

**JOHN BRANCH: 1782-1863, GOVERNOR
OF NORTH CAROLINA, UNITED STATES
SENATOR, SECRETARY OF THE NAVY,
MEMBER OF CONGRESS, GOVERNOR
OF FLORIDA, ETC.**

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John Branch: 1782-1863, Governor of North Carolina, United States Senator, Secretary of the Navy, Member of Congress, Governor of Florida, etc. by Marshall DeLancey Haywood

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BY MARSHALL DELANCEY HAYWOOD,

Author of "Governor William Tryon and His Administration in the Province of North Carolina, 1765-1771," "Lives of the Bishops of North Carolina," "Ballads of Courageous Carolinians," etc.

Before the office of Secretary of the Navy was created, the functions which were later performed by the occupant of that office devolved upon the Chairman of the Committee on Naval Affairs in the old Continental Congress, and Joseph Hewes, of North Carolina—a Revolutionary statesman, who made his name immortal by signing the Declaration of Independence—was the first person who held that post. Since the Revolution, five North Carolinians have, at different periods of our country's history, entered the President's official family in the capacity of Secretary of the Navy, viz.: John Branch, in the Cabinet of President Jackson; George Edmund Badger, in the Cabinet of the first President Harrison; William Alexander Graham, in the Cabinet of President Fillmore; James Cochran Dobbin, in the Cabinet of President Pierce; and Josephus Daniels (present incumbent), in the Cabinet of President Wilson. It is the purpose of the writer of this sketch to give an account of the distinguished services, both State and National, of the first of these five cabinet officials.

JOHN BRANCH, three times Speaker of the Senate of North Carolina, three times Governor of that State, a member of the United States Senate and National House of Representatives, Secretary of the Navy, member of the North Carolina

Constitutional Convention of 1835, last Governor of the Territory of Florida, and first Acting Governor of the State of Florida, was born in the town of Halifax, in Halifax County, North Carolina, on the 4th day of November, 1782, at a time when his father, Lieutenant-Colonel John Branch, was bravely participating in the War for American Independence, then drawing to a successful close. The services of the Revolutionary patriot, last mentioned, were useful and varied. He was High Sheriff of the County of Halifax at the outbreak of the war; and, while acting in that capacity, was a terror to the Tories in that vicinity. The records of the Committee of Safety tell us that he brought disaffected persons before the committee and "prayed condign punishment upon them." He was a Justice of the Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions (a tribunal made up of all the magistrates of the county) from December 23, 1776, until after the close of hostilities. On February 11, 1780, he became Lieutenant-Colonel of the Halifax Regiment of North Carolina Militia; and, as such, served for a while in the army of General Greene. In 1781 he was one of the State Auditors for the Halifax District. He was a member of the House of Commons at two sessions during the war, 1781 and 1782; and once in 1788, after the return of peace. He likewise served as a delegate to the Convention of North Carolina which rejected the proposed Constitution of the United States in 1788—he voting with the majority to reject. For many years after the war he held a seat in the Council of State, during the administrations of Governors Richard Dobbs Spaight (the elder), Samuel Ashe, Benjamin Williams, and James Turner. Colonel Branch survived the Revolution nearly twenty-five years. He belonged to the Masonic fraternity and was a member of Royal White Hart Lodge, No. 2, in the town of Halifax. A contemporaneous newspaper announcement of his death said:

"Departed this life, on the 14th of March, 1806, at Elk Marsh, in Halifax County, N. Carolina, Col. John Branch, a soldier of the Revolution. Of this good man, the voice of panegyric is wont to

sound praises in the most exalted strain. As a man, he was brave, open, and ingenuous; as a citizen, active and useful; as a husband, father, and master, he was kind, tender, and affectionate. The child of sorrow found in him a protector; the man of worth, a sincere friend; the poor and needy sought shelter beneath his hospitable roof, and a numerous circle of acquaintances will partake of his glad cheer no more forever. His morning sun was fair and unclouded; its meridian, bright and effulgent; and its descending rays insured him a glorious immortality."

In the Will of Colonel Branch, he left (among other property) to his son Joseph "ten thousand acres of land in the State of Tennessee, on the waters of Duck River." By the same will, Joseph was given a 600-acre tract called "The Cellar," near Enfield. "The Cellar" or "Cellar Field" was afterward owned and occupied by Governor Branch, who probably purchased it from his brother.

