

Wade Hampton Biography

Wade Hampton

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Biography

The American planter Wade Hampton (ca. 1751-1835) played a major role in the economic and political development of South Carolina and became one of the wealthiest planters in the South.

Born in Halifax County, Va., Wade Hampton was a descendant of a Jamestown settler of 1630. Prior to the American Revolution, his parents decided to seek their fortune on the frontier of South Carolina. There, except for Wade and three of his brothers, the family was massacred by Indians in 1776.

During the early years of the Revolution, Hampton was reluctant to declare his allegiance to either the Revolutionaries or the English crown. But after he began selling provisions to the American troops, he accepted a commission from the patriots and established a notable military reputation.

Shortly after the Revolution, Hampton purchased a sizable block of land near Columbia, the new capital of South Carolina. He cultivated tobacco and grains. By 1790 he owned 86 slaves and worked over 1,000 acres of land. After the invention of the cotton gin, he turned to cotton production. In 1799 he reportedly harvested nearly \$90,000 worth of cotton. He is generally credited with being one of the first planters in South Carolina to demonstrate that large-scale production of cotton could be profitable. He also had extensive landholdings in Mississippi and Louisiana, where over 3,000 slaves produced cotton and sugarcane.

In the Southern tradition of public service, Hampton was active in South Carolina politics, serving as a delegate to the state assembly and as a member of the convention that ratified the U.S. Constitution. He represented South Carolina twice in the U.S. Congress. In addition, he was a justice of the peace and served briefly as sheriff.

At the threat of war with England, Hampton again became active in the Army. When the War of 1812 broke out, he was placed under the command of Gen. James Wilkinson as a brigadier general. But bad feelings erupted, and after the campaign against Montreal, Wilkinson held Hampton responsible for the defeat. Although Hampton was exonerated by the War Department, he resigned his commission and returned to South Carolina. At his death in 1835, he was reputed to be the wealthiest planter in the United States.