

A Biography of Colonel Robert Rankin

Robert Rankin was a soldier of the Revolutionary War who led an adventurous and noteworthy life. In this composition we will look at everything known and speculated about Col. Rankin.

It should be noted that I have not personally been to Virginia to do detailed research in deed records and other county records to learn more about Robert Rankin and his parents. It is quite possible that such details as Robert's parentage and hypothesized exact birth place could be confirmed by such research.

His Name

In all official documents and compiled histories, his name is always given as either Robert Rankins or Robert Rankin, the latter being the simplified surname used by all descendants and the former appearing to be the traditional, historical surname. No middle initial has ever been indicated.

Some genealogies give his name as Richard Robert Rankin. I do not know the source of this variation and do not consider it credible given the voluminous references using simply Robert Rankin and no known references including Richard or a middle initial. Given the very detailed depositions by Robert and his wife it is highly unlikely Robert had a middle name or initial for otherwise it would surely have been noted in these records.

His Parents

There is no known documentation of Robert's parents. However, in the testimony of Abner S. Lipscomb (former Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court) for Rankin's Revolutionary War pension, Lipscomb indicates Rankin was a "near kinsman" of Chief Justice John Marshall. Through deduction, reasoning, or documentation now lost to us, this has led to the conclusion that his mother was Margaret Masena Marshall, whose brother was Col. Thomas Marshall the father of the Chief Justice. This would make John a maternal first cousin of Robert. Thomas and Margaret were children of John "of the Forest" Marshall and Elizabeth Markham.

As for Robert's father, his name has variously been given as "William Robert Rankin" and "Robert William Rankin". Virtually nothing is known about him.

Additionally, nothing is certainly known about the ancestry of the Rankin family or their immigration to America.

His Birth

Some genealogies give Robert's birth information as 18 Sep 1753 in Frederick County, Virginia. I have seen no documentation for either this exact date or place. The best that I have certainly proven is that Robert was born in 1753 in Virginia. During the War he did "return home" to Frederick County to marry Peggy, so certainly he (and possibly his parents) lived there when he was a young adult. But, I have not seen evidence to tie him or his parents to Frederick County in 1753.

His Brother

In the Revolutionary War pension file for William Rankin, the deposition of John Kercheval indicates that William had a brother named Robert "who was an officer". Given both men's service in the Virginia Continental Line, this clearly indicates our Robert had a brother named William who served as a Private during the War. William was born about 1759 and died on 12 Apr 1836 in Mason County, Kentucky. He was buried in the Old Washington Cemetery, but his grave no longer has a visible marker.

Learning the work of a Surveyor with Thomas Marshall and George Washington

The story has been told that as a young man (perhaps around 17 years old) Robert learned surveying from his uncle Thomas Marshall and Thomas' business partner George Washington. While Robert's son William is known to have been a surveyor, there is no evidence Robert was a surveyor. So, at this point Robert knowing George Washington at this level of intimacy is merely an intriguing possibility. The only references I have seen to this are contained in summaries containing many other false and outlandish tales about Robert, so this may not be a true story.

The Revolutionary War

Robert served as a Lieutenant in the John Marshall Company of the Virginia Continental Line, the same John Marshall who was his first cousin and would later be the Supreme Court Justice.

He participated in the following battles during the War:

- Brandywine (11 Sep 1777)
- Germantown (04 Oct 1777)
- Stony Point (15-16 Jul 1779)
- The siege of Charleston, South Carolina under Major General Lincoln

Robert was captured after the Siege of Charleston (12 May 1780). He remained a prisoner of war until exchanged, at which time he states he received a promotion to Lieutenant.

Records show the following promotions:

- Enlistment as Sergeant in the 11th Virginia Regiment 26, Jul 1776
- Moved to the 7th Virginia Regiment, 14 Sep 1778
- Ensign, 04 Jul 1779
- Lieutenant, 01 Jan 1780

Two muster roll cards indicate that Robert was present at Valley Forge for the winter stay of 1777-1778.

As an officer who served to the conclusion of the War, Robert was a member of the Society of the Cincinnati.

Robert received two Virginia Revolutionary War bounty land warrants, #165 for 2,166 ²/₃ acres and #1485 for 200 acres. These were rolled into a single land patent for 2,866 ²/₃ acres issued in the Ohio military district on 28 Oct 1799. Robert soon sold this land grant to Henry Massie on 04 Feb 1800.

Robert also appeared to have purchased the bounty land warrants from four other soldiers, #3890 through #3893 for a total of 400 acres. These were possibly rolled into and replaced by warrant #4729 for 444 acres which was patented in the Ohio military district on 25 Aug 1801 to David Davis whom Robert had sold the land grants to.

Robert would later apply for a Revolutionary War pension. Interestingly in the pension documents he claimed never to have received any payment for his services since the end of the War, including bounty land. This is obviously not true. I would surmise that Robert meant he had never used such lands he had been given, but since he surely derived financial benefit from their sale I am not sure what to think. It is possible he was simply old and senile at this point.

Marriage

When Robert was paroled after the Siege of Charleston he went home for a time on furlough. It was at this time that he married Margaret "Peggy" Kendall Berry on 01 Oct 1781 in Frederick County, Virginia. Margaret was the son of Thomas Berry, Sr. (1733-1818) and Frances Ann Kendall (1737-1818). Thomas was Captain of a Virginia company during the War and a well respected man in his own right.

Mason County, Kentucky

Robert left Virginia some time after the War and is seen in what would become Mason County, Kentucky by Aug 1786. His name is seen very regularly in the documents and histories of early Mason County.

