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James Blackburn was born on June 19, 1758, in York, Pennsylvania. He married Sara Lytle in 1784, and the couple raised five children. By 1800, Blackburn had moved to Fairfield Township in what later would become Butler County.

On March 24, 1803, the Ohio General Assembly established Butler County primarily from the northern portion of Hamilton County, just weeks after Ohio achieved statehood. The county was named after General Richard Butler, a general killed in 1791 during St. Clair's Defeat in the Northwest Indian War.

The county was quick to form its government, and at the first session of the Court of Quarters, a special election was ordered on May 10, 1803. On June 1, 1803, the election was held, and James Blackburn became the first sheriff of the county. However, he served only until the General Election in October.

At the time of Blackburn's election, the county's facilities were improvised. The U.S. Army supplied Fort Hamilton's powder magazine to serve as the jail, capable of housing four prisoners.

According to a requirement of the 1788 Northwest Territory Militia Law, remaining in force when Ohio became a state in 1803, all male inhabitants between the age of sixteen and fifty were liable to and perform military duty, known as the Common Militia. In 1803, Blackburn served as Captain of the militia company tasked with protecting the jail whenever a prisoner was present.

Historical articles indicate that Blackburn was a commissioner of Butler County as early as 1807 and as late as 1814.

Preceding his public service, Blackburn served in the American Revolutionary War. Records indicate that he was a private under Colonel McCallister in the Pennsylvania "Flying Camp" Battalion. He participated in the Battle of Long Island and was captured at Fort Washington on November 16, 1776. Blackburn was subsequently held by the British as a prisoner aboard the British prison ship Dutton for approximately three months before being paroled in March 1777.



It is believed that James Blackburn died on August 22, 1842, in Fairfield Township, Butler County, although no death record could be located. Despite extensive research, the precise location of his burial has not been identified. It is highly likely that he is buried in the Walker Cemetery in Fairfield, as the Walker family were neighbors. His widow, Sarah Blackburn, died on April 2, 1857, and is buried in Eaton, Ohio.

