

Cherry, William Walton ^[1]

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by Francis Speight, 1979

1806–45

William Walton Cherry, legislator, was born near Windsor in [Bertie County](#) ^[2]. His father, Solomon Cherry, was at one time or another sheriff, clerk of the court, and member of the [General Assembly](#) ^[3]. His uncle, William Cherry, was graduated from [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[4] in a class of three in 1800, was a trustee of the university from 1804 to 1809, and had a brilliant career as an attorney until his untimely death, hastened by intemperance, at the age of twenty-seven.

Cherry studied at The University of North Carolina but did not graduate. He taught school for two or three years, married Mary Etheridge of Colerain, and was in the mercantile business for about two years. Afterward, he began the study of law with James H. Jones, a well-known lawyer of the day, and in due course was admitted to the bar. He became interested in politics and in 1838, after two unsuccessful attempts, defeated the wealthy and politically powerful [Dr. Alexander Mebane](#) ^[5] for the state senate.

In the senate he was made chairman of the Committee on Education and in that capacity worked with those who had for several years been trying to establish free public education. His influence enabled a bill for that purpose to be reported favorably. Called the Cherry Bill, it passed the senate, and a similar measure was passed in the house. Cherry is thus associated with the establishing of free public education in North Carolina.

In 1840, Cherry was a delegate to the national convention of the [Whig party](#) ^[6] in Harrisburg, Pa. He went as a supporter of Henry Clay for president, but after the nomination went to Harrison, Cherry worked diligently to help elect him.

In 1844, Cherry was again in the North Carolina legislature, this time in the House of Commons representing Bertie County. In 1845 he was unanimously chosen as the [Whig](#) ^[6] candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives from the first district, but he died the following week. Having gone to Jackson to attend the Northampton County Court, he became very uncomfortable and unresponsive to friends' salutations in the court room on Monday morning. That night he went to bed with a severe chill, and his death occurred Friday morning, bringing to a close, when he was just thirty-nine, his brilliant and promising career.

References:

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Subjects:

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[Public officials](#) ^[11]

Authors:

[Speight, Francis](#) ^[12]

Origin - location:

[Bertie County](#) ^[13]

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