

## **Simmons, James Frederick** <sup>[1]</sup>

### **Simmons, James Frederick**

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**19 Dec. 1826–19 Dec. 1905**

James Frederick Simmons, poet, newspaperman, and judge, was born in Halifax, the son of James (1800–1891) and Susan Gary Simmons. His mother died when he was an infant and he was raised by an aunt, Polly Gary. He probably was educated in a local academy before joining relatives in the summer of 1843 in Grenada, Miss., where he remained for four years working as a store clerk. Simmons began writing poetry, some of which was published in a local newspaper. In the summer of 1847 he returned to North Carolina to manage property inherited from his maternal grandfather, John Gary, and it probably was during this period that he read law. On 15 Mar. 1848 he married, at Woodland in [Northampton County](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, Elizabeth Dorothy Crump, a niece of the Reverend Hezekiah G. Leigh, one of the founders of [Randolph-Macon College](#) <sup>[3]</sup>.

At the time of the 1850 census, when he was twenty-three, Simmons was editor of the *Weldon Herald*, of which no copy survives. He had been editor since at least May 1848, when he wrote to William Henry Haywood about being a proxy to the Philadelphia convention. This newspaper venture was not successful, and he became depot agent for the [Wilmington and Weldon Railroad](#) <sup>[4]</sup>. With resources from his own legacy and an inheritance of his wife's, Simmons purchased a large flour mill in Weldon. This proved to be a profitable undertaking, and he sold it before returning to Mississippi. He bought a plantation in [Panola County](#) <sup>[5]</sup> for ten thousand dollars and invested several thousand more in purchasing and enslaving workers and laborers to operate it. Here his family lived from 1860 until a few years after the [Civil War](#) <sup>[6]</sup>. At least one of his children, Florence, had been born in North Carolina and was one year old at the time of the 1850 census. In time he and his wife had five additional children.

Early in 1862 Simmons returned to North Carolina and in spite of growing deafness served in the rank of major as quartermaster in Matthew W. Ranson's Brigade. Because of poor health he had returned to Mississippi by early 1864 and still with the rank of major was serving as paymaster with troops there; on 21 March he was commended "for gallantry and efficiency on the field." In mid-May 1865 at Memphis, Tenn., when he was paroled, it was noted that he had been president of the Electoral College in 1861 and was a lawyer by occupation.

Simmons returned to Panola County and resumed the practice of law. In 1867 he built a new home in Sardis, the county seat, and became an important force in the development of the town. In 1870 he was appointed chancellor (judge) of the Tenth District, a position he held until 1874. Previously he had been referred to as Major Simmons, but henceforth he was addressed as Judge Simmons. For a number of years Simmons had also edited the *Panola Star*, but in 1880 he bought the Henderson, Ky., *Reporter*, which he edited for five years before he moved it to Sardis and established the *Southern Reporter*. He remained senior editor of the latter paper for the remainder of his life.

Simmons continued to write, contributing to various newspapers and periodicals. He once mentioned that he did not have copies of much of what he had written. *Godey's Lady's Book* <sup>[7]</sup> for November 1850 published an account by him of a Revolutionary War heroine from [Halifax County](#) <sup>[8]</sup>, and the issues of *Graham's Magazine* <sup>[9]</sup> for February and June 1853 each contained poems by him. Eight more poems were included in [Mary Bayard Clarke](#) <sup>[10]</sup>'s anthology of North Carolina poetry, *Wood-Notes* <sup>[11]</sup>, published in 1854. Two volumes of his collected verse were issued by the commercial publisher, J. B. Lippincott and Company of Philadelphia. *The Welded Link, and Other Poems* <sup>[12]</sup>, in 1881, contained 82 poems, and *Rural Lyrics, Elegies, and Other Short Poems* <sup>[13]</sup>, in 1885, contained 104. The preface to the first was dated at Sardis, Miss., while the second was at Cozy Nook, Henderson, Ky. In the latter he commented that he had intended to complete one or two narrative poems but that other duties and the lack of time prevented him from doing so.

Simmons enjoyed traveling with his family and often also took friends along. His thirteen-room home, which he called Malvern Villa, surrounded by formal gardens and a landscaped park, was often the scene of elaborate parties. His health began to fail about ten years before his death at age seventy-nine, but he remained busy with his accustomed activities.

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Elizabeth M. Hutchison, "[Judge J. F. Simmons: Lawyer, Soldier, Editor, Poet](#)" <sup>[14]</sup> (typescript, North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1943).

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**Subjects:**

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Civil Rights <sup>[16]</sup>

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Lawyers <sup>[18]</sup>

Military <sup>[19]</sup>

Newspapers and magazines <sup>[20]</sup>

Poets <sup>[21]</sup>

Writers, journalists, and editors <sup>[22]</sup>

**Authors:**

Powell, William S. <sup>[23]</sup>

**Origin - location:**

Halifax <sup>[24]</sup>

Northampton County <sup>[25]</sup>

**From:**

Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press. <sup>[26]</sup>

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