

Kennedy, John Thomas ^[1]



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by John Baxton Flowers III, 1988

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John Thomas Kennedy, planter, Confederate officer, and public official, was born at his father's Oak Hill plantation in west-central [Wayne County](#) ^[2], the son of John and Sarah Everett Becton Kennedy, [Quakers](#) ^[3]. His earliest education was at home under his mother; then, with his brother, Joseph Everett, he attended Waynesborough Academy at the county seat, Waynesborough. When he was about eighteen he began farming, and in 1843 he married Elizabeth Anne Cox. They settled on land given him by his father which they called The Meadows.

By the mid-1840s Kennedy was demonstrating an interest in politics and he became a justice of the peace for the county. At about the same time he and his brother, Joseph, and a half brother, John E. Becton, using their slaves, contracted to lay the roadbed for the [North Carolina Railroad](#) ^[4] between Selma and Pine Level. As contractors they also built the office for the Bank of New Bern in Waynesboro, as the county seat was then called. In 1850 they had the contract to construct the new brick courthouse there. Kennedy in 1853 joined other men to form a stock company which established the Wayne Institute and Normal College; four years later he and others founded the Wayne Female College in Goldsboro.

In mid-April 1861, before North Carolina had [seceded](#) ^[5], he and his sixteen-year-old son, John, were among members of two companies of militia setting out for New Bern en route to take [Fort Macon](#) ^[6] from Federal control. In New Bern they learned that the fort had already been secured for the state, and they returned home. In October, after the state had left the Union, Kennedy enlisted in the Thirty-fifth North Carolina Regiment of infantry and became first lieutenant in one of the companies; his son was a private in the same regiment. During the following spring he raised two companies from Wayne, Johnston, and Wake counties and partially outfitted them. With two other companies from the state, they were assigned to a Georgia regiment in August 1862. Kennedy was promoted to major, and in 1863 he became a lieutenant colonel; he served with the Georgia regiment until the spring of 1864, frequently engaged in scouting duty and in skirmishes in eastern North Carolina.

In July 1864 Kennedy was promoted to colonel to take command of the newly formed Sixteenth Battalion, North Carolina Cavalry. He was in enemy hands at the time, however, having been hit in the back by Union sharpshooters at Spring Hill, Va., at the end of May 1864 and captured. Exchanged in August, he was with his new command by the end of November. The war ended in the spring of 1865, and he was paroled at Goldsboro on 15 May.

As a [Democrat](#) ^[7] Kennedy was elected a delegate from Wayne County to the [constitutional convention in Raleigh in 1865](#) ^[8], but he was in a minority and, discontented with the convention's actions, resigned his seat. In February 1866 he was elected sheriff and remained in office until 1874. During this time the whipping post was abolished as a means of punishment in the county. Also during this period Kennedy joined some neighbors, as well as some men from adjoining [Johnston County](#) ^[9], in an effort to encourage European immigrants to move to that region as farm laborers, but they met with only limited success. In 1877 he became steward of the new [State Hospital](#) ^[10] for the Colored Insane near Goldsboro, where he superintended the production of farm crops for the staff and patients.

In the elections of November 1884, Kennedy narrowly won a seat in the state senate. His committee assignments included those on Institutions for the [Deaf, Dumb, and Blind](#) ^[11]; [Education](#) ^[12]; [Agriculture](#) ^[13]; and Military Affairs. He introduced a bill to prohibit the sale of "spirituous liquors, or other intoxicating drinks" in state institutions. Kennedy did not seek reelection and retired to his farm. Because of poor health, he fell into debt and asked friends in state government for employment. Between 1889 and 1900, at age seventy-four, he became a janitor in the museum section of the Department of Agriculture. His wife died in 1901, and he returned briefly to Goldsboro. In 1904, however, he became assistant curator at the state museum and helped prepare the state's exhibition for the St. Louis World's Fair. Further illness resulted in his moving to the Confederate Soldiers' Home in Raleigh where he remained until his death.

Kennedy and his wife were the parents of eleven children: John Bryan, Sarah Eliza, Micajah Thomas, William Frederick, Silas Cox, Mary Elizabeth, Matthew Everett, Thomas Simpson, Richard Lee, Robert Dearing, and Sidney Davis.

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Subjects:

[Biographies](#) [19]

[Military personnel](#) [20]

[Public officials](#) [21]

Authors:

[Flowers, John B., III](#) [22]

Origin - location:

[Wayne County](#) [23]

[Goldsboro](#) [24]

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1 January 1988 | Flowers, John B., III

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