

Falkener, Sarah DeRippe ^[1]

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by Mary Hinton Duke Kerr, 1986

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Sarah DeRippe Falkener, pioneer in female education and organizer of the Falkener Seminary for Young Ladies of which she was preceptress, was born in London, England, where she married [William Falkener](#) ^[2] about 1775. By 1787 Sarah, William, and their young son had come to America and by 1790 were living in Warrenton, N.C.

In January 1801 Mrs. Falkener, as "Lady Principal," opened the Falkener Seminary, the first boarding school for young ladies in that section of the country. The many notices appearing in the [Raleigh](#) ^[3], [Halifax](#) ^[4], and Petersburg (Va.) newspapers were all in the name of Sarah Falkener until 1811, when her husband's name accompanied hers—even though he was active in the undertaking from the start. Besides instruction in decorum and etiquette, Mrs. Falkener taught her pupils the art of needlework including sample making and dressmaking.

Mrs. Falkener's school was a success from the beginning, and by 1805 an instructor at several European seminaries was engaged to teach French, music, and dancing. The dancing lessons were given in the front room of the nearby Warrenton Eagle Tavern, owned by Marmaduke Johnson. His daughter, who married the Falkeners' only son in 1807, was probably one of the day students in the school. In connection with the teaching of vocal and instrumental music, [Ellen Mordecai](#) ^[5] wrote in her history of Warrenton that, before the arrival of a "spinnett," the piano keys were marked in chalk on a table so that the pupils could practice the scales to a violin accompaniment by the teacher. By 1808 considerable additions had been made to the school buildings to accommodate additional pupils, and five persons besides the music teacher were employed in their tuition. According to the 1810 census, there were thirty-one young girls listed in the Falkener household; these, in addition to the day pupils, appear to have comprised the student body.

Except in 1811 and 1812, and possibly 1814, Sarah Falkener's female seminary was operated through 1815 and may have functioned until her death. She died in Warrenton, where she had lived for almost thirty years, and it appears that she was buried in the Johnson family burying ground.

References:

Charles L. Coon, *North Carolina Schools and Academies, 1790–1840* (1915).

Halifax *North Carolina Journal*, 16 Dec. 1805.

Ellen Mordecai, "Fading Scenes Recalled, or By Gone Days of Hastings, by Esther Whitlock" (Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill).

Raleigh Register, 12 Jan. 1801, 14 Jan., 8 Apr. 1805, 23 May, 2 June 1808, 30 Dec. 1814, 26 Mar., 10 Dec. 1819.

U.S. Census, 1810, Warren County.

Additional Resources:

Young ladies' boarding-school, Warrenton: Falkener Seminary for Young Ladies (Warrenton, N.C.). University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries: <http://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/WU7649164> ^[6]

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1 January 1986 | Kerr, Mary H. D.

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