Southwest Territory (Tennessee): William Blount

While he was not part of the U.S. Marshal Service, as Governor of the Southwest Territory, William Blount conducted the 1790 Census for his area. Like a majority of his contemporaries, Blount was both a veteran of the American Revolution and dedicated public servant in the arena of state and national politics. Born in Bertie County, NC, on March 26, 1749, William Blount worked in his family’s mercantile business before the outbreak of the American Revolution in April 1775. When hostilities commenced between the British and the American colonies, Blount quickly joined the 3rd North Carolina regiment as its paymaster. As the paymaster of the 3rd North Carolina, Blount accompanied his regiment as it marched north in time to participate in Washington’s 1777 Philadelphia Campaign. Two years later, Blount returned to North Carolina and became the deputy paymaster general for North Carolina’s militia forces. Finally, Blount’s military career concluded after he witnessed British General Horatio Gates’ defeat at the battle of Camden, SC on August 16, 1780.

Having served his state and new nation as a soldier, Blount began his political career as a member of North Carolina’s House of Commons (1780-1784), but quickly entered the national political scene as one of North Carolina’s delegates to the Continental Congress (1782, 1783, 1786, and 1787). During his time as a congressional delegate, Blount championed a series of legislative acts that provided settlers and land-speculators, like himself, with increased access to frontier land that is located in present-day Tennessee. Perhaps, it was Blount’s active role in state politics that led to his appointment as one of North Carolina’s delegates to the 1787 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. Despite his lack of active participation in the debates surrounding the creation of the U.S. Constitution, Blount added his signature to it on September 17, 1787. Blount’s role as one of the signers of the U.S. Constitution proved

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instrumental in his future career as a politician because he was able to meet George Washington, who served as the president of the Constitutional Convention.208 209

After returning home to North Carolina from the Constitutional Convention, Blount continued to strategically position himself to personally benefit from the formation of a new national government and westward expansion. He continued to buy land in the western part of North Carolina with the hope that it would become more valuable as explorers, settlers, and entrepreneurs developed the land and its resources.210 Meanwhile, Blount participated in both of North Carolina’s conventions to ratify the U.S. Constitution (July 21-August 4, 1788 and November 16-23, 1789) and served as a state senator for almost two years (1788-1790).211 Because Blount had almost decade of political experience and had strongly supported the U.S. Constitution, President Washington appointed him as the governor of “Territory of the United States, South of the River Ohio,” also known as the “Southwest Territory,” on June 8, 1790.212

Approximately five months after receiving his appointment as governor of the Southwest Territory and a simultaneous appointment as the Superintendent of Indian Affairs (1790-1796), Blount left North Carolina and established the Southwest Territory’s temporary capital in a present-day, Piney Flats, TN.214 215 Almost immediately afterwards, Blount worked to forge peace between the distinctive Native American tribes and settlers, train a professional state militia, and, among a host of other tasks, oversee the enumeration of the territory’s population.216

Initially, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson wrote to Blount saying, “As the census of all the rest of the Union will be taken in the course of this summer... it is thought extremely desirable

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211 “Blount, William, (1749 - 1800).”
that of your Government should be taken also, and arranged under the same classes as prescribed by the Act of Congress for the general census. Yet that act has not required it in your Territory, nor provided for any expense which might attend it”. 217 As W.S. Rossiter, former Chief Clerk of the Census Bureau, observed Blount did not have to carry out an enumeration of the Southwest Territory’s population, especially since the federal government was unable to pay his militia captains who acted as enumerators. 218

Yet, Blount provided Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson with an almost completed 1790 census return on September 19, 1791, thus demonstrating the dedication of Blount and his militia captains in serving the interests of their community and the federal government. 219 220 After tabulating the results from Blount’s 1790-91 census return, the Southwest Territory had a population of 35,691 people, which meant that, according to the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, it failed to meet the threshold of 60,000 people required for a territory to become a state. 221 Undeterred, Blount and his fellow “Tennesseans” conducted another census in 1795 and were able to meet the 60,000 population threshold with a population of 77,262 people. 222 224 In this way, Blount succeeded in laying the administrative and political foundations for Tennessee obtaining statehood on June 1, 1796.

Shortly afterwards, on August 2, 1796, Blount was elected as one of Tennessee’s first U.S. Senators. 225 Blount’s term came to an end, when he was expelled from the Senate for his involvement in a conspiracy to incite Native American tribes and the British to conquer the Spanish territory of West Florida. 226 Although Blount never participated in national politics

219 According to Blount’s 1790 census return, the numbers in his return were from July 1791 and they were the results from the militia captains, who were able to complete their enumerations not long after the May 2, 1790 deadline.
221 “Territory of the United States of America, South of the River Ohio”.
225 “Blount, William, (1749 - 1800).”
226 “Blount, William, (1749 - 1800).”
again, he served a state senator and as the president of Tennessee’s state senate, until September 1799.  

227 William Blount died in Knoxville, Tennessee on, March 21, 1800.  

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227 Ibid.  