Colonel John Branch, Sr., was twice married: first, to Rebecca Bradford (daughter of Colonel John Bradford and his wife, Patience Reed), and left by her the following five children:

I. James Branch, who was twice married and left an only child, who died young, upon which his property (by the terms of his Will) reverted to his brothers and sisters.

II. Martha Branch, who married General Ely Benton Whitaker.

III. John Branch, Jr., subject of the present sketch, who married (first) Elizabeth Foort, and (second) Mrs. Mary Eliza Bond, née Jordan.

IV. Joseph Branch, who married Susan Simpson O'Bryan, and removed to Tennessee, where he died in 1827, at the town of Franklin, leaving (among other children) Lawrence O'Bryan Branch, of North Carolina, who became a Brigadier-General in the Confederate Army, and was killed at the Battle of Sharpsburg, otherwise known as Antietam.

V. Patience W. Branch, who married the Reverend Daniel Southall.

The second wife of Colonel John Branch, Sr., was Elizabeth Norwood, daughter of John Norwood, and a sister of Judge William Norwood, of Hillsborough, North Carolina. By her he left the three following children:

I. William Joseph Branch, who married Rosa Williams Harriss.

II. Washington Lenoir Branch, who married Martha Anna Lewis.

III. Elizabeth Ann Branch, who married (first) Gideon Alston, and (second) the Reverend William Burge.

As already stated, one of the sons of Colonel John Branch was John Branch (known as John Branch, Jr., during his father's lifetime), and to the latter's career we shall now confine this sketch.

It was in the General Assembly of North Carolina, which convened at Raleigh on the 18th of November, 1811, that JOHN BRANCH, our present subject, made his first appearance in public life, having been elected State Senator from the county of Halifax. So acceptable were his services to the people of his county that he was repeatedly re-elected. Twice during the Second War with Great Britain, in 1813 and 1814, he was State Senator; and, as such, was a firm supporter of the measures of the National and State administrations in prosecuting that war. He was chairman of the Joint Legislative Committee which presented resolutions of censure (December 15, 1813) against the Honorable David Stone, in a tone so severe as to cause that gentleman to resign from the United States Senate, and make place for a more active supporter of the war measures demanded by the people of North Carolina. Mr. Branch had attained so high a reputation that when he was next sent to the State Senate, in 1815, that body unanimously elected him Speaker—the presiding officer of the Senate then being called Speaker, instead of having the more recent title of President. He was again State Senator and again unanimously elected Speaker, at the

two following sessions of 1816 and 1817. On the 3d of December, 1817, while serving his third term as Speaker of the State Senate, Mr. Branch was elected Governor of North Carolina by a joint ballot of the General Assembly—the office of Governor then being annually filled by the Legislature, and not by popular choice. On the day after his election as Governor, Mr. Branch sent in his resignation, both as Speaker and member of the Senate, whereupon that body unanimously passed the following resolution:

Resolved, That the thanks of this House be presented to the late Speaker thereof, Colonel John Branch, for the able and impartial manner in which he has discharged the duties of the chair; and that a select committee of this House, composed of Mr. Murphey and Mr. Pickett, be appointed to wait on Colonel Branch and make known to him this Resolution."

Mr. Branch was re-elected Governor on November 24, 1818; and elected for the third time on November 25, 1819, serving until December 7, 1820. In his official correspondence, and messages to the General Assembly, we see evidences of sagacity and foresight, while the humaneness of his disposition is shown by efforts to secure alterations of the over-severe penal laws of the time in which he lived.

Though Mr. Branch was elected Governor in 1817, he was not inaugurated until December 6th in that year, when the General Assembly had transacted most of its business, and hence it was not until the Legislature of 1818 convened that he transmitted his views on public matters, in the shape of an annual message, on November 18th in that year. Concerning education he then said:

"In a government like ours, where the sovereignty resides in the people, and where all power emanates from, and, at stated periods, returns to them for the purpose of being again delegated, it is of the last importance to the well being and to the existence of government that the public mind should be enlightened. Our sage and patriotic ancestors who achieved the liberties of our country, and to whom we are indebted for our present benign and happy form of government, duly impressed with the magnitude of the subject, and anxiously solicitous to impart stability to our institutions, and to transmit to