

Foster, Charles Henry ^[1]

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by T. C. Parramore, 1986

18 Feb. 1830–14 Mar. 1882

Charles Henry Foster, lawyer, editor, and politician, was the son of Cony and Caroline Brown Foster of Orono, Maine. After graduating from [Bowdoin](#) ^[2] with first honors in 1855, he read law under [Israel Washburn](#) ^[3], later governor of Maine, and was admitted to the bar in 1856. Owing perhaps to a condition of intermittent deafness, Foster declined to practice law and instead pursued a career in journalism. Having campaigned actively for Buchanan in the 1856 election, he became editor in 1857 of a Democratic, Southern rights newspaper at Norfolk, Va., the *Southern Statesman*. Later that year he became assistant editor of a larger paper, the *Norfolk Day Book*. He was a delegate to the Democratic state convention at Petersburg in 1858 and published some essays and poetry in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, *Knickerbocker Magazine*, and other periodicals.

At the end of 1859, Foster purchased *The Citizen*, a small Democratic weekly at Murfreesboro, N.C., and moved there to become the new editor. Active from the first in First District politics, he was elected an alternate to the Democratic National Convention at Charleston in 1860 and represented North Carolina at the Baltimore convention later in the year. Still vociferously the champion of Southern rights, he supported the nomination of John C. Breckinridge as the Democratic candidate. Earlier in the year, he married Susan A. Carter of Murfreesboro.

In October 1860, Foster sold his newspaper and applied for a position in the Post Office Department from the outgoing Buchanan administration. He also announced as a candidate to the state convention of February 1861, which was to consider the question of North Carolina's secession from the Union. In his campaign, and in articles published in [W. W. Holden](#) ^[4]'s *Raleigh Standard*, Foster now came forward as a strong Union man, appealing against secession. He withdrew from the race when [W. N. H. Smith](#) ^[5], another Union man, announced for the convention, and left Murfreesboro in February to accept a clerkship in the Post Office Department, Washington, D.C. On a visit to his family in Murfreesboro in May, he was suspected by some in the community to be a spy for Lincoln and was forced to flee the town, leaving his wife and infant daughter behind. He returned to Washington and began to seek a seat in Congress to represent the Unionists of North Carolina.

After an abortive bid to take a seat in the special session of July 1861, Foster contrived a series of letters, postmarked from various North Carolina towns, representing that [Unionism](#) ^[6] was rife throughout the state. The letters also publicized a "Unionist election" in North Carolina in August for the purpose of sending representatives to Congress. Having mysteriously absented himself from Washington in July and August, Foster reappeared in September bearing credentials attesting to his election to Congress by the Unionists. It was subsequently determined that he had probably been in hiding in Lexington, Ky., during these months and that the views represented in his series of letters carried in the *New York Tribune* and other papers were largely false or highly exaggerated. Although further efforts to gain a congressional seat by holding elections in 1861 and 1862 at reoccupied Hatteras Island and elsewhere on the North Carolina coast were futile, it was not until 1863 that he finally abandoned hope for the office. His ambition was evidently nourished by the practice of the Lincoln administration of awarding seats to representatives elected from reoccupied portions of Virginia, Louisiana, and other Confederate states in the early part of the war. Military governor [John Stanly](#) ^[7] and his allies succeeded in effecting the thorough discrediting of Foster during the winter of 1862–63.

In the meantime, Foster had found employment as a recruiting agent for the Union Army in eastern North Carolina. He recruited most of the First North Carolina Union Regiment and won a guarantee that he could take command of a second regiment if he could raise it. This he accomplished in 1863 and was commissioned lieutenant colonel of the Second North Carolina [Union Volunteers](#) ^[8], a position he held until banished from the army and, temporarily, from North Carolina by order of General [Benjamin F. Butler](#) ^[9] in 1864. Butler's actions were taken on the grounds of Foster's inefficiency as an officer and because of complaints to Washington by Unionists close to Governor Stanly.

Having established a law practice on the North Carolina coast in the closing months of the war, Foster returned to Murfreesboro in the spring of 1865 and remained there until 1878. During these years he was an active but not particularly successful [Republican](#) ^[10] political figure, a merchant, and an erstwhile correspondent for the *New York Herald* and various papers in North Carolina and Virginia. In 1878, pleading the ill health of his wife as the reason, Foster moved with his family to Philadelphia and became an editorial writer for the *Philadelphia Record*. He died there four years later. Foster was an active layman in the Episcopal Church.

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