

Meares, Oliver Pendleton ^[1]

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by John R. Jordan, Jr., 1991

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Oliver Pendleton Meares, jurist, lawyer, secession ^[2] leader, political activist, and Confederate officer, was born in Wilmington, the sixth son of William Belvidere ^[3] and Catherine Grady Davis Meares. Like his brothers, he attended Bingham School ^[4] at Hillsborough, then went on to graduate from The University of North Carolina ^[5] in 1848. Afterwards he studied law under Judge William H. Battle ^[6] in the university law school and in 1850 began his legal career in Wilmington.

An old-line Whig ^[7] and a recognized political leader in the state, Meares was a significant figure in the campaign of 1852. In 1856 he was a presidential elector on the Millard Fillmore ^[8] ticket, and four years later he gained further prominence in the campaign of 1860.

Meares played an important role in the duel between Dr. W. C. Wilkings and J. H. Flanner ^[9] in which the former was killed. Wilkings had challenged Flanner over remarks made during a political debate in Wilmington during the campaign of 1856, and Meares acted as Flanner's second. The dueling party went to South Carolina, where dueling was legal, and after the customary ceremonies, the duel with pistols began. After two exchanges of fire, neither man was down, and settlement negotiations were initiated by Wilkings's seconds and friends. However, when Meares demanded a full apology in accordance with the *code duello*, the negotiations collapsed. The duel resumed and on the third exchange of fire, Flanner killed Wilkings. This is believed to have been the last political duel fought between North Carolinians.

Following Abraham Lincoln' ^[10]s election as president, Meares became one of North Carolina's most outspoken Secessionists. The Cape Fear historian James Sprunt ^[11] records that at a public meeting in Wilmington in 1861, Meares delivered a ringing call for the state's immediate secession from the Union. Describing the occasion, Sprunt wrote that Meares "was an ardent secessionist and a fiery speaker, and the younger element were carried away by his eloquence." When the break with the Union finally came, Oliver P. Meares was immediately commissioned a captain of the Wilmington Rifle Guards, which occupied Fort Caswell ^[12] on 16 Apr. 1861. Just the day before he had been elected captain of a company in the Eighteenth Regiment, and on 20 July he was elected lieutenant colonel of the regiment. Defeated for reelection on 24 Apr. 1862, when the regiment was reorganized, he later became assistant quartermaster (captain) of the Sixth Regiment. In 1863 he was a candidate for a seat in the Confederate Congress ^[13] but was defeated by Thomas C. Fuller ^[14].

After the war Meares resumed his law practice in Wilmington and became politically active. In January 1867 he was elevated to the bench in New Hanover County ^[15], a post he held until the adoption of the new state constitution in 1868. Returning to his law practice, he played a role in the campaigns of 1868, 1870, 1872, and 1876. In 1877 he was reappointed to the bench by the General Assembly ^[16] and had a long and distinguished career as judge of the criminal circuit for New Hanover and Mecklenburg counties.

Meares married Ann Elizabeth Wright, the daughter of Dr. Thomas H. Wright of Wilmington.

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