

Duffy, William ^[1]

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by Mark F. Miller, 1986

d. August 1810

William Duffy, lawyer and politician, was the son of George Duffy, an unsuccessful lawyer of New Bern. Little is known about young Duffy's early life. In 1792 he was licensed to practice law in New Bern and five years later moved to Hillsborough to establish his practice. Family problems figured prominently in his decision to relocate; Archibald DeBow Murphey, a future student of Duffy, recounted that William Duffy "was the child of misfortune, thrown upon the world without friends and without fortune." His parents separated in 1797; after settling his father's debts and affairs, he, with his mother and two sisters, hoped to start anew in Hillsborough. One sister, Elizabeth, died in 1800; the other, Mary, married Thomas Scott. The young lawyer enjoyed immediate success and in a short time had acquired the largest practice in the [Orange County](#) ^[2] court. In addition, Duffy acted as counsel and land agent for the fledgling [University of North Carolina](#) ^[3]. In 1802 he moved for a final time to [Chatham County](#) ^[4] but retained a country home, Oakley Wood, near [Fayetteville](#) ^[5]. The following year he was involved in a duel with [Duncan Cameron](#) ^[6] for the hand of Rebecca Bennehan. Duffy lost both the duel and Rebecca and was severely wounded in the exchange. Nevertheless, his law practice and reputation continued to grow and in 1806 he represented Fayetteville in the [General Assembly](#) ^[7]. On 21 August of the same year he married Peggy Bell, daughter of Robert Bell of Orange County. Through years of perseverance Duffy had become a gifted orator despite a speech impediment. He was recognized as one of the ablest lawyers in the state and his pupils included [Archibald DeBow Murphey](#) ^[8] and future Vice-President [William R. King](#) ^[9]. When Duffy died at his home in Chatham County, he was described as being "in middle age." He had no children but left a part of his meager estate to a niece, Elizabeth Sanderson.

References:

Chatham County wills (North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh).

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Additional Resources:

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[Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press.](#) ^[18]

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