Jacob Blount, Sr., and Barbara Gray Blount, was born in Bertie County, North Carolina, on March 26, 1749. He was active in the family mercantile business and later served in the American Revolution as paymaster of the 3<sup>rd</sup> North Carolina regiment and for the state militia. In the midst of the Revolution, Blount married Mary Grainier (Granger); of their six children who reached adulthood, one son also became prominent in Tennessee politics. Blount left the military before the war's end to pursue two passions that would obsess him for the rest of his life. The first was western lands; like many businessmen of his day, Blount believed the future of the new nation lay beyond the Appalachian Mountains so he accumulated as much western land as possible. The other obsession was public office. From 1780 to 1784, he served in the lower house of the North Carolina legislature that included a stint as speaker. After his wedding, Blount returned to the state legislature to serve in the state's upper house. In addition to his service in state politics, Blount took part in national politics representing North Carolina in the Continental Congress in 1782-83 and 1786-87. In 1787 he was appointed at the age of 38 as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention. He was absent for more than a month because he chose to attend the Continental Congress on behalf of his state. There is little indication that Blount actively participated in the debates at the convention, but he did attend the sessions and signed the new U.S. Constitution, although reluctantly to make it the unanimous act of the States in Convention.

It was apparently during the Constitutional Convention that Blount came to the attention of George Washington, a contact that served him well when North Carolina ceded its western lands to the federal government. Commonly called the Southwest Territory, the North Carolina land comprised all of present-day Tennessee and stretched from the crest of the Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi River. The most important office in the new territorial government was that of Governor of the Territory South of the Ohio River, and for this position Washington selected William Blount.

From Blount's perspective it was an ideal assignment. By this time he had acquired a million acres of western land, and it is likely that through partnerships he controlled much more. In fact Blount had already determined that he must move west in order to protect his vast holdings; his appointment as governor would only make that task easier.

Blount arrived in the territory in October 1790. His appointment carried with it the position of Superintendent of Indian Affairs, and his immediate superior, Secretary of War Henry Knox, specifically charged him to resolve the ongoing dispute regarding the Cherokee boundary. In June 1791, Blount called the Cherokee to a treaty at White's Fort on the Holston River, in present-day Knoxville. The Treaty of the Holston, signed in early July, called for additional Cherokee land cessions and set a new boundary, thereby resolving the conflict. However, frustrated Cherokee believed Blount had treated them unfairly.

Despite this awkward beginning, Blount maintained good relations with the Cherokee, although a militant faction continued to attack the territory for several years. Likewise he was generally able to prevent white settlers from encroaching across the Cherokee boundary. But attacks by the militant Cherokee and the Creek continued, and each attack led to renewed calls for a federal army to be stationed in the territory for protection. Blount increasingly found himself caught between his superiors, who refused to consider such a demand, and the citizens who were very clearly in need of protection.

For Blount, the only way out of this impasse was to move as quickly as possible toward statehood. When a 1795 census revealed a population in excess of 60,000, large enough to satisfy the provisions in the Northwest Ordinance, Blount dispatched a delegate to Congress with instructions to lobby for immediate admission. The delegate soon discovered that the Federalist-controlled Congress was certain that angry westerners would vote against the Federalist candidate in the upcoming presidential election. Therefore, Congress did not take any steps to admit Tennessee to statehood.

To get around this obstacle, Blount decided to proceed without the blessing of Congress and, since Tennessee was the first territory to seek admission under the provisions of the Northwest Ordinance, there were no precedents to restrict him. Blount first called for a constitutional convention and, once convened, he pushed the delegates to move quickly and draft a state constitution. When the new document was approved, Blount simply declared that his territorial government was terminated and the new Tennessee state constitution was operational. The Federalists were unable to prevent a joint session of Congress from approving the new constitution or the process by which it had been submitted. On June 1, 1796, Tennessee was admitted to statehood.

