

McDowell, William Wallis ^[1]

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by Robert M. Topkins, 1991

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William Wallis McDowell and wife Sarah Lucinda Smith. Courtesy of the Western NC Historical Association.

^[2]William Wallis McDowell, merchant, Confederate ^[3] soldier, and banker, was born at Pleasant Gardens in present-day McDowell County ^[4], the grandson of Revolutionary War ^[5] hero Major Joseph McDowell ^[6] and the son of James (ca. 1791–1854) and Margaret Erwin McDowell (1801–31). He moved to Asheville ^[7] in 1845 and on 21 July 1846 married Sarah Lucinda Smith, the fifth daughter of James McConnell Smith (1787–1856), a wealthy Asheville merchant and hotelkeeper who is said to have been the first white person born in North Carolina west of the Blue Ridge Mountains ^[8], and his wife Mary (Polly) Patton (ca. 1793–1853).

McDowell soon entered into a mercantile partnership with his father-in-law; the firm, known as Smith and McDowell, maintained a store directly across from the well-known Buck Hotel (which was owned by Smith) on Asheville's main street (now Patton Avenue). In addition, he served as an officer in the Asheville Branch of the Bank of Cape Fear ^[9]. In 1858 McDowell purchased a brick house that had been built by James M. Smith for his son, John Patton Smith. The latter had died unmarried and intestate in 1857. The Smith-McDowell House, said to be Asheville's oldest surviving structure, was restored as the headquarters of the Western North Carolina Heritage Center.



William Wallis McDowell.
Courtesy of the Western NC Historical Association.

^[2]On 20 Nov. 1860 Governor John W. Ellis ^[10] named McDowell captain of the Buncombe Riflemen, organized on 20 Dec. 1859 in response to John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry. In February 1861 this county regiment of militia was reorganized as one of North Carolina's first volunteer companies, and McDowell, along with three other men, was named in the act passed by the General Assembly ^[11] incorporating the company. He formally enlisted on 24 Apr. 1861 at age thirty-eight and was appointed captain of the volunteers. Following the fall of Fort Sumter the Buncombe Riflemen became Company E of the First North Carolina Volunteers or the "Bethel Regiment." In the early summer of 1862 the First Regiment was made a part of the newly created Sixtieth Regiment, which had been organized by McDowell's brother, Dr. Joseph A. McDowell of Madison County ^[12]. William Wallis McDowell was named captain, and later major, of this regiment.

Poor health compelled him to return to Asheville before the end of the Civil War ^[13]. He and his wife continued to reside in the house built by his father-in-law, and he apparently resumed his banking career. Early in 1866 he declined the offer of a friend in Texas to become an officer of a bank there. He noted that his family was too large and that he was then unable to

raise enough money to move to Texas without selling his real estate.

McDowell was the father of nine children. Although he was long associated with the mercantile business and with banking, the censuses of 1860 and 1870 declare him to have been a farmer, and the 1880 census lists his occupation as builder. Census data suggest that McDowell was a large slaveholder—he owned forty slaves in 1860—and a man of considerable wealth. The McDowells disposed of the Smith-McDowell House in April 1881 but apparently continued to reside in Asheville. Mrs. McDowell died there about 1905.

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William Wallis McDowell Papers (Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill).

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U.S. Works Progress Administration, Pre-1914 Graves Index (North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh).

Wilmington North Carolina Presbyterian (obituary), 6 July 1893.

Additional Resources:

Smith-McDowell House, Asheville, NC, National Park Service: <https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/asheville/smi.htm> ^[14]

William Wallis McDowell Papers, 1772-1893 (collection no. 03160). The Southern Historical Collection. Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/m/McDowell,William_Wallis.html ^[15] (accessed August 2, 2013).

William Wallave McDowell, the Western Carolina Historical Association: <http://www.wnchistory.org/Exhibits/wwMcDowell.html> ^[2]

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