

THE DEBATE OVER THE U.S. CONSTITUTION IN NORTH CAROLINA

PART 4: MEET THE ANTI-FEDERALISTS

LEARNING OUTCOME:

Students can:

- ♦ *Explain specific reasons why three North Carolina Anti-Federalists opposed ratification of the U.S. Constitution at the 1788 Hillsborough Convention.*

In July 1788, North Carolina held a special convention in the town of Hillsborough, North Carolina, to vote whether or not to **ratify** (approve) the 1787 federal Constitution, which was proposed to replace the Articles of Confederation.

Three of the most outspoken Anti-Federalists at the 1788 Hillsborough Convention were Willie Jones, Timothy Bloodworth, and Samuel Spencer. These three men, however, each opposed the proposed new Constitution for different reasons. Considering each of their unique perspectives will help to clarify the debate over the proposed new Constitution that took place in 1787 and 1788 in North Carolina and throughout the United States.

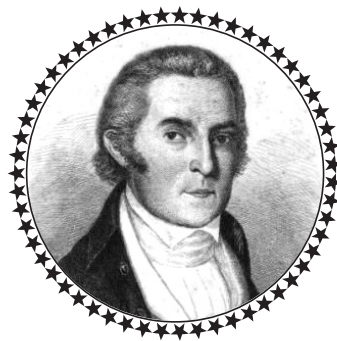
Federalists:	Anti-Federalists:
Supported the new (1787) Constitution, which would give the U.S. government more power than the state governments. (Be sure to recognize that these Federalists are different from the Federalist Party that emerged in the 1790s.)	Opposed the 1787 Constitution. They wanted to keep the Articles of Confederation, which gave state governments more power than the U.S. government.

WILLIE JONES (1741–1801)

Willie Jones (1741–1801) was an influential Anti-Federalist. Jones was from one of North Carolina's wealthiest families. He owned a large cotton plantation in northeastern North Carolina. He also owned 1,200 enslaved people. Jones was part of North Carolina's "eastern elite," meaning a small group of very wealthy and politically powerful landowners who lived in eastern North Carolina. However, unlike most of North Carolina's eastern elite, Jones opposed the U.S. Constitution.

During the colonial era, Jones had supported the colonial government during the Regulator Rebellion of 1770. The Regulators were a group of small farm owners from the Piedmont region of North Carolina (in the middle of the state) who rebelled against colonial taxes, British interference in colonial affairs, and an unfair system of representation in the colony's General Assembly. However, in the 1770s, Jones became disillusioned with the British colonial government. He sided with the Patriots during the American Revolutionary War and expressed support for full independence from Great Britain.

In 1787, Jones opposed the U.S. Constitution for several reasons. He



Willie Jones, a leading North Carolina Anti-Federalist during the debate over the U.S. Constitution

feared the fact that the new Constitution would allow the U.S. government to create a “**standing army**” (a permanent army that would exist even in peacetime). He worried that the U.S. government might someday use a standing army to take away citizens’ individual liberties. He also feared the creation of a U.S. Supreme Court that would have the power to overrule state court decisions. Finally, he worried that the new Constitution would create “a federal government that regulated the economy to benefit a few commercial interests.” He wanted the constitution to include “specific, individual rights,” which would be guaranteed to all free men (although he did not want any of these rights to be guaranteed to enslaved people).¹

Willie Jones was one of the representatives at the 1788 Hillsborough Convention. Jones knew that the majority of the delegates at the convention were suspicious of the new Constitution, so at the beginning of the meeting, he proposed that the representatives vote immediately, without any discussion. The chairman of the convention, James Iredell, disagreed. He persuaded the representatives to discuss the new Constitution before voting on it. The discussion lasted 14 days. Willie Jones became one of the unofficial leaders of the representatives who opposed the new Constitution at the Hillsborough Convention.

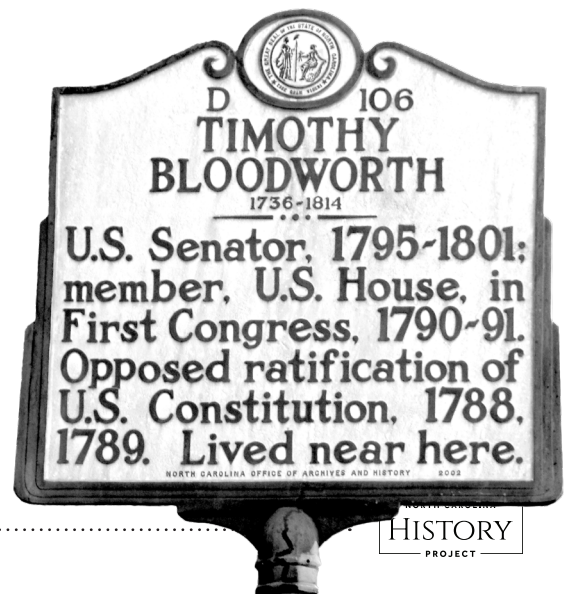
After the U.S. Bill of Rights was approved by the U.S. Congress and it appeared that North Carolina would vote to ratify the new federal Constitution, Willie Jones chose not to participate in the 1789 Fayetteville Convention.

