

Falkener, William ^[1]

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by Mary Hinton Duke Kerr, 1986

1751–6 Dec. 1819

William Falkener, merchant, justice of the county court, teacher, and pioneer in female education, was born in London, England, where members of his family operated a tea warehouse in Newgate Street. Before emigrating to America he married [Sarah DeRippe](#) ^[2], who later organized a seminary for young ladies in Warrenton, N.C. Family tradition that the vessel on which he sailed for America with his wife and young son was wrecked at sea may be substantiated by the Warrenton history written in 1845 by [Ellen Mordecai](#) ^[3], who probably had been one of his pupils. She told how Falkener frequently described his joy in escaping from the dangers of the ocean and how, on their safe arrival, he knelt to kiss the beach in gratitude and penciled the date on a scrap of paper from his portfolio.

Falkener was residing in Philadelphia, Pa., in 1787, when he first bought land in [Franklin County](#) ^[4], N.C. It appears that by 1790 he was in Warrenton, living in a house rented from [General Thomas Person](#) ^[5] until buying his first town lots and houses in 1793. In 1792 he witnessed the will of James Milles, one of the original trustees of the Warrenton Academy for boys. Milles's son taught "a few scholars and them chiefly English", one of whom may have been Falkener's son.

Falkener's general interest in education is evidenced by the fact that he was a trustee of the Warrenton Academy and secretary to the board of trustees by 1792. Until 1805, when the steward's house for the academy was built, the students had to board in homes in the town. The 1800 census shows that twenty-six young boys were in Falkener's household; the five young men besides his own son living with him may have been instructors in the academy. In addition, he assisted his wife in the management of the Falkener Seminary for Young Ladies from the time it was opened in 1801; and the 1810 census lists thirty-one girls in his household in Warrenton. One of the most elegant pensmen of his day, Falkener instructed the pupils in penmanship, reading, spelling, and English literature, utilizing his large and valuable collection of books. He also made their copybooks and taught them lessons on fortitude and English customs and history.

Falkener's merchandizing operations were on a large scale from the start; in the course of his business he dealt with merchants in Philadelphia and Petersburg and imported merchandise from Europe. He also served as justice of the Warren County [Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions](#) ^[6] (at least from 1795 to 1806) and at times acted as a handwriting expert in proving signatures on legal documents. From 1798, when he assigned all of his property to his son and only child, William Augustus Keppel Falkener, the two worked together in most of their many undertakings; both were closely associated with Marmaduke Johnson, whose daughter the younger Falkener married in 1807. Some of their operations were transacted as Falkener & Co. and as Johnson, Falkener & Co. Falkener's store was located next to the Warrenton Eagle Tavern, owned by Marmaduke Johnson, on Main Street, a block from his wife's Seminary for Young Ladies. The younger Falkener was entry taker for Warren County in 1801, proprietor of the Warrenton Race Course and the Warrenton Eagle Tavern in 1810 and 1811 (both of which he bought from his father-in-law and sold to his brother-in-law), county trustee in 1813, and, at the time of his death in 1819, clerk of Warren County Court and district collector of U.S. Revenue.

The elder Falkener died in Warrenton of dropsy, having survived his wife by only ten months, his son (who died a month after his mother), and his daughter-in-law (who died within a month after writing her will three days after her husband's death and the day after the death of her father). Ellen Mordecai tells of refreshments being served to the company assembly for Falkener's funeral consisting of small blocks of cake enveloped in white paper sealed with black wax and wine and brandy in decanters, each with a weeper of black crepe tied around its neck.

It appears that Falkener was buried next to his wife in the Johnson family burying ground, located just south of Warrenton and east of Highway 401, which has a number of unmarked graves. Many of his descendants were buried in the Plummer cemetery in Warrenton as both of the Falkener grandchildren married children of [Kemp Plummer](#) ^[7], a descendant being [Kemp Plummer Battle](#) ^[8], president of [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[9].

References:

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