

Cowles, Josiah ^[1]

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by Horace W. Raper, 1979; Revised November 2022.

3 Apr. 1791–11 Nov. 1873

Josiah Cowles, Western North Carolina merchant, manufacturer, and political leader, was born in Farmingbury (now Wolcott), Conn., the son of Calvin Cowles. Little is known of Josiah's early boyhood, except that he was orphaned at about ten years of age. Despite the insolvency of his father's estate, he acquired a good common school education and learned the tinner's trade, perhaps as an apprentice. Prior to marriage in 1815, he made a profitable trip to the Creek country in Georgia, peddling Yankee notions and buying [animal skins](#) ^[2]: at that time it was considered unpatriotic to wear an English hat, and American hatters were forced to pay well for rabbit skins. He set up a tinner's shop later and worked one year near Kernersville, but he settled permanently in 1816 at Hamptonville, [Yadkin County](#) ^[3].

Cowles became one of the most successful businessmen in his section, engaging in general mercantile business and the manufacture of tinware for local and national markets. He acquired a large fortune in land and enslaved people (and their labor), most of which was lost during the Civil War and [Reconstruction](#) ^[4] periods when slavery was abolished; his losses were worsened by his refusal to press for collection of debts, lest he distress his debtors. He was known for his strict integrity, great benevolences, and hospitable and generous nature. Because of his strong leadership capabilities, he took an active role in local and state politics, serving as a justice of the peace and member of the [court of pleas and quarter sessions](#) ^[5] for [Surry](#) ^[6] and Yadkin counties for many years, as a member of the council of state to Governor [William A. Graham](#) ^[7] (1845–49), and as a postmaster for nearly half a century. Cowles was an old-line Whig in politics, and although he bitterly opposed secession, he supported the Confederacy during the [Civil War](#) ^[8].

Cowles was twice married. First, on 20 Sept. 1815, he married Deborah Sanford (11 June 1795–9 Jan. 1827) of Woodbridge and Meriden, Conn., who was related to many prominent Connecticut families, including that of Henry Ward Beecher. On 25 July 1828, Cowles married Mrs. Nancy Caroline Carson Duvall (19 May 1802–3 July 1863), the widow of Alvin Simpson Duvall of Hamptonville. She was the daughter of Captain Andrew Carson of Revolutionary War fame and the niece of Lindsay Carson, father of Christopher ("Kit") Carson, the famous western scout, guide, and soldier. Cowles was the father of eleven children, several of whom distinguished themselves as outstanding business and political leaders of North Carolina. The eleven were Eliza Ann, who married Bilson Belzar Benham; Elvira Deborah; Calvin Joseph, an outstanding Republican leader in the state; Abel Sanford, a physician who died at the age of twenty-nine; Josiah; [Andrew Carson](#) ^[9]; Miles Melmoth, lieutenant in the Thirty-eighth North Carolina Infantry, who died of wounds received at the Battle of Mechanicsville, Va.; Lewis Williams; [William Henry Harrison](#) ^[10], Democratic congressman; [Henry Clay](#) ^[11], federal court clerk at Statesville and Charlotte; and Caroline Mary.

Cowles was not a member of any religious denomination but regularly attended the local Presbyterian church. He was buried at the Flat Rock Cemetery, Hamptonville.

References:

Calvin D. Cowles, *Genealogy of the Cowles Families in America* (1929). ^[12]

Additional Resources:

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Origin - location:

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