

Baker, Simmons Jones ^[1]

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Baker, Simmons Jones

by Claiborne T. Smith, Jr., 1979

15 Feb. 1775–18 Aug. 1853

Simmons Jones Baker, physician and legislator, was born in [Hertford County](#) ^[2], the son of [Laurence Baker](#) ^[3] and his first wife Anne Jones, daughter of Albridgeton Jones and Elizabeth Simmons. Baker's mother died when he was young, and he lived for seven years with his maternal aunt, Sarah Burgess, in southeastern Virginia; there he attended the school run by her husband, the Reverend Henry John Burgess. In 1793 he went to Europe and attended lectures at the medical school in [Edinburgh](#) ^[4], then the most celebrated in the world. There is no record that he was graduated, but in that day few physicians took a degree.

After his return home, he married, on 24 Oct. 1795, Polly Smith, the daughter of Turner and Bettie Edwards Smith of Scotland Neck [Halifax County](#) ^[5]. The Bakers settled on a Halifax County plantation given Polly by her grandfather, James Smith, and in 1796 they built a house called Greenwood. Greenwood is now the southern end of the present town of Scotland Neck.

When Baker went to England in 1793, he carried with him an old armorial seal that had passed down in the family and took it to the Herald's College in London to find out if any Baker still lived in England with the same coat of arms. He found that Sir George Baker, then physician to [King George III](#) ^[6], was the only such person. He made a second trip to Europe shortly after his marriage to consult this Dr. Baker about a personal illness. The trip was successful, and in gratitude he included the name "George" in the name of his firstborn son.

In 1800, Baker sold Greenwood and moved several miles east to Palmyra, in what was the [Martin County](#) ^[7]. He became politically active and represented the county in the House of Commons in 1814 and 1815 and in the senate from 1816 to 1818. In 1828, Baker moved to Jackson County, Fla., where he remained for several years, acquiring large tracts of land near the present town of Marianna and around St. Andrews Bay. His plantation in Florida was Buckland Place. For the next decade he lived in Florida intermittently; then he returned to Raleigh, where he resided until shortly before his death.

Tradition says that Baker was a competent and learned physician, but little information is available about this important facet of his life. In a published article, Dr. Jeremiah Battle referred to notes from Baker on a severe type of malaria prevalent on the [Roanoke](#) ^[8], and mention is made of dissections performed on victims dying of the disease. As was the custom of the day, Baker undoubtedly trained many young physicians in his home, but no names are known. Two sons-in-law were physicians, and they, with his ward, Dr. Albridgeton S. N. Burgess, were probably of the number. He does not appear to have participated in the first attempt to form the [North Carolina Medical Society](#) ^[9] in 1799. After 1849, when the society was finally organized on a sound basis, Baker was listed as an honorary member.

Baker was interested in education all his life. He was a trustee of the [Vine Hill Academy](#) ^[10] in Scotland Neck when it was chartered by the legislature in 1809. Vine Hill was influential in [Eastern North Carolina](#) ^[11] for a hundred years. He was a trustee of [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[12] from 1812 until his death in 1853, and it appears that he took this duty seriously. On 22 June 1831, during the commencement activities at Chapel Hill, friends of education organized the [North Carolina Institute of Education](#) ^[13], and Baker was unanimously elected president.

An active layman of the [Episcopal church](#) ^[14], Baker was one of the churchmen who organized Trinity Church, Scotland Neck, in February 1833. On 7 Mar. 1838, Baker and several other physicians founded St. Luke's Church in Marianna, Fla., and he served as the first senior warden.

Baker was grand master of the [Masons](#) ^[15] in North Carolina in 1832 and again in 1840 and in that capacity laid the cornerstone of the present [capitol](#) ^[16] building in [Raleigh](#) ^[17], 4 July 1833.

Describing Baker as a man of liberal education, very lively and intelligent in his conversation, [Elisha Mitchell](#) ^[18] commented, "He sets a higher value on the 'Amor Patriae' than any man I've ever known."

Polly, Baker's first wife, died in 1812, after the birth of her eighth child. In 1814, Baker married Ann Cleverius Seawell, widow of Henry Hunter of Williamston. She died in Raleigh in 1843, leaving one surviving child, Elizabeth, who married William H. Dudley, of Wilmington. By his first marriage, Baker had two sons and five daughters who reached maturity. The oldest son, James Laurence George, was a member of the legislature from Martin in 1832. James and Simmons, Jr., eventually moved to Florida; the town of Greenwood there was named for the old home in Halifax County. Of the daughters, Emily married Dr. Benjamin B. Hunter of Tarboro; Mary Eliza married William Armistead of [Bertie](#) ^[19]; Anna Maria married Dr. William Hunter of Raleigh; Ann Jones married Gabriel Long Stewart of Martin; and Laura married the Reverend Joseph H. Saunders.

Baker died in Raleigh. An obituary in the [Raleigh Register](#) ^[20] stated: "During his long and valuable life, he enjoyed the respect and esteem of all who came into association with him—he was a true specimen of that excellent race of men—now nearly extinct, the old school gentleman." A portrait of Dr. Baker, in profile with white wig and queue, hangs in the [Masonic Temple](#) ^[21] in Raleigh. He was buried in a private cemetery near Scotland Neck, Halifax County, where a large central monument records the ages of Baker, his wives, and their progeny.

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