- Robert's service in the Kentucky militia led him from a rank of Captain to Colonel
- Robert was named by the Kentucky legislature as a trustee of the new town of Charlestown in 1787
- The first Mason County court was held at his home on 26 May 1789
- Robert was named by the Kentucky legislature as a trustee of the new town of Washington in 1790
- Robert was a delegate from Mason County to the Danville Convention in 1792 where the first constitution of Kentucky was framed
- Robert was an elector from Mason County for the election of senators to the Kentucky state senate in 1792
- Robert was a trustee of Franklin Academy in the town of Washington when it was founded in 1795

Robert is also a footnote to an interesting historical fact in Mason County. The Marshall Key House in the town of Washington is today the Harriet Beecher Stowe Slavery to Freedom Museum. It is so named because it is the place where Stowe visited and witnessed a slave auction in 1833 from which she drew inspiration for some of her characters for the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* she would write many years later. While the house was not built by Marshall Key until 1807, the original owner of the lot in 1789 was none other than Robert Rankin.

Logan County

Robert was reported in Logan County, Kentucky in 1802. I have not researched his time at this location. The only mention I have seen of it is in the deposition of William Butler in Robert's Revolutionary War pension file.

Washington County, Alabama (Mississippi Territory)

Robert is seen in Washington County in the Mississippi Territory by 1810. He would remain in this area until at least 1830. As with Mason County, Kentucky, Robert again is regularly seen in the historical documents of Washington County.

- Robert served as a Justice of the Peace in 1810
- Robert served as a Justice of Quorum in 1815
- Robert served as a Justice of the Peace in 1828

It is during this time that the fortunes of the Rankin family are believed to have turned for the worse. This is probably due to the economic distress caused by the Panic of 1819 which was driven by land speculation.

Republic of Texas

While two of Robert's children were killed at the Fort Mims massacre, others ended up in Texas before its independence from Mexico. His son William went to Texas as early as Jan 1830 with the Zachariah Landrum caravan. Robert followed them about 1834. He is first seen in Texas on 03 Nov 1834 when Jesse Grimes (a notable Texan who also came from Washington County, Alabama) signed a character certificate supporting Robert's application to enter Joseph Vehlein's colony (14 Nov 1834). Robert was granted one league of land in what would become San Jacinto County on 24 Apr 1835. The town of Coldspring today sits on Rankin's land grant.

Robert reportedly lived near Sam Houston. It is this association and the relationship that developed that led to Robert's role in the successful fight against Mexico for Texas independence.

Battle of San Jacinto

Robert was an elderly man by the time 1836 rolled around. He was known as "Colonel Rankin" and was reportedly well respected as a diplomatic man. At Sam Houston's personal request Rankin was to convince the Indians to remain neutral in the conflict between Texas and Mexico. His successful mission allowed Houston to focus on the conflict with Santa Anna without distraction or fear of third-party intervention. This directly led to the victory at San Jacinto. In honor of his contribution to the fight for Texas independence, Robert's remains were reinterred in Texas State Cemetery at the centennial of Texas Independence in 1936.

His Death

Before his death, Robert and Peggy had moved to St. Landry Parish in Louisiana. The reason for their move is not known. It has been speculated it was to get better health care or to more easily work to secure Robert's Revolutionary War pension (from within the United States rather than the Republic of Texas). In any case, Robert died there in Nov 1837. The exact date is in question because of a misspelling in the deposition of Peggy in the Pension file. His date of death is given as the "thirtieth day of November". This misspelling could be "thirteenth" or "thirtieth". I have gone with what seems to have been chosen by earlier researchers - 13 Nov 1837.

After his death, Robert's body was returned to his land in Texas where he was buried in Butler Cemetery until his remains were reinterred at Texas State Cemetery in 1936.

Summary

After supporting the American Revolution for the entirety of the War, Robert Rankin helped lay the foundations for one state (Kentucky), two counties (Mason County, Kentucky and Washington County, Alabama) and at least three cities (Washington, Kentucky, Charlestown, Kentucky, and Coldspring, Texas). He also played a vital role in the history of Texas as a diplomat to the Indians at the behest of Sam Houston to convince them to remain neutral in the lead up to the Battle of San Jacinto. Robert's first cousin was Chief Justice John Marshall, he was friends with Sam Houston, and he likely knew or met the likes of George Washington. Robert is certainly the most prominent and well-respected person in my family tree and a devoted American Patriot.

Tall Tales

The following are stories and other “facts” I have seen about Robert Rankin. I do not believe any of them are true and have never seen the slightest bit of evidence to support them. My understanding is many of them originated with a two-page “biography” written by a Rankin relative in the 1930s. As this coincides with the Texas independence centennial and the reinterment of Robert’s remains at Texas State Cemetery, it is possible that some of the biography is based on extensive research of something like Sam Houston’s personal papers. But, lacking this evidence, for the time being the best I can do is document all of these as “tall tales.”

- He was one of the men who guarded the door when the Declaration of Independence was signed.
- He was a member of the Virginia “House of Representatives” after the Revolutionary War (no such thing exists; there is a House of Delegates and a Senate which compose the Virginia General Assembly, neither of which Robert is known to have served in).
- Under orders of President Thomas Jefferson, he worked with Sam Houston during the War of 1812.
- He helped settle the Louisiana Purchase. This is patently false since Robert lived in Kentucky and/or the Mississippi Territory during this time which was east of the Louisiana Purchase.
- He was a member of Austin’s Old Three-Hundred. This is patently false since Robert arrived in Texas many years after the original 300 settlers in Austin’s Colony and entered into Vehlein’s Colony. (His son Frederick Harrison Rankin however was a member of Austin’s Old Three-Hundred.)
- He was at the meeting where the treaty was signed between Sam Houston and Santa Anna. He is reported to have spoken to Santa Anna for Sam Houston in Spanish, “Surrender or die!” - the irony being this is the phrase Santa Anna used at the Alamo.
- He spoke 5 languages including Spanish.