



Do You Know The History Behind Houston County?

The unfamiliar spelling of the last syllable in Houston as it appears in the act of the General Assembly, Houstoun, represents the original, for the county was named for Governor John Houstoun. Just when and why the spelling was changed and the *u* omitted is uncertain, but all of the earliest references include it - some maps as late as 1870. Perhaps the change came by careless accident, or common consent, or was an Americanization of the English in the way that honour became honor, and colour, color. To newcomers, much more curious than spelling is the pronunciation of this word. Old time Houstonians insist that it has always been pronounced with an "ow" sound as in house, and never "hyoo" as in the Texas city, because this was the pronunciation given the name by the Houstoun family.

Residents can proudly acknowledge the name Houston, for it comes from a patriotic statesman. As the son of Baronet Patrick Houstoun of Savannah, John might more profitably have remained loyal to Britain. His father was a personal friend to James E. Oglethorpe, served as the Registrar of Grants and Receiver of Quit Rents, and was a member of the Council in the Royal Government of Georgia. Only intense feelings of patriotism to the cause of American independence could have turned him from his father's loyalties and encouraged him to seek his political future in dissent.

In 1774 with Noble Jones, Archibald Bullock and John Walton, he was one of the four Sons of Liberty who incited others by notice in the Georgia Gazette to join the group at a meeting at Tondee's Tavern in Savannah. He was elected to both the Provincial and the Continental Congress in 1775 and should have been one of the four to sign the Declaration of Independence for Georgia. Distributed by events at home, he had returned to Georgia to counteract the influence of John J. Zubly, who had left Philadelphia in an attempt to convince Georgians to remain loyal to the King and reject the Declaration.

Elected Governor in 1778, Houston was given almost dictatorial power by Executive Council. Their confidence in his judgment is revealed in the following martial policy.

The council... do request that his Honor the Governor will be pleased to exercise all the Executive powers of government appertaining to the militia... independent of the Executive council, and without calling, consulting or advising with them, unless when and where he shall find it convenient and shall choose to do so. And they pledge themselves to support and uphold him in so doing, and to adopt as their own the measures which he shall embrace and that this shall continue during the present emergency, or until the Honorable House of Assembly shall make an order to give their opinion to the contrary.

He exercised this power in an ambitious but futile attempt to clear Georgia's southern border. Commanding the Georgia Militia, Houston joined with General Robert Howe's Continental troops in a disastrous military venture to dispel the Tories and Indians.

In spite of this fiasco, he was re-elected Governor in 1784. During this administration he instituted the Land Court to settle frontier property and repay those who had served Georgia without salary in the Revolutionary War. His concern caused 40,000 acres of land to be set aside in Franklin and Washington Counties as an endowment for establishing a "seminary of learning." Franklin College, begun in 1785, has directly affected the lives of many Houstonians as the University of Georgia, and John Houstoun's name is listed among its first Trustees.

A lawyer by profession, Houston was commissioned as Chief Justice of Georgia in 1786. The following year he served on a commission to settle the boundary line between Georgia and South Carolina. Later he was elected Judge of the superior Court of Chatham County, then Mayor of Savannah. When President George Washington visited Savannah in 1791, Houstoun was a member of the committee that received and entertained him. At fifty-two, after a quarter of a century of faithful public service, he died at his home near White Bluff in Savannah on July 20, 1796.

*Credit to: Bobby Hickson Nelson
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