

Coke, Octavius ^[1]

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4 Oct. 1840–30 Aug. 1895

Octavius Coke, North Carolina secretary of state, was born in Williamsburg, Va., the son of John Coke and his wife, Eliza Hawkins. His uncle, Richard Coke, Jr. (16 Nov. 1791–16 Mar. 1851), served two terms in the U.S. House of Representatives (1829–33) as a Jacksonian Democrat from Virginia. One brother, Richard (13 Mar. 1829–14 May 1897), became a Democratic governor of Texas (1873–77) and a U.S. senator (1877–95); two others, George, a physician, and Lucius, later moved to North Carolina and settled in Perquimans ^[2] and Martin ^[3] counties, respectively.

Coke studied at the College of William and Mary (1857–58) but apparently did not graduate; he then read law and opened practice in Williamsburg just before the outbreak of the Civil War. On 31 Aug. 1861 he enlisted in the Williamsburg Junior Guards, later incorporated as Company C, Thirty-second Virginia Infantry; advancing rapidly through the ranks, he was elected captain on 11 May 1862, with his commission to date from 23 Oct. 1861. He was wounded several times, most seriously during the Seven Days' and at Five Forks.

After the war, Coke emigrated to Edenton ^[4], where he again practiced law and almost immediately involved himself in politics. In 1868 he ran unsuccessfully as a Conservative for a seat in the state constitutional convention ^[5]; in 1872 he was the Greeley elector for the First District; and in 1876, despite the Republicans ^[6]' county-wide edge in voter registration, Chowan elected him as a Democrat ^[7] to one term in the state senate, where he quickly established himself as one of the party's main floor leaders.

Moving permanently to Raleigh in 1880, Coke maintained a strong interest in Democratic party affairs. That same year he served as chairman of the party's state executive committee and as such was considered by his contemporaries largely responsible for the Democrats' decisive victory in the fall elections. At the state convention of 1884, he was narrowly defeated for the gubernatorial nomination by Alfred M. Scales ^[8]. In 1889, Governor Daniel G. Fowle ^[9] appointed him to the board of directors of the state psychiatric hospital to assist in the investigation of a scandal that resulted in the forced resignation of Dr. Eugene Grissom ^[10], an old political enemy, as director. In 1891, on the death of Secretary of State William L. Saunders ^[11], Coke was appointed by Governor Thomas M. Holt ^[12] to fill the unexpired term; he was elected in his own right the next year by a large majority.

Coke died at his home in Raleigh and was buried in Oakwood Cemetery. The Raleigh *News and Observer*'s obituary lauded him for his forthright avowal of principle (Coke, an Episcopalian, was an outspoken opponent of prohibition ^[13], especially during the Raleigh referendum of 1886); and Josephus Daniels ^[14], a sometime political opponent, described him as "a gallant Confederate soldier, and an eloquent orator and advocate, with personal charm."

Coke married twice, in 1867 to Caroline Wood of Edenton, who died in 1876, and in 1879 to Kate Fisher of Raleigh. There were two children by his first marriage, Caroline Wood and Octavius, Jr., and four by his second, Kate, Julia, Jeff Fisher, and Richard.

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Lethem, John. "Octavius Coke." *Historical and descriptive review of North Carolina*. Charleston, S.C.: Empire Pub. Co. 1885. 84-85. <https://archive.org/stream/historicaldescri00leth#page/84/mode/2up/> [17] (accessed January 8, 2014).

Subjects:

Biographies [18]

Authors:

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1 January 1979 | Steelman, Bennett L.

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