Blount was no longer governor, but he had secured an appointment as Senator from Tennessee. During this period, Blount's affairs took a sharp turn for the worse. In 1797 his speculations in western lands led him into serious financial difficulties. From this vantage point he hatched a plan to manipulate land prices in the west, for Blount had accumulated far too many acres and the market for western lands had not developed as he anticipated. He was convinced, however, that land values would rise if the British controlled the port of New Orleans, and so he

arranged for Creek and Cherokee Indians to assist the British in capturing the city from the Spanish in addition to West Florida. A letter he wrote alluding to the plan fell into the hands of President Adams, who turned it over to the Senate on July 3, 1797. Five days later, that body voted 25 to 1 to expel Blount. The House impeached him on the grounds “of a high misdemeanor, entirely inconsistent with his public trust and duty as a Senator,” but the Senate dropped the charges in 1799 on the grounds that no further action could be taken beyond his dismissal.

The episode did not hamper Blount's political career in Tennessee. In 1798 he was elected to the senate, rising to the speakership before turning over his duties and seat in the General Assembly in September 1799. In March of the following year, Blount complained of a chill and died on March 21, 1800 after a six-day illness in Knoxville. He is buried there in the cemetery of the First Presbyterian Church.

A land speculator and businessman from an influential family with political connections, William Blount seemingly had little in common with the people he governed. But while he operated on a much larger scale, his desire to improve his financial standing through the acquisition and sale of land was typical of the frontier. Likewise, his insistent requests for an increased federal military presence to confront the ongoing threat of Indian attacks only served to increase his popularity among the people he governed. To them, his administration was seen as responsive, effective, and fair. At the same time, Blount's superiors in the War Department came to view his administration with considerable suspicion as a result of rumors that he had misappropriated funds, but an informal investigation failed to produce any evidence. In the end this native North Carolinian and adopted Tennessean, who signed the U.S. Constitution, is remembered as the driving force behind the Tennessee Constitution and statehood, and for his expulsion from the United States Senate.

**Sources:** Michael Toomey, [www.northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia](http://www.northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia)

**For additional sources see:** Thomas Perkins Abernethy, *From Frontier to Plantation in Tennessee: A Study of Frontier Democracy* (Chapel Hill, 1932); John D. Barnhart, *Valley of Democracy: The Frontier vs. the Plantation in the Ohio Valley* (Bloomington, 1953); Clarence E. Carter, ed., *The Territorial Papers of the United States: The Southwest Territory*, vol. 4, Washington, 1936; Walter T. Durham, “The Southwest Territory: Progression to Statehood,” *The Journal of East Tennessee History* (1990) 62: 3-17; William B. Eigelsbach, “The Blount Conspiracy: Notes of Samuel Sitgreaves on the Questioning of Dr. Nicholas Romaine on July 13 and 14, 1797, Before the House Impeachment Committee,” *The Journal of East Tennessee History* (1994) 66: 81-96; John R. Finger, *Tennessee Frontiers: Three Regions in Transition* (Bloomington, IN, 2001); Philip M. Hamer, ed., “Letters of Governor William Blount,” *The East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications* (1932) 4: 122-137; William H. Masterson, *William Blount* (Baton Rouge, 1954); William H. Masterson, “The Land Speculator and the West: The Role of William Blount,” *The East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications* (1955) 27: 3-8; Buckner F. Melton Jr., *The First Impeachment: The Constitution's Framers and the Case of Senator William Blount* (Macon, GA, 1998); Michael Toomey, “Doing Justice to Suitors: The County Courts in the Southwest Territory,” *The Journal of East Tennessee History* (1990) 62: 33-53.

