

Donnell, John Robert ^[1]

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by Gertrude S. Carraway, 1986

1789–15 Oct. 1864



Marling, Jacob. [Portrait of John Robert Donnell].

1816-1818. North Carolina Museum of History. ^[2]John Robert Donnell, lawyer and superior court judge, was a native of Scotland. He was graduated with honors in 1807 from [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[3] and became a prosperous lawyer at New Bern. From 1815 to 1819 he was solicitor for the New Bern judicial circuit, and from 1819 until his resignation in 1837 he was a judge of the superior court.

On 18 June 1816 at New Bern he married Margaret Elizabeth Spaight (1800–1831), daughter of Governor [Richard Dobbs Spaight, Sr.](#) ^[4], and Mary Leech Spaight. After his wife's death Judge Donnell never remarried. Their son, [Richard Spaight Donnell](#) ^[5], was a congressman, state senator, and speaker of the North Carolina House of Commons. Their daughter, Mary Spaight Donnell (28 Sept. 1817–30 Apr. 1883), became the second wife of Congressman [Charles Biddle Shepard](#) ^[6] on 24 Mar. 1840. One of the two Shepard daughters, Margaret Donnell Shepard (11 Jan. 1841–11 Oct. 1925), was married to Samuel Stewart Nelson (12 Nov. 1835–24 Mar. 1876). The other daughter, Mary Spaight Shepard (18 Mar. 1843–1 Jan. 1892), was the first wife of [James Augustus Bryan](#) ^[7]; they were the parents of Colonel [Charles Shepard Bryan](#) ^[8].



Portrait of Margaret Spaight Donnell, wife of John Robert Donnell, circa 1816-1818 by Jacob Marling. Image from the North Carolina Museum of History.

^[9]In his *Recollections of Newbern Fifty Years Ago*, Stephen F. Miller wrote in part: "Judge Donnell was always in the habit of attending market to purchase what articles of produce he needed, and was a man of strict integrity, as well as a kind, considerate, generous neighbor."

"He was a rigid economist, and by the skillful management of the large property which he obtained by inheritance from an uncle, and by his marriage with a daughter of Gov. Spaight, he increased it probably to half a million of dollars. . . . He was a quiet, unobtrusive, upright gentleman, and used to bear with quiet equanimity the biting sarcasm which Mr. [John] Stanly ^[10] was in the habit of thrusting at the court whenever it suited his policy. . . . His life was exemplary, and his abilities and integrity as a Judge secured him a spotless reputation."

Miller reported that Donnell died "at Raleigh, October 15, 1864, while a refugee from his princely house and estates, after Federal occupancy in Newbern." His "princely" brick home at New Bern, renowned for its exquisite, hand-carved woodwork, was destroyed by fire in late January 1970. His adjacent law office, with a "perfectly-proportioned" entrance, was moved to a waterfront site on Trent River near New Bern for restoration and enlargement by a collateral descendant.

A portrait of Donnell was once displayed in the conference room on the second floor of the Archives and History-State Library building, Raleigh, but is now in the possession of the North Carolina Museum of History.

References:

John L. Cheney, Jr., *North Carolina Government, 1585–1974* (1975).

Daniel L. Grant, *Alumni History of the University of North Carolina* (1924).

Stephen F. Miller, *Recollections of Newbern Fifty Years Ago* (1874).

Records (Christ Episcopal Church, New Bern).

Tombstones, Cedar Grove Cemetery (New Bern).

Additional Resources:

Donnell Family Papers, 1795-1869 (collection no. 01154). The Southern Historical Collection. Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. http://www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/d/Donnell_Family.html ^[11] (accessed February 10, 2014).

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Marling, Jacob. "Oil Portrait, Accession #: [H.1997.148.10](#) ^[9]." 1816-1818. North Carolina Museum of History.

Marling, Jacob. "Oil Portrait, Accession #: [H.1997.148.9](#) ^[2]." 1816-1818. North Carolina Museum of History. (accessed April 14, 2014).

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