

GWINNETT, BUTTON (1735 - 1777), merchant, landowner and politician

Name: Button Gwinnett
Date of birth: 1735
Date of death: 1777
Spouse: Ann Gwinnett (née Bourne)
Child: Amelia Gwinnett
Child: Ann Gwinnett
Child: Elizabeth Ann Gwinnett
Parent: Samuel Gwinnett
Parent: Ann Gwinnett (née Emes)
Gender: Male
Occupation: merchant, landowner and politician
Area of activity: Business and Industry; Land Ownership; Politics, Government and Political Movements
Author: Vivienne Sanders

Button Gwinnett was born in 1735 in Down Hatherley, Gloucestershire, the third of the seven children of Reverend Samuel Gwinnett (died 1777), an Anglican minister, and his wife Ann (née Emes, died 1767). He was baptized on 10 April 1735. Samuel Gwinnett's ancestors had left Caernarfonshire and settled in Gloucestershire in the 1550s, but their Welsh connections remained strong. The surname Gwinnett is a form of the regional name Gwynedd. Ann Emes's mother was Ann Prise of Glamorgan. The family of her wealthy cousin Barbara Button held extensive lands in Glamorgan, including the manor of Cottrell, which was inherited by Barbara. Barbara Button was Button Gwinnett's godmother. Button's siblings were Anna Marie, Samuel, Thomas, Robert, John and Emilia. The family's Glamorgan connection is attested in that Anna Marie, who died at the age of 15, was buried in St Nicholas Church in Cottrell, and Samuel married Emilia Button who inherited Cottrell Park from her aunt.

Button Gwinnett was educated at King's School, Gloucester. He worked for several years for his two merchant uncles in Bristol, then moved to Wolverhampton in 1755. In 1757 he married Ann Bourne, an heiress whose father was an affluent grocer. They had three children, Amelia, Ann and Elizabeth Ann. Button was engaged in trade with the American colonies in the West Indies. There is no evidence that he was involved in the slave trade. He was an unsuccessful trader, effectively bankrupt by 1762, which prompted his emigration to the colony of Georgia. By 1765, he was trading in Savannah, Georgia. He acquired a 500 year lease on St Catherine's Island, off the Georgia coast. Some slaves were included in that acquisition. He was an unsuccessful plantation owner, but his main interest was politics. He was involved in local politics in the years 1768-1774. While not particularly honest in making financial deals and acquiring property, he was one of Georgia's largest landowners by 1772. In both America and England, he faced frequent financial difficulties. While in Georgia he blamed these on the policies of the British government.

In the years 1775-1776, he was a state and national politician with a reputation as a committed advocate of American independence. He was one of Georgia's three representatives at the second Continental Congress in Philadelphia in 1776. There, he served on two committees and was the second signatory of the Declaration of Independence (together with **Francis Lewis**, who was born in Wales, and Thomas Jefferson who claimed Welsh ancestry). He left Philadelphia soon after. He was the leader of Georgia's Popular Party, which chose him as Speaker of Georgia's Provincial Congress. That office ensured that he dominated the production of Georgia's constitution, which greatly extended the electorate and was unusually democratic for the time. He helped prevent the union of South Carolina and Georgia.

In March 1777, he was elected President of Georgia's Council of Safety. As such, he was commander-in-chief of the militia. He was keen to lead an expedition to Florida, from whence Loyalists were raiding Georgia. His repeated clashes with Continental Army officer Lachlan McIntosh led to a duel in which he acquired the leg wound that led to his death on 19 May 1777 from a combination of infection, trauma and gangrene. There is some doubt as to where he was buried, but it was possibly in the Old Colonial Cemetery, Savannah, Georgia. Gwinnett County, an area of Atlanta, Georgia, is named after him.

While perpetually financially unstable, his political career suggests that he was articulate and charismatic. An account written soon after his death described him as physically imposing. His production of the unusually democratic Georgia Constitution suggests that he might have contributed something more than merely his signature to the Declaration of Independence while at the Continental Congress.

Author

Vivienne Sanders

Sources

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Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Button Gwinnett](#)

Additional Links

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