

Hathaway, James Robert Bent ^[1]

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by Herbert R. Paschal, Jr., 1988

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James Robert Bent Hathaway, businessman and historical editor, was born in [Edenton](#) ^[2]. The Hathaway family, of Welsh origin, migrated in the mid-eighteenth century from Dartmouth, Mass., and settled first in [Tyrrell County](#) ^[3] and later in [Chowan County](#) ^[4]. Although born into a family of at least six children, Hathaway was one of only two children and the only son of Burton Walker and Sarah Ann Bent Hathaway to reach maturity. He received his education from private tutors and at the Edenton Academy. As a young boy he joined the Methodist Episcopal church, in which he was active throughout his life.

His lawyer-planter father died when he was sixteen, and he soon assumed the management of the extensive family holdings in land and slaves. Hathaway suffered heavy financial losses during the [Civil War](#) ^[5], but in 1866 he established a successful general mercantile business in Edenton. This large and originally prosperous business was destroyed by the panic of 1873. In 1879 he began a general collecting and business agency which evolved into the first private bank in Chowan County. Hathaway's bank, locally known as "The Counting House," served a broad area about Edenton and prospered until the depression of 1893 forced it to close in 1895. During his business career, Hathaway was elected mayor of Edenton on four occasions.

His heavy financial losses and his lack of any steady employment following the collapse of his banking business placed Hathaway in severe financial straits. His situation was relieved somewhat with the recovery through the U.S. government of some French spoliation claims. This last windfall made it possible for the former businessman, now in his late fifties, to undertake a new career.

Hathaway had long been noted in Edenton as "an exceptionally well read person" with a strong interest in North Carolina history and "a flair for mathematics." In 1898 a letter from a woman in Georgia awakened in him an interest in genealogy. It was while in pursuit of his family's history that he became aware of the vast store-house of early public records to be found in the county courthouses of eastern North Carolina. He determined to make these available to anyone interested in the state's history, and in 1900 he launched a quarterly called *The North Carolina Historical and Genealogical Register* ^[6]. From 1900 to 1903 Hathaway published ten issues; an almost completed eleventh number was published after his death by his son. Although the *Register* contained a few historical articles and features, at least 90 percent of its pages were devoted to the publication of records from the courthouses of the Albemarle region and from the secretary of state's office in Raleigh.

In his last years Hathaway was permitted to actually live in the Chowan courthouse. His intimate knowledge of the records it contained was especially fortuitous, as Edenton had served as the first capital of North Carolina and many seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century provincial records were still housed in the colonial courthouse building. Most of these he published in the *Register*. The journal eventually obtained subscribers in thirty states, but each issue brought a small financial loss. At Hathaway's death, his books showed a total deficit of \$450. It was reliably reported that he "often went without the necessaries of life that he might publish the magazine containing the fruits of his efforts." A number of important primary source items that he published have since disappeared, and they are now known only because of their publication in his quarterly.

Hathaway penned an occasional article for his journal, but he wrote only one other published item. This was an article describing the erection and probable location of the first church in Chowan and the erection of the present St. Paul's Church in Edenton. The piece was included in a commemorative volume published in 1901 honoring the two hundredth anniversary of St. Paul's Parish.

On 23 July 1861 Hathaway married Margaret Grizzell Reed of [Perquimans County](#) ^[7], the daughter of James V. and Mary C. Reed and a descendant of the Proprietary governor, [William Reed](#) ^[8]. The couple had two children, Burton Walker (1862–1917) who became a physician, married, and had four children, and Lorena Bent who never married. Hathaway died at the home of his son at Merry Hill in [Bertie County](#) ^[9] and was buried in Beaver Hill Cemetery, Edenton.

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