

Leake, Walter Francis ^[1]

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by Warren L. Bingham, 1991

26 Mar. 1799–28 Apr. 1879

See also: [Great Falls Mills](#) ^[2]

Walter Francis Leake, lawyer, politician, and textile manufacturer, was born in [Richmond County](#) ^[3], the son of Walter and Judith Leake. Growing up in the county, he attended local schools and was enrolled at [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[4] in 1815–16; he was a trustee of the university from 1846 to 1868, and in 1847, when President [James K. Polk](#) ^[5] was on campus, Leake participated in the oral examination of some of the students prior to their graduation. Returning home in 1816, he studied law and farmed. He was a delegate to the reform convention that met in Raleigh in November 1823 to discuss the needs of western North Carolina for constitutional reform. In 1831–32 he was a member of the North [Carolina](#) ^[6] House of Commons, and in 1832–33 he served in the senate.

In 1840, as chairman of his [Democratic](#) ^[7] district convention, Leake was directed to write President [Martin Van Buren](#) ^[8] to determine his attitude as a presidential candidate towards slavery. Leake pointed out that "Southern Democrats . . . will not support any man for the Presidency, who does not give the South Satisfactory assurances, that he is opposed to the bold and mischievous movements of the Abolitionists." In [1844 he attended the Democratic National Convention](#) ^[9] in Baltimore that nominated his fellow North Carolinian and friend from college days, James K. Polk, for president. Leake was considered for appointment as ambassador to Cuba and to Brazil but withdrew his name from consideration for the former and the latter did not become available. In 1846 and again in 1857, he was a candidate for his party's nomination for governor but was defeated. In 1861, however, he represented Richmond County in the [Secession Convention](#) ^[10].

Leake is best known for laying the foundation for the [textile](#) ^[11] growth of Richmond County. Perhaps his most notable accomplishment was the establishment of the Richmond Mill, the first cotton mill in Richmond County and the fifth in the state. It was chartered in 1833 with him as president. The mill was burned in 1865, when General William T. Sherman's troops invaded the state, but in 1869 a new mill, [Great Falls Manufacturing Company](#) ^[2], began operation with Leake as president, a post he held until his death. As late as 1945, when the first textile mills were sold to outside interests, all but one of the eight textile mills in the county were being operated by Leake's descendants.

Leake's first wife was Mary Cole, and they were the parents of Anne Cole, Mary Cole, and Hannah Pickett. After Mary's death, he married Mrs. Harrison Lawyer. He was buried in the Leake cemetery in Rockingham.

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