

UNITED STATES SENATE  
ELECTION, EXPULSION  
AND CENSURE CASES

 1793–1990 

by  
Anne M. Butler and Wendy Wolff  
U.S. Senate Historical Office

Prepared under the direction of  
Sheila P. Burke  
Secretary of the Senate

## Case 5

---

### William Blount

(1749–1800)

Tennessee

---

#### Expulsion Case

July 3, 1797 to July 8, 1797

#### Issues

Disloyalty to United States

#### Chronology:

President's letter received: July 3, 1797

Referred to committee: July 4, 1797

Committee report: July 6, 1797

Senate vote: July 8, 1797

**Result: Expelled**

---

### Background

In 1790, President George Washington appointed William Blount, a Republican, as governor of the newly formed Tennessee Territory. When Tennessee entered the Union in 1796, the legislature chose Blount as one of the state's first two United States senators (See Case 4).

Blount, who had served in the Revolutionary army, the North Carolina legislature, the Continental Congress, and the Constitutional Convention, was an active land speculator. His speculations had led him into serious financial difficulties. In an apparent effort to extricate himself, Blount concocted a scheme for Indians and frontiersmen to attack Spanish Florida and Louisiana, in order to transfer those territories to Great Britain. Unfortunately for the senator, a letter, in which Blount thinly disguised his desire to arouse the Creek and Cherokee Indians to aid his plan, fell into the hands of Federalist President John Adams.

### Statement of the Case

On July 3, 1797, President Adams sent the incriminating letter to both the Senate and House, accompanied by a special message charging that Blount had sought the aid of a United States government interpreter to seize Spanish Florida and Louisiana with British and Indian help. Adams acted on an opinion from the attorney general that the letter was evidence of a crime and that Blount, a senator, was liable to impeachment under the Constitution. For the first time in the Senate's then brief history, its powers to expel and to convict in an impeachment case were to be tested.

### Response of the Senate

The House and Senate promptly appointed special committees to review the matter. On July 7, the House concluded, after spirited debate, that a senator was an impeachable official and ordered the chairman of its committee

to inform the Senate that the House planned to present articles of impeachment. The House also demanded that the Senate suspend Blount from his seat and guarantee his appearance to answer the charges.

In the meantime, on July 6, the Senate's committee reported in favor of expelling Blount. After having been mysteriously absent from his seat, Blount suddenly reappeared. He refused to answer questions about the notorious letter but successfully demanded the right to counsel. On July 7, the Senate received the impeachment message from the House and granted the defense counsels' request for more time to prepare the Senate case.

On July 8, after hearing two of Blount's colleagues testify that the letter was in his handwriting and listening to a response by defense counsel, the Senate took up its committee's report. The committee had cited Blount's conduct as "entirely inconsistent with his public trust" and recommended that he be expelled from the Senate. By a vote of 25 to 1, the members upheld the report in the first expulsion of a United States senator. Further, the Senate ordered Blount to appear on July 10 to answer the representatives' articles of impeachment. Although Blount gave assurances that he would appear on that date, he instead spurred his horse home to Tennessee.

## **Conclusion**

The Senate's actions on July 8 were actually contradictory: while attempting to ensure that Blount would be present at his impeachment trial, it simultaneously declared him already guilty when it voted to expel him. In the succeeding months, the Senate unsuccessfully sought to take custody of Blount and return him to the capital. Although Blount graciously received the acting Senate sergeant at arms at his home, the unrepentant Tennessean's supporters and state authorities warned the official to make no attempt to remove their friend.

Despite Blount's absence, his impeachment trial began in the Senate on December 17, 1798, and quickly focused on the Senate's right to try an expelled senator. In a narrow vote, the Senate defeated a resolution that asserted William Blount was an impeachable officer. In this vote, the Senate failed to make clear whether its decision stemmed from a belief that no senator could be impeached or from the belief that someone who ceased to hold a "civil office" also ceased to be impeachable.

Both Republicans and Federalists found it awkward to take political advantage of the Blount case. Federalist proponents of impeachment were in the uncomfortable position of supporting a House move to impeach a senator, thus compromising the Senate's independence of the lower chamber. Republican supporters of Blount, on the other hand, faced the double dilemma of defending both the Federalist Senate and the treasonous Tennessean who had sought to benefit Great Britain, the nation the Federalists were often accused of favoring.

As for Blount, his Washington difficulties had no adverse effect on his popularity in Tennessee. Shortly after his return home, Blount won a seat in the state senate, became speaker of that body, and continued to serve there until his death in 1800.

### Sources

U.S. Congress. Senate. *Annals of Congress*. 5th Cong., 1st and 2d sess. (See pp. 33-45.) An account of Blount's impeachment, as distinguished from his expulsion, is found in the *Annals*, 5th Cong., 1st and 2d sess., pp. 39-45, and 2d and 3d sess., pp. 2245-2416.

———. *The United States Senate, 1787-1801: A Dissertation on the First Fourteen Years of the Upper Legislative Body*, by Roy Swanstrom. S. Doc. 100-31. 100th Cong., 1st sess., 1988; reprint of 1962 edition. (See pp. 51-56.)

Johnson, Allen, ed. *Dictionary of American Biography*. Vol. 2. New York, 1946; reprint of 1935 edition. (See pp. 390-91.)

Masterson, William. *William Blount*. Westport, CT, 1969; reprint of 1954 edition. (See pp. 312-23.)

Turner, Frederick Jackson, ed. "Documents of the Blount Conspiracy." *American Historical Review* 10: 274, 574-606.