

McDowell, Silas ^[1]

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by G. S. Dunbar, 1991

16 May 1795–14 July 1879

Silas McDowell, tailor, farmer, court clerk, scientific observer, and writer, was born in York District, S.C., the natural son of Elizabeth McDowell. He was raised by his mother and her father, William ("Pacolet William") McDowell, a cousin of General [Charles McDowell](#) ^[2] and a distant relative of [Major Joseph \("Pleasant Gardens"\) McDowell](#) ^[3]. From about 1805 to 1812 Silas lived with his grandfather in [Rutherford County](#) ^[4], and in 1812 he went to [Asheville](#) ^[5] and completed his formal education at Newton Academy. He was an apprentice tailor in Charleston, S.C., from 1814 to 1816, after which he practiced his trade in Morganton, N.C., for ten years. In 1826 he moved to Asheville, married two years later, and in 1830 took his wife and child to a farm in [Macon County](#) ^[6] that he had purchased in 1820. From about 1830 to 1846 he served as clerk of the superior court of [Macon County](#) ^[6] while continuing his trade as tailor and building up a large apple orchard.

McDowell served as a guide to several botanists in western North Carolina, which was becoming recognized as an area of great botanical richness. He went on several collecting trips with John Lyon between 1812 and 1814 and was present at Lyon's death in the latter year. In 1839 he served as a guide to Moses Ashley Curtis on an extended jaunt, and Curtis named a new sunflower, *Helianthus dowellianus*, after him. McDowell was then gaining fame because, as a storyteller, he had been the source of much of [Senator Robert Strange's *Eoneguski*](#) ^[7], "the first North Carolina novel," which had just appeared (1839). Called "the outstanding apple producer in the state" in the 1850s, McDowell sold apples, apple tree graftings, and rhododendrons to individuals and nurseries in North Carolina and Georgia and apparently traveled as far as Asheville to graft trees. After a disastrous freeze in April 1858, he turned to viticulture and to writing about the phenomenon of "