TIMOTHY BLOODWORTH (1736–1814)

Another North Carolina Anti-Federalist at the Hillsborough Convention was Timothy Bloodworth. Bloodworth was also from eastern North Carolina, but his life was quite different from the lives of wealthy plantation owners such as Willie Jones. Bloodworth’s parents were not wealthy, and he did not have much formal education, but he managed to become somewhat wealthy by working several different jobs. His main job was as a **blacksmith** (a metal worker who made horseshoes and other things out of iron), but he also owned a tavern and operated a **ferry** (a boat that transported people across a river). Bloodworth eventually used the money from his businesses to buy a farm near the town of Burgaw (about 25 miles north of Wilmington). Unlike elite plantation owners such as Willie Jones, Timothy Bloodworth and his family worked on the farm. However, like many farm owners at that time, Bloodworth used some of his wealth to buy nine enslaved people, who also worked on the farm.

At the beginning of the American Revolution, Bloodworth became a leader in the Patriot movement. He wholeheartedly supported independence from Great Britain. At the end of the Revolutionary War, Bloodworth argued in favor of punishing American Loyalists by taking away their property and selling it to raise money for the North Carolina state government. Bloodworth opposed the 1783 Treaty of Paris, which formally ended the American Revolutionary War, because it included a promise that state governments would not **confiscate** (take ownership of) Loyalists’ property.

At the 1788 Hillsborough Convention, Bloodworth was against the proposed new Constitution. Even when it became clear that a bill of rights was going to be added, he still opposed the federal Constitution for a very specific reason. Bloodworth did not agree with the part of the Constitution that would allow the U.S. Senate to decide whether or not to ratify **treaties** (official agreements between the United States and the governments of other countries). Bloodworth worried that the president and the U.S. Senate would make treaties that would force the United States into expensive wars. He thought it would be safer for the



American people if the entire U.S. Congress (the House of Representatives and the Senate) had the power to decide whether or not to ratify treaties.

Although Bloodworth opposed the Constitution at both the 1788 Hillsborough Convention and the 1789 Fayetteville Convention, once North Carolina ratified the U.S. Constitution, he was elected to represent North Carolina in the U.S. House of Representatives. Timothy Bloodworth was the only Anti-Federalist to be elected to the U.S. Congress from North Carolina.

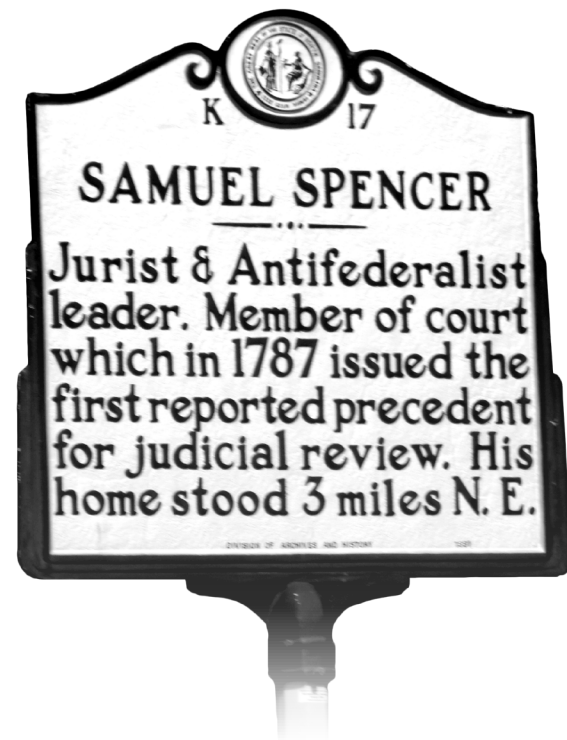
SAMUEL SPENCER (1738–1794)

Samuel Spencer was another Anti-Federalist who participated in the 1788 Hillsborough Convention. Spencer was born in Connecticut and attended the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University), which was one of the best colleges in the American colonies at that time. After graduating from college, Spencer moved to North Carolina and began working as a lawyer in Anson County. He was elected to the North Carolina General Assembly in 1769, while North Carolina was still a British colony.

In 1775, after the Patriots took effective control of North Carolina, Spencer joined the Provincial Congress, which was North Carolina's Patriot-controlled legislature throughout the American Revolutionary War.

By 1788, Spencer was a superior court judge. As a lawyer and a judge, he was familiar with making and evaluating persuasive arguments, so it was not a surprise that he was one of the most persuasive speakers at the Hillsborough Convention. Throughout the convention, Spencer spoke out persuasively against the proposed new federal Constitution. He worried that if the new Constitution became the law of the land, the U.S. government would try to interfere in each state's elections for the U.S. Congress. The proposed new Constitution gave the U.S. government the power to set the "place, time, and manner of elections" for the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives.² Spencer feared that the U.S. government would abuse this power. However, Spencer did express support for the "No Religious Test Clause" of the proposed federal Constitution, which prevented the U.S. government from putting any religious-based restrictions on who could be elected to public office. At that time, North Carolina allowed only Protestant Christians to serve as elected officials.

In 1789, Samuel Spencer participated in the Fayetteville Convention. At this meeting, he voted for a second time against the 1787 federal Constitution. However, at this meeting, he was outvoted, and North Carolina became the 12th of the 13 states to ratify the U.S. Constitution.



READING REVIEW QUESTIONS:

Using information from the reading, explain why Willie Jones opposed ratification of the 1787 federal Constitution.

Using information from the reading, explain why Timothy Bloodworth opposed ratification of the 1787 federal Constitution.

Using information from the reading, explain why Samuel Spencer opposed ratification of the 1787 federal Constitution.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Troy L. Kickler, "Willie Jones (1701–1801)," North Carolina History Project, accessed November 19, 2024, <https://northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/willie-jones-1741-1801/>.
- 2 Troy L. Kickler, "Anti-Federalism," North Carolina History Project, accessed November 19, 2024, <https://northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/anti-federalism/>.