

Kerr, John, Jr. ^[1]

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by Katharine K. Kendall, 1988

10 Feb. 1811–5 Sept. 1879

John Kerr, Jr., congressman, judge, and legislator, was born in Halifax County, Va., of Scottish and English ancestry, the son of Elizabeth Williams and [John Kerr](#) ^[2], a [Baptist](#) ^[3] minister and congressman. He attended school and studied law in Richmond, where his father was pastor of the First Baptist Church. In 1832 he settled in Yanceyville, [Caswell County](#) ^[4], N.C., the home county of his father and grandparents, and in April took an oath to practice as an attorney before the county court. The frequency of his name on deeds, wills, and court cases in Caswell records indicates that his legal practice was large.

Active in politics and a forceful orator in judicial circles, Kerr was an unsuccessful candidate for [governor](#) ^[5] in 1852 on the [Whig](#) ^[6] ticket. He may have lost the election because of his campaign to allow the people to vote on a state constitutional amendment rather than to have the legislature adopt it. Soon afterwards, however, he was elected as a Whig to the Congress of 1853–55. Kerr was a staunch believer in slavery, and in October 1854 the citizens of Yanceyville honored him with a public dinner for his efforts to promote passage of the [Kansas-Nebraska Act](#) ^[7]. In the same year he was speaker for the first Agricultural Fair in Yanceyville. In 1858–60 he served in the General Assembly, and in 1862–63 he was a judge of the Superior Court. With the fall of the [Whig party](#) ^[6], he became a [Democrat](#) ^[8].

After the [Civil War](#) ^[9], Kerr suffered much humiliation from [Reconstruction](#) ^[10] forces and during the [Kirk-Holden](#) ^[11] war was arrested by [George Kirk](#) ^[12]—along with other residents of Caswell County—and imprisoned in [Raleigh](#) ^[13]. His denial of a writ of habeas corpus before the Supreme Court on 2 Aug. 1870 shocked the country and aroused sympathy from his state. In 1874 he was again named a Superior Court judge and served until his death. During his last tenure, he moved to Reidsville to take advantage of rail transportation to meet court schedules.

Active in educational affairs, Kerr was an organizer and trustee of the [Yanceyville Female Academy](#) ^[14] in 1836; solicited funds for the establishment of [Wake Forest College](#) ^[15], of which he served as a trustee from 1844 to 1856; and was a trustee of [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[16] from 1846 to 1868, as well as escheats officer for Caswell County. In 1879 [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[16] awarded him the honorary doctor of laws degree. At the time of his death, Kerr was president of the Historical Society of North Carolina. An ardent and uncompromising Baptist, he served as president of the Beulah Baptist Association and as president of the [Baptist State Convention](#) ^[17] during the periods 1875–76 and 1877–78.

Kerr died in Reidsville and was buried in the Yanceyville Baptist cemetery. He was married twice, first in 1835 to Evelina B. Campbell, of [Orange County](#) ^[18], by whom he had seven children: John Marshall, Mary, William Alexander, Nathaniel, Elizabeth Williams, Fannie, and E. C. His second wife was Anne Eliza Royall, of Chesterfield County, Va., who went to Yanceyville to teach music. They had five children: Junius Royall, Sallie, Grace, Annot Lyle, and Laura.

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