The following letter written by William Blount to announces that a U.S. treaty, known as the Holston Treaty, had been negotiated with the Cherokee Indians on July 2, 1791

Treaty Ground on the Banks of the  
Holston near the Mouth of French  
Broad July 8th 1791

Dear Sir,

I seize all the opportunity by Capt. Spring to inform you that on the 2. Inst. I signed at this place a Treaty on the part of the United States with the Cherokees - The Articles are nearly the same as those of the Creek Treaty except the one which fixes the Boundary - The Boundary is not as good as I could wish but it is the best I could obtain - The Chiefs both me well pleased and I have great Hopes that the Treaty will long be preserved on both sides inviolate - Be pleased to present my most respectful Compliments to General Pickens and believe me dear Sir with great esteem,

Your most Obedient  
Humble Servant

His Excellency  
Governor Pickens

Wm Blount

South Carolina

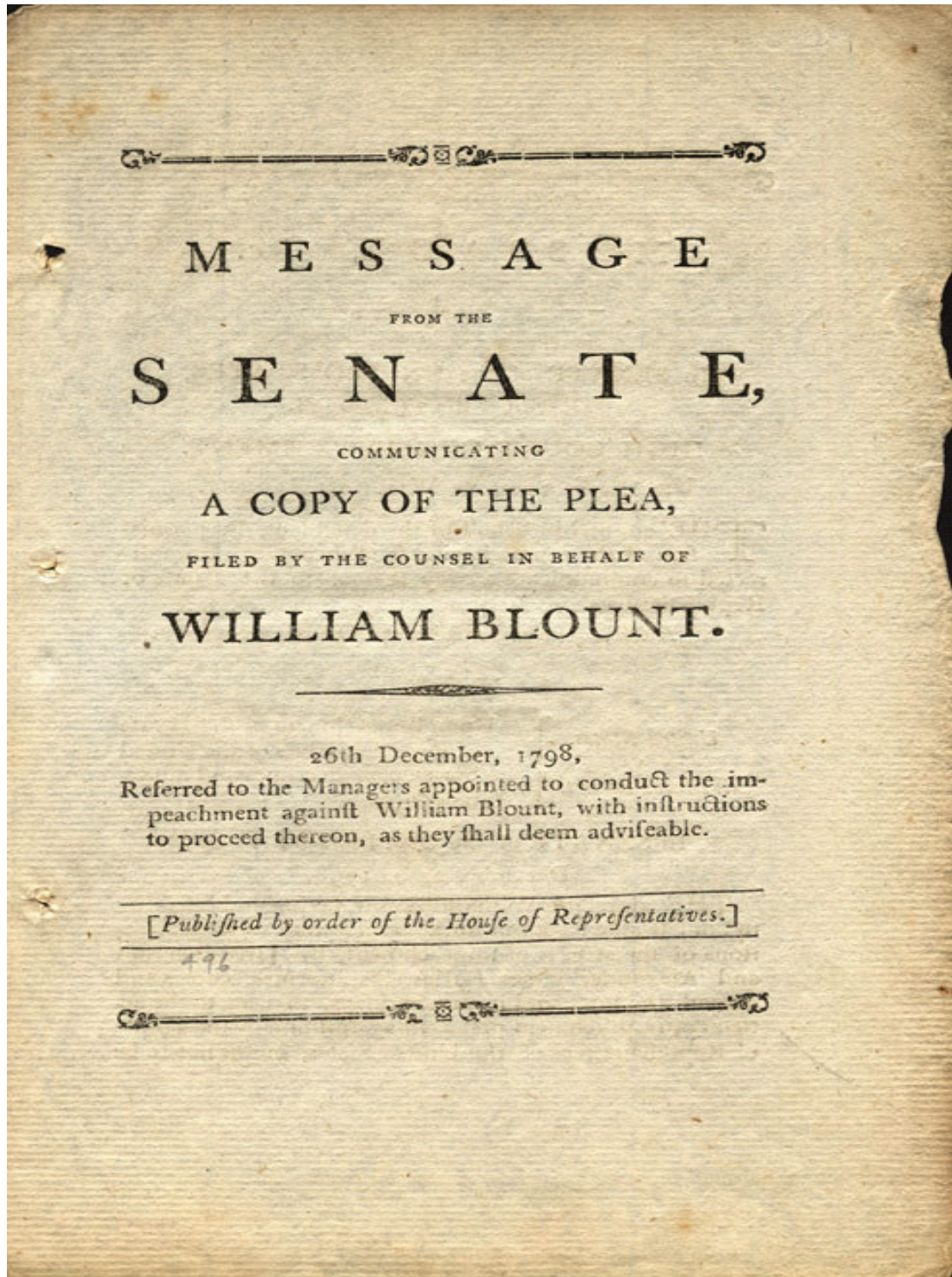
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1791  
Governor, Blount  
August 28. 1791  
Report on the  
Treaty with the  
Indians.

His Excellency  
Charles Pinckney Esquire  
Capt. Spring South Carolina

Calvin M. McClung Historical Collection, Knoxville

The following document is a copy of the plea filed by counsel on behalf of William Blount regarding Blount's plea in the High Court of Impeachment, *United States vs. William Blount*. Blount was the only United States Senator that Congress ever attempted to impeach. The federal government subsequently determined that they had no legal right to impeach a Senator and set a legal precedent.



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M E S S A G E, &c.

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In SENATE of the UNITED STATES,  
December the 24th, 1798.

HIGH COURT OF IMPEACHMENT.

UNITED STATES, vs WILLIAM BLOUNT.

THE counsel in behalf of the defendant, by permission of the court, having filed their plea, I am directed to communicate a copy thereof to the House of Representatives.

Attest,

SAM. A. OTIS, Secretary.

*United States,*  
vs  
*William Blount.*

} Upon impeachment of the House  
of Representatives of the United  
States, of high crimes and misdemeanors.

In SENATE of the UNITED STATES,  
December 24th, 1798.

THE aforesaid William Blount, saving and reserving to himself all exceptions to the uncertainty and imperfections of the articles of impeachment, by Jared Ingersoll and Alexander James Dallas, his attorneys, comes and defends the force and injury, and says, that he, to the articles of impeachment preferred against him by the House of Representatives of the United States, ought not to be

compelled to answer, because he says, that the 8th article of certain amendments of the constitution of the United States, having been ratified by nine states, after the same was in a constitutional manner proposed to the consideration of the several states in the union, is of equal obligation with the original constitution, and now forms a part thereof; and that by the same 8th article, it is declared and provided, that "In all criminal prosecutions the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury of the state and district wherein the crime shall have been committed: which district shall have been previously ascertained by law; and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation: to be confronted with the witnesses against him; to have compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor; and to have the assistance of counsel for his defence." That proceedings by impeachment are provided and permitted by the constitution of the United States only on charges of treason, bribery, or other high crimes and misdemeanors, alledged to have been committed by the President, Vice-President, or any civil officer of the United States, in the execution of their offices held under the United States; as appears by fourth section of the second article, and the 7th clause of the third section of the first article, and other articles and clauses contained in the constitution of the United States. That although true it is, that he the said William Blount, was a Senator of the United States from the state of Tennessee, at the several periods in the said articles of impeachment referred to, yet that he the said William is not now a Senator, and is not nor was at the several periods so as aforesaid referred to, a civil officer of the United States, nor is he the said William, in and by the said articles charged with having committed any crime or misdemeanor in the execution of any civil office held under the United States, nor with any mal-conduct in a civil office, or abuse of any public trust in the execution thereof.



That the courts of common law, of a criminal jurisdiction of the states wherein the offences in the said articles recited, are said to have been committed, as well as those of the United States, are competent to the cognizance, prosecution and punishment of the said crimes and misdemeanors, if the same have been perpetrated, as has been suggested and charged by the said articles,—which, however, he utterly denies. All which the said William is ready to verify—And prays judgment whether this high court will have further cognizance of this suit, and of the said impeachment, and whether he, the said William, to the said articles of Impeachment, so as aforesaid preferred by the House of Representatives of the United States, ought to be compelled to answer.

JARED INGERSOLL.  
A. J. DALLAS.

1798, December 24th.

A true copy of the record of court.

Attest,

SAMUEL A. OTIS, Secretary.