

## Spelman, John <sup>[1]</sup>

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**1821–4 Apr. 1889**

John Spelman, printer and newspaper editor, was born in England. Nothing appears to be recorded concerning his origin or education, but a number of Spelman men, all from the county of Norfolk, attended [Cambridge University](#) <sup>[2]</sup> in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He moved to North Carolina to become foreman of the printing office at the state school for the visually and hearing impaired people living in [Raleigh](#) <sup>[3]</sup> by August 1854, when he applied to the [Wake County Court](#) <sup>[4]</sup> for U.S. citizenship. His earliest known employment was as a reporter for William W. Holden, publisher of the *North Carolina Standard*. The Raleigh Board of Commissioners in 1857 for the first time extended the town's limits following the taking of a special local census. Spelman was engaged to analyze the census, and his summary appeared in the *Standard*. In 1858 he became captain of one of the capital city's two volunteer fire companies. In that position he took steps to ensure an adequate source of water for fighting fires and was a member of a committee that conferred with a local engineer about repairing the fire engine.

In November 1859 it was reported that the *Salisbury Banner*, a weekly that he soon converted to a semiweekly, had been "transferred" to Spelman, who was described as "an accomplished writer and superior printer." By then he was well known in journalistic circles, as the *Wilmington Journal* of 18 Nov. 1859 confirmed this appraisal of him. It anticipated the success of his undertaking, since Spelman had been a "faithful and talented reporter of the *Raleigh Standard* for years past." As editor of the *Banner* he strongly opposed ad valorem taxation, which he associated with antislavery and pro-Union sentiment. On 1 June 1860 he also began publication of a [Democratic](#) <sup>[5]</sup> campaign weekly in [Salisbury](#) <sup>[6]</sup>, *The Little Adder*. It attacked the Know-Nothings and ad valorem taxation while supporting [John W. Ellis](#) <sup>[7]</sup> for governor and John C. Breckinridge and [Joseph Lane](#) <sup>[8]</sup> for president and vice-president, respectively. This paper appeared only during the period 1 June–27 July.

On 15 Mar. 1860 in Petersburg, Va., Spelman married Mollie Lea. The census of that year for [Rowan County](#) <sup>[9]</sup> recorded them as residents of a hotel in Salisbury. A daughter, born on 21 Mar. 1861, died the same day and was buried in the Old English Cemetery, Salisbury. They may have intended to remain in Salisbury only briefly, because in March 1860 Spelman founded the *Weekly State Journal* in Raleigh as a continuation of the *Democratic Press*; his connection with the *Journal* lasted at least until 1882, but for some of the time others were associated with him in its operation. During the [Civil War](#) <sup>[10]</sup> his paper served as the voice of the Confederate administration, and he printed some state currency on his press. In the later Prohibition campaign, Spelman's paper was a strong anti-Prohibition voice. For a few weeks in 1872 he also published *The Blasting Powder*, described as being "for Democrats and Conservatives, a weekly campaign paper for the people." At times during the Civil War the *Journal* appeared in weekly, semiweekly, and daily editions, and for a while it was published in [Goldsboro](#) <sup>[11]</sup>. In March 1865, with the approach of the Federal army, a few people fled Goldsboro; among them was Spelman, editor of the *Goldsboro State Journal*. A Northern writer described him as a "little, dirty, nasty, howling, snarling, hypocritical, demagogical secesh" who had contributed to the war. By fleeing, a later historian wrote, he probably "saved his skin."

Soon after becoming governor in 1859, John W. Ellis of Salisbury named Spelman the state printer. In 1860 Spelman bought the Adams Power Press, which had formerly belonged to the North Carolina Institution for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb and Blind. Richard H. Whitaker was involved with him in this undertaking. With the aid of the governor, \$3,500 was secured to acquire the press, but the total amount had not been repaid in March 1865, when the press was destroyed. After W. W. Holden's newspaper and printing office were demolished by Confederate soldiers from Georgia, Holden supporters—unhappy over Holden's support of Reconstruction—destroyed Spelman's press and his newspaper, the *State Journal*, in retaliation.

On 3 Apr. 1866 Spelman began publishing the *Daily Newbern Commercial* as a general newspaper but with emphasis on business. In time a weekly edition also appeared. As editor, Spelman followed a very close line between supporting the Reconstruction government and undertaking to justify the actions of North Carolinians during the years 1861–65. He endorsed the program of President [Andrew Johnson](#) <sup>[12]</sup> for presidential Reconstruction, publicized actions taken by Congress of which he disapproved, and reported news of the late leaders of the Confederacy. A poem by an unidentified Englishman, "A Reply to the Conquered Banner," published in the issue of 16 Apr. 1866, surely brought comfort to many of its readers.

While continuing his *State Journal*, Spelman once more undertook to publish a new campaign paper. In June and July 1872 he produced *Blasting-Powder for Democrats and Conservatives* <sup>[13]</sup>. Subtitled *A Weekly Campaign Paper for the People*, it supported [Augustus S. Merrimon](#) <sup>[14]</sup> in his contest for governor against Republican Tod R. Caldwell.

The 1870 census recorded Spelman and his wife, Mary, who must have been called Mollie, as living in the home of one

Francis Miller in Raleigh—apparently a boarding-house. No children were listed. Following a period of declining health, Spelman died at age sixty-eight; after funeral services at the Church of the Good Shepherd, Raleigh, he was buried in Oakwood Cemetery <sup>[15]</sup>. For a number of years after his death Mary Spelman, a native of North Carolina, was a matron at the St. Luke's Home for women in Raleigh.

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## Subjects:

Biographies <sup>[26]</sup>

Writers, journalists, and editors <sup>[27]</sup>

## Authors:

Powell, William S. <sup>[28]</sup>

## Origin - location:

Wayne County <sup>[29]</sup>

Goldsboro <sup>[30]</sup>

Rowan County <sup>[31]</sup>

Salisbury <sup>[32]</sup>

Wake County <sup>[33]</sup>

Raleigh <sup>[34]</sup>

## From:

Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press. <sup>[35]</sup>

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