

Polk, Sarah Hawkins ^[1]

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6 Mar. 1784–10 Dec. 1843

Sarah Hawkins Polk, businesswoman and community leader, of [Warren County](#) ^[2], was one of thirteen children of Philemon Hawkins, Jr., and Lucy Davis Hawkins. Her father was a noted Patriot during the Revolution, as was her grandfather, Philemon Hawkins, Sr. One of her brothers, [William](#) ^[3], served as governor of North Carolina during the [War of 1812](#) ^[4]; another, John D., was a member of the state senate and a trustee of [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[5].

Little is known about her early life, but Sarah Hawkins obviously received a good education for a woman of her day. On 1 Jan. 1801 she married a widower, Colonel [William Polk](#) ^[6], who was a respected and well-known Revolutionary War veteran. Colonel Polk had moved to [Raleigh](#) ^[7] the year before, and he and his second wife became leaders in the social and civil life of the capital city. Several accounts relate an incident that occurred at a subscription ball held in 1807. When the managers of the ball assigned a socially inferior partner to Mrs. Polk, her husband felt insulted and angry; but she calmed Colonel Polk, telling him that some of the people only wanted to annoy him. She danced with the man and, in the words of Kemp P. Battle, showed "the excellent sense which distinguished her."

Mrs. Polk was noted for her business acumen and her intelligence. Following her husband's death in 1834, she inherited land, enslaved people, and stock. She herself bought at auction the tanyard sold by the executors of [John Rex](#) ^[8] of [Raleigh](#) ^[7] in 1839. Her ability was attested to by her husband who, naming her sole executrix of his will, said, "I have entire confidence, in her integrity, intelligence prudence and parental regard, for our children."

There is conflicting evidence as to the origin of the idea for the experimental railroad to haul granite from the quarry to build the state capitol. For example, [Joseph Gales](#) ^[9], in his reminiscences, said he conceived the plan. Several sources, however, including [David L. Swain](#) ^[10], credit Mrs. Polk with having first advanced the suggestion. William Peck, too, an incorporator of the experimental railroad, undoubtedly attributed the idea to her; when in June 1840 a gala three-day celebration was held in Raleigh to commemorate the completion of both the capitol and the Raleigh and Gaston Railroad, he made one of the toasts to "The distinguished female who suggested the construction of the [Raleigh Experimental Rail Road](#) ^[11]; the first ever seen in North Carolina—She well deserves a name among the benefactors of our State." Colonel Polk had been one of the incorporators, and whether or not Mrs. Polk actually first thought of the railroad, she was evidently concerned about the road and its functioning.

Interest in [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[5] led Sarah Polk and several other women to present a pair of globes to the university. She was a leader in the operation of the [Raleigh Female Benevolent Society](#) ^[12], chartered in December 1821 for the purpose of aiding "distressed females, who may be considered fit objects of charity." For many years the society operated a school for female orphans, and during her lifetime Sarah Polk was active in its program, holding the office of first directress.

When Mrs. Polk died, the *Raleigh Register* reported that "the loss of this lady will be deeply felt, not only by her numerous family and personal friends, but by the community at large. To domestic merits of the most valuable and endearing kind, she added an indefatigable and intelligent devotion to objects of public beneficence; and her name is conspicuous in the annals of the foundation and management of various important charitable establishments."

The Polks had several children: Lucius Junius, who married Mary Ann Eastin in the White House during the administration of [Andrew Jackson](#) ^[13]; Leonidas, bishop of Louisiana and an officer in the Confederate army who was killed in the Battle of Pine Mountain in 1864; Rufus King, who predeceased his mother; George Washington; Susan Spratt; and Andrew Jackson.

Sarah Hawkins Polk was buried in Raleigh's City Cemetery. Inscribed on her tombstone is the epitaph, "Her relative duties were performed with exemplary fidelity."

References:

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Charter of Raleigh Female Benevolent Society in Legislative Papers, 1821, Minutes of Experimental Railroad and Wills of William Polk and Sarah Polk, and Wake County Tax Lists, 1837–43 (North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh); Dr. R. B. Haywood, "Recollections of Raleigh" (manuscript owned by Marshall Delancey Haywood, Jr., Raleigh)

William H. Hoyt, ed., *The Papers of Archibald D. Murphey*, vol. 2 (1914) (sketch of William Polk)

Raleigh *Register*, 8 Jan. 1838, 7, 10 Feb., 16 June 1840

12 Dec. 1843

David L. Swain, *Early Times in Raleigh* (1867)

Subjects:

Biographies ^[14]

Women ^[15]

Authors:

Mitchell, Memory F. ^[16]

Origin - location:

Cumberland County ^[17]

Wake County ^[18]

Raleigh ^[19]

Warren County ^[20]

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