

McDonald, Ralph Waldo ^[1]

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by Thomas S. Morgan, 1991

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Ralph Waldo McDonald, educator, legislator, gubernatorial candidate, and president of [Bowling Green State University](#) ^[2], was born near Shawneetown in Gallatin County, Ill., the son of G. L. and Lillie Sanders McDonald. Reared in Illinois and Arkansas, McDonald was graduated from the public high school in Paragould, Ark., in 1919. After working a year to pay his way through college, he attended [Hendrix College](#) ^[3] in Conway, Ark., where in 1923 he received an A.B. degree with majors in economics, English, and mathematics. Immediately after graduation, he taught high school mathematics in Fort Smith, Ark., then moved to North Carolina as principal of the Sunnyside Consolidated Schools in Fayetteville from 1924 to 1927. From 1928 to 1934 he was head of the Department of Psychology and Education at [Salem College](#) ^[4] in Winston-Salem, while also serving as business adviser to the college president and leading Salem's extension work.

While at Salem McDonald began graduate work in educational psychology at [Duke University](#) ^[5], where he obtained an M.A. degree in 1927 and a Ph.D. in 1933. His master's thesis on public school revenue in North Carolina pointed to an abiding interest in improving public school finances in the state. This interest led him to obtain a seat in the North Carolina House of Representatives from [Forsyth County](#) ^[6] in 1934. In the 1935 legislature he quickly became an important force in leading the opposition to the sales tax that Governor [J. C. B. Ehringhaus](#) ^[7] had succeeded in getting through the [General Assembly](#) ^[8] in the previous session. McDonald filled an important void that had been created by the death of Dennis G. Brummit in January 1935. In effect, he replaced Brummit as the antiestablishment candidate for governor against [Clyde R. Hoey](#) ^[9] in the [Democratic](#) ^[10] primary of 1936. Despite the presence of a third candidate, McDonald came within 4,468 votes of leading Hoey in the first primary and garnered over 214,000 votes to Hoey's 266,354 in the second primary. The depth of opposition to the sales tax and McDonald's emphasis on the so-called Gardner machine gave him a strong popular following at the time.

McDonald showed his loyalty to the Democratic party when he campaigned for Hoey in the general election. Rather than return to teaching, he planned to further his political career by entering law school at [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[11] in September 1936 and to set up a practice in [Winston-Salem](#) ^[12]. His plans were aborted when he developed tuberculosis in 1937 and was forced to spend two years recovering in sanitariums. Emerging cured in late February 1939, he soon accepted a position in Chapel Hill as associate director of extension; at the same time he was appointed professor of education in the graduate school and head of the radio department. The latter post became a major vehicle for McDonald to create a unique educational radio network that used commercial stations in North Carolina and South Carolina to broadcast at least twenty hours of programming each week.

Meanwhile, in politics he supported [J. Melville Broughton](#) ^[13]'s successful bid for governor in 1940, then resigned his positions at The University of North Carolina in 1943 to begin his long campaign for governor in 1944. While he was able to resurrect many of his supporters from 1936, issues like the sales tax and the "machine" were no longer enough to stimulate the same enthusiasm for his candidacy. He was defeated by [R. Gregg Cherry](#) ^[14].

In August 1944 McDonald reentered the education arena as director of conferences for the [National Education Association](#) ^[15] but maintained his residence in Winston-Salem for a year to serve out his term as president of the North Carolina Education Association. After he moved to Washington, D.C., his duties expanded to executive secretary of the National Commission on Teacher Education and Professional Standards (1946–51) and executive secretary of the National Education Association's Department of Higher Education. In the latter role he became responsible for the National Conference on Higher Education, predecessor to the American Association for Higher Education. He also had time for noneducational issues such as serving as president of the National Committee on Atomic Information (1945–51).

In 1951 McDonald accepted an offer to become the fourth president of Bowling Green State University in Ohio. For ten years he presided over that institution's growth from 3,200 to over 7,000 students. His abrupt resignation in September 1961 came at a time of increasing dissatisfaction on the campus.

From Bowling Green McDonald moved to Florida to study that state's higher education system, then settled into semiretirement in Fort Lauderdale as an educational consultant. In later years he made frequent trips to Charlotte as adviser to the city's teachers' association. He eventually retired to Russellville, Ark., where he died and was buried in Plummerville Cemetery.

McDonald married Athleen Taylor of Arkansas on 12 June 1923. The couple had one daughter, Athalea, who married John M. Haygood and moved to California. As president emeritus of Bowling Green, McDonald was honored by having a quadrangle on the campus named for him.

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Ralph Waldo McDonald Papers #5413, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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