

Lambeth, John Walter, Sr. ^[1]

Lambeth, John Walter, Sr.

by M. Jewell Sink, 1991

25 May 1868–3 July 1934

See also: [Lambeth, John Walter, Jr.](#) ^[2]

John Walter Lambeth, Sr., pioneer furniture manufacturer, banker, and civic leader, was born in the Fair Grove community, two miles south of Thomasville, the sixth child of David Thomas and Caroline Eliza Simmons Lambeth. His mother was the daughter of Benjamin Whitfield and Eliza Hussey Harris Simmons and was educated at Glen Anna Female Seminary. The Lambeths were of English descent, the first settlement of this family in North Carolina having been made before 1750 in the [Craven County](#) ^[3] area. Later generations moved inland to Guilford and Rowan counties near the end of the century. In 1835 Dr. Shadrach Lambeth (father of David Thomas), his wife, Jane Thomas, and children moved from Guilford to Fair Grove where some of their relatives had been living for many years. In addition to being a farmer, the elder Lambeth was a physician, doctoring principally with herbs. After the passage of the North Carolina Railroad Act in 1849, he joined his brother-in-law, John W. Thomas, and other leaders in its implementation by pledging the construction of a section of the railroad. Although he died before his part was completed, Dr. Lambeth had directed in his will that this important work be finished by his sons.

As an executor of his father's will, David Thomas Lambeth took a leading part in the completion of his contract with the railroad. A year later, he and Caroline Eliza Simmons were married and went to live on their farm east of Fair Grove. Here their eleven children were born and reared. Although he was the father of three at the outbreak of the [Civil War](#) ^[4], David T. volunteered for service in the Confederate army; entering as a second lieutenant, he was discharged as first lieutenant a short time later. His name appears on the honor roll of his company. A successful farmer, he was the first in his community to try advanced methods of farming. He also owned the largest store in Thomasville. In 1886 the David T. Lambeths moved into the village where he continued to operate his store and later owned a flour mill.

John Walter Lambeth attended I. L. Wright's Academy at Fair Grove and later [Trinity College](#) ^[5], about seven miles from his father's farm. His special interests were athletics and hunting. After the family moved to Thomasville, he organized an athletic club. Six feet tall with a strong physique, he excelled among the village young men. In later life, he often said that his earliest ambition was to be high sheriff but that as he reached manhood the adventure of private business had more appeal.

In 1890, when the population of the village was less than six hundred and the economic outlook very dark, John W. Lambeth married, bought the Thomasville Hotel, renamed it Lambeth Hotel, and moved into it as manager. Three years later he was appointed postmaster, an office he held four years; then, after selling the hotel, he bought a flour mill.

In 1898, along with three other resourceful men—his brother Frank S. Lambeth, E. W. Cates, and John Pope—he took a business step that started the conversion of Thomasville from a small village to an industrial town. Despite financial limitations, they pooled their resources, organized the Standard Chair Company, erected a building, and bought machinery; with only twelve employees, they began manufacturing chairs. Within a few years this venture was a success, and other factories sprang up all over town. In 1905 Lambeth sold his interest in the chair company and bought the Lambeth Furniture Company, a factory making kitchen safes and cupboards, to which he devoted his full time for many years. After World War I, he was joined by his son, [John Walter, Jr.](#) ^[2]; they changed the line to bedroom furniture and greatly increased the output. It was a successful enterprise, but in their most profitable year, 1928, the Lambeths were persuaded to sell it.

Soon afterwards, the elder Lambeth became president of the First National Bank, a position he held for the remainder of his life. During the depression, this bank stood firm and was among the first in the state to open its doors after the bank holiday declared by presidential proclamation in March 1933. For a time Lambeth was also a director of the High Point branch of [Wachovia Bank and Trust Company](#) ^[6] as well as a director of the [North Carolina Railroad](#) ^[7].

In addition to his business interests, Lambeth owned two large farms, one known as the Gray Place and the other as Cedar Lodge Farm, once the home of his great-uncle, John W. Thomas, the founder of Thomasville. Like his father, Lambeth tried new methods of farming and maintained a high level of production.

Although he devoted most of his time to business, Lambeth was vitally interested in the betterment of his community. Early in the twentieth century, with the building of new factories and a fivefold increase in population, Thomasville had an urgent need for better schools. As candidate for mayor in 1901, Lambeth led the campaign for a bond issue of \$10,000 to erect a public graded school. The bond issue carried, and he and his ticket won by a large majority. As mayor for six years, he helped lay the foundation of Thomasville's educational system. Later he served on the town school board and

on the county board of education. For four years he was a member of the city council.

Lambeth also had a leading role in the [Good Roads movement](#) ^[8], in popularizing the idea of state-supported roads, and in seeking legislation to that end. He was appointed to the [Davidson County](#) ^[9] Board of Road Commissioners in 1915 and served as treasurer. Under the supervision of this board, Davidson became one of the pioneer counties in good road building.

In 1916 Lambeth was a delegate to the Democratic National Convention from the Seventh Congressional District. He did not desire public office for himself, saying with a smile that he preferred being a "ward heeler." All of his political ambition was centered around his son's career. In the councils of the [Democratic party](#) ^[10] his opinions had great weight, not only in the county but also in the state.

For many years Lambeth was a trustee and steward of the Main Street Methodist Episcopal Church, and in 1928 he became chairman of the board of stewards. He was a charter member of the Thomasville Rotary Club and a member of the Junior Order of United American Mechanics, the [National Grange](#) ^[11], and the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks. A Shriner and a [Mason](#) ^[12], he served as treasurer of the local lodge for twenty-five years.

On 23 Dec. 1890 Lambeth married Daisy Hunt Sumner, the daughter of Captain Julian Everard and Jennie Loftin Sumner. The Sumners had long been prominent in the state and active in Davidson County government for many years. Daisy Lambeth had attended Thomasville Female College. They became the parents of four children: David Sumner, who died at age seventeen; John Walter, Jr., who became a congressman; Ernestine, who married Thomas Austin Finch, Sr., and after his death, Dr. L. K. Mobley, a well-known dentist in New York City; and Julian Hill, who died in infancy.

Lambeth was buried in the Thomasville City Cemetery.

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