

Vance, Robert Brank ^[1]

Vance, Robert Brank

by Daniel M. McFarland, 1996

1793–6 Nov. 1827

Robert Brank Vance, physician and congressman, was born on [Reems Creek](#) ^[2], near [Asheville](#) ^[3] in [Buncombe County](#) ^[4], one of eight children of David (1745–1813) and Priscilla Brank (1756–1836) Vance. His father was a surveyor, teacher, and farmer who, as an officer in the Revolution, saw service at Brandywine, Germantown, Monmouth, Valley Forge, and King's Mountain; he also served in the Assembly several terms, was first clerk of court for Buncombe, and held the rank of colonel in the local militia. Two nephews of Robert Brank Vance became congressmen. One of them was a general in the Confederate army and the other, [Zebulon Baird Vance](#) ^[5], was North Carolina's [Civil War](#) ^[6] governor and a U.S. senator.

Robert Brank Vance was educated at Newton Academy in Asheville and studied medicine at the school of Dr. Charles Harris in [Cabarrus County](#) ^[7]. He began to practice in Asheville in 1818 but soon realized that he was physically unsuited to conduct his profession. One of his legs was six inches shorter than the other, and his lameness made it difficult for him to attend his patients. Fortunately, winnings from a lottery allowed him to retire and devote himself to literature, history, and politics.

In the election of 1821 Vance challenged incumbent Felix Walker of the Twelfth [Burke County](#) ^[8] Congressional District. Old and long-winded, Walker was called "Talking to Buncombe" in Washington, where his dull speeches were notorious. Nevertheless, the congressman, who had been a friend of [Daniel Boone](#) ^[9] and was a veteran of the Revolution and Indian wars, defeated the young doctor. In a rematch two years later the count was apparently even. When required to break the tie, the sheriffs of the district gave the victory to the younger man.

Congressman Vance was active in the campaign to reform the state constitution. In April 1824 he was the only member of the North Carolina delegation to support the act authorizing a survey of possible federally financed roads and canals. In February 1825, when the disputed presidential race was decided by the House, he was one of the two congressmen from his state to support Andrew Jackson. During his one term on Capitol Hill he served on the Revolutionary Pensions Committee.

Four men announced as candidates to represent the Burke district in 1825, when Walker and Vance were joined on the ticket by Samuel P. Carson of Burke and [James Graham](#) ^[10] of [Rutherford](#) ^[11]. Before election day Walker withdrew in favor of Carson, and Carson won the race. This prematurely forced Vance into an unwelcomed retirement. Two years later he tried to unseat Carson. It was a vituperative contest seldom equaled in the mountain district. In Asheville Vance called his opponent a coward. A few days later in [Morganton](#) ^[12], Carson's hometown, where the crowd obviously contained many of Carson's kin, Vance insulted Carson's father. Carson held his temper until after the election, which he won by a wide margin. Then Carson challenged Vance to a duel. Vance realized his danger and wrote his will: "anticipating in a few days a probable exit from this earthly theatre," he divided his property. His library of some five hundred volumes he inventoried and left to three friends who were to help "in the affair of honour now pending."

The duel took place at Saluda Gap in November 1827. Dr. Vance was fatally wounded. His gun was not fired, and some said he had deliberately courted death. He was buried in the family burial ground at Reems Creek. The former congressman had never married.

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[Biographies](#) [25]

[Physicians, Dentists, Pharmacists, and other Medical Professionals](#) [26]

[Political leaders](#) [27]

Authors:

[Mcfarland, Daniel M.](#) [28]

Origin - location:

[Buncombe County](#) [29]

[Asheville](#) [30]

[Cabarrus County](#) [31]

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1 January 1996 | Mcfarland, Daniel M.

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