

Gorrell, Ralph ^[1]



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by John L. Bell, Jr., 1986

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Ralph Gorrell, lawyer, was the eldest son of David (1770–1848) and Euphemia Stewart Gorrell (1770–1850) of [Guilford County](#) ^[2]. His grandfather was Ralph Gorrell, Jr. (1735–1816), who migrated from County Donegal, Ireland, to Boston in 1750, and thence to Guilford County where he settled near and became an active member of the Alamance Presbyterian Church. Ralph, Jr., was a member of the [Halifax](#) ^[3] [Provincial Congresses](#) ^[4] of April and December 1776, of the North Carolina House of Commons in 1784, and of the state senate in 1777–78, 1795, and 1796. He was commissioned during the [American Revolution](#) ^[5] to raise troops to keep the Indians in check. In 1808 he sold, for \$98, the forty-two acres of land on which the town of [Greensboro](#) ^[6] was laid out.

Like his grandfather, Ralph Gorrell developed an interest in politics. After graduation from Greensboro Academy in 1820 and [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[7] in 1825, he was licensed to practice law in 1827. He ran for the House of Commons in 1832, but withdrew when he discovered that he was three acres under the constitutional property requirement of one hundred acres. He was elected to the House of Commons in 1834, 1835, and 1854. He also served Guilford County in the state senate in 1856 and 1858; there the minority party supported him for presiding officer. Like other [Whig](#) ^[8] leaders of his day, Gorrell supported public education, state aid to railroads, and ad valorem taxation of slaves, and he stood firm for the Union until the advent of war led him to cast his vote for secession in the Convention of 1861. During the war the Confederate Treasury Department appointed him a depository at Greensboro. Until the office was abolished in 1868, Gorrell served for many years as Guilford County clerk and master in equity. Appointive positions that he held were commissioner of the Fayetteville and Western Railroad and director of the [North Carolina Railroad](#) ^[9]. Gorrell's political life was characterized by honesty, a rational speaking style, and a refusal to use demagoguery.

As a lawyer and a businessman, Gorrell achieved a good reputation and moderate wealth. From 1830 to 1835 he organized a business partnership with William Kerr and Calvin J. Chisholm to operate mercantile houses in Greensboro and Morganton. In 1851, he became the first president of the [Greensboro Mutual Life Insurance and Trust Company](#) ^[10]. Gorrell also owned a plantation—in 1860 he listed the value of his property at \$46,000, but the war impoverished him—and had a flourishing law practice. In the 1850s he drafted construction contracts for the North Carolina Railroad in addition to routine legal affairs. His most notable legal case involved the defense of the abolitionist Daniel Worth on charges of distributing incendiary literature in 1860. Although Worth was convicted in two separate trials and the convictions were upheld on appeal, Gorrell obtained for Worth reasonable bail that permitted the elderly abolitionist to escape to the North rather than serve his two one-year prison sentences. Gorrell's colleagues at the bar praised his honesty, devotion to principle, ability to keep confidences, industry, and reliability.

In his family life, Gorrell was a devoted husband and father. He married Mary Jennings Chisholm of [Richmond County](#) ^[11], but their lives were saddened by the deaths of seven of their ten children. One son, Captain Henry Clay Gorrell, died leading troops in the [Civil War](#) ^[12]. Anne Eliza Gorrell, who married Joseph B. Fariss in 1869, was the only child to bear him grandchildren. Gorrell was noted for holding daily family devotions after he joined the [Presbyterian](#) ^[13] church in 1843. He became the ruling elder of his church in 1849 and was regularly called upon to represent it at meetings of the presbytery, synod, and general assembly. Gorrell's spacious home was a meeting place for preachers as well as lawyers and statesmen. It was there in 1865 that General Joseph E. Johnston delivered the last message to his troops before surrendering. After Gorrell's death, the Cape Fear and Yadkin Valley Railroad Company purchased his homeplace for its general offices.

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