

Meares, William Belvidere ^[1]

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by Eugenie W. Carr, 1991

8 Dec. 1787–11 Oct. 1841

William Belvidere Meares ^[2], lawyer, planter, and politician, was born in Spring Garden, New Hanover County ^[3], to Jane Meares, a spinster. His father was Henry Hyrne Watters, a prominent planter who acknowledged his paternity, helping raise young Meares and giving him a large plantation when he was twenty-one. Meares attended the Reverend William Bingham ^[4]'s school at Hillsborough and The University of North Carolina ^[5], where he gave an oration at the 1804 commencement; he was a member of the class of 1806. Kemp Battle (1907) called him a "non-graduating contemporaneous matriculate," but according to the 1954 *Alumni Directory*, he received an A. B. degree. In any case, Meares read law with William Gaston ^[6] and became something of a protégé of the prominent lawyer (he named his second son William Gaston; his first was named after Henry Watters).

In 1818 Meares was elected to represent Wilmington in the state legislature ^[7], and the following year he was among the civic leaders toasting President James Monroe ^[8] during Monroe's visit to Wilmington. In 1822, by then a fairly prominent lawyer himself, Meares was a director of the Bank of Cape Fear ^[9]. He was a member of the North Carolina Senate in 1829–30 and again in 1833–34, when he received all sixty-eight votes cast in Wilmington. In 1835 he was a delegate ^[10] from Sampson County ^[11] to the state constitutional convention, where he served on the rules committee. An Episcopalian ^[12], Meares voted for a resolution offered by William Gaston, a Roman Catholic, changing the religious requirement for state officeholders from "Protestant" to "Christian."

At the first meeting of the new Wilmington and Weldon Railroad ^[13] on 14 Mar. 1836, Meares was elected a director of the company that owned what was to be, for a while, the world's longest single line of railroad track (161½ miles). Just three years earlier, on 13 Mar. 1833, he had been appointed a director and chairman of a group of subscribers wishing to erect a "free bridge between this place [Wilmington] and Hilton."

Sometime between 1835 and 1840, Meares quit politics and the practice of law and devoted himself to running his big rice plantation at Meares Bluff on the Cape Fear River ^[14]. He reportedly "adopted and improved . . . scientific methods of farming [with] great success." A trustee of The University of North Carolina from 1835 to 1840, he was an "ardent advocate and supporter of the state university as well as of an efficient system of public schools throughout the state." Meares also took an interest in amateur theater as a member of the Thalian Association. Like other observers, James Green Burr, in a pamphlet on the association (1871), described Meares as outspoken and perhaps rather stubborn once his mind ("more solid than brilliant—more practical than imaginative") was made up. He had strong principles and was "a devout lover of truth," and he capped all that by being handsome and "possessed of elegant manners."

On 11 Nov. 1811 Meares married Susan Mary Pendleton at St. James's Church; she died two years later, at age eighteen, after giving birth to a daughter. In 1816 he married Catherine Grady Davis, the daughter of General Thomas Davis ^[15] of Fayetteville; they had eight sons. Meares died suddenly while visiting friends in Warren County ^[16]. He was buried at Magnolia Cemetery in Auburn, Brunswick County ^[17]; the grave has since been lost. There is a portrait in the possession of Henry Jay MacMillan, 118 South Fourth Street, Wilmington.

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