

A NEW  
AMERICAN  
BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARY;  
*William* — OR, *Brown's Book*  
REMEMBRANCER  
OF THE  
DEPARTED HEROES & STATESMEN  
OF  
AMERICA.

CONFINED EXCLUSIVELY TO THOSE  
WHO SIGNALIZED THEMSELVES IN EITHER CA-  
PACITY, IN THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR WHICH  
OBTAINED THE INDEPENDENCE OF THEIR  
COUNTRY.

COMPILED FROM THE BEST PUBLICATIONS.

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BY THOMAS J. ROGERS.

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“ The deeds of long descended ancestors,  
“ Are but by grace of imputation ours.”

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1813.

WYTHE, GEORGE, Chancellor of Virginia, and a distinguished friend of his country, was born in the county of Elizabeth city, in 1726. At school he learned only to read and write, and to apply the five first rules in arithmetic. Without the assistance of any instructor he acquired an accurate knowledge of the Greek, and he read the best authors in that as well as in the Latin language. He made himself also a profound lawyer, becoming perfectly versed in the civil and common law, and in the statutes of Great Britain and Virginia. He was also a skilful mathematician, and was well acquainted with moral and natural philosophy.

Having obtained a license to practice law, he took his station at the bar of the old general court with many other great men, whose merit has been the boast of Virginia. Among them he was conspicuous not for his eloquence or ingenuity in maintaining a bad cause, but for his sound sense and learning, and rigid attachment to justice. He never undertook the support of a cause, which he knew to be bad, or which did not appear to be just and honorable. He was even known, when he doubted the statement of his client, to insist upon his making an affidavit to its truth, and in every instance, where it was in his power, he examined the witnesses as to the facts intended to be proved before he brought the suit, or agreed to defend it.

When the time arrived, which Heaven had destined for the separation of the wide, confederate republic of America, from the dominion of Great Britain, Mr. Wythe was one of

the instruments in the hand of providence for accomplishing that great work. He took a decided part in the very first movements of opposition. Not content merely to fall in with the wishes of his fellow citizens, he assisted in persuading them not to submit to British tyranny. With a prophetic mind he looked forward to the event of an approaching war, and resolutely prepared to encounter all its evils rather than to resign his attachment to liberty. With his pupil and friend, Thomas Jefferson, he roused the people to resistance. As the controversy grew warm, his zeal became proportionally fervent. He joined a corps of volunteers, accustomed himself to military discipline, and was ready to march at the call of his country. But that country, to whose interests he was so sincerely attached, had other duties of more importance for him to perform. It was his destiny to obtain distinction as a statesman, legislator and judge, and not as a warrior. Before the war commenced, he was elected a member of the Virginia assembly.— After having been for some time speaker of the house of burgesses, he was sent by the members of that body as one of their delegates to the congress, which assembled May 18, 1775, and did not separate until it had declared the independence of America. In that most enlightened and patriotic assembly he possessed no small share of influence. He was one of those, who signed the memorable declaration, by which the heroic legislators of this country pledged “their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor,” to maintain and defend

its violated rights. But the voice of his native state soon called him from the busy scenes, where his talents had been so nobly exerted. By a resolution of the general assembly of Virginia, dated November 5, 1776, Thomas Jefferson, Edmund Pendleton, George Wythe, George Mason, and Thomas Ludwell Lee were appointed a committee to revise the laws of the commonwealth. This was a work of very great labor difficulty. The committee of revisors did not disappoint the expectations of their country. In the commencement of their labors they were deprived of the assistance, which might have been received from the abilities of Messrs. Mason and Lee, by the death of the one and the resignation of the other.— The remaining three prosecuted their task with indefatigable activity and zeal, and, June 18, 1779, made a report of one hundred and twenty-six bills, which they had prepared. This report showed an intimate knowledge of the great principles of legislation, and reflected the highest honor upon those who formed it.

After finishing the task of new modelling the laws, he was employed to carry them into effect, by being placed in the difficult office of judge of a court of equity. He was one of the three judges of the high court of chancery, and afterwards sole chancellor of Virginia, in which station he continued until the day of his death, during a period of more than twenty years.

He was a member of the Virginia convention, which in June 1788, considered the proposed constitution of the United States. He

was ever attached to the constitution, on account of the principles of freedom and justice, which it contained, and in every change of affairs he was steady in supporting the rights of man. His political opinions were always firmly republican. He presided twice successively in the college of electors in Virginia, and twice voted for a president, whose political opinions coincided with his own.

He died in June, 1806, in the eighty first year of his age. It was supposed that he was poisoned, but the person suspected was acquitted by a jury of his countrymen. By his last will he bequeathed his valuable library and philosophical apparatus to his friend, Mr. Jefferson, and distributed the remainder of his little property among the grand children of his sister, and the slaves, whom he had set free.

Chancellor Wythe possessed a soul replete with benevolence. He was of a social and affectionate disposition. His integrity was never even suspected. While he practised at the bar, when offers of an extraordinary but well merited compensation were made to him by clients, whose causes he had gained, he would say, that the laborer was indeed worthy of his hire, but the lawful fee was all he had a right to demand, and as to presents he did not want and would not accept them from any man. This grandeur of mind he uniformly preserved to the end of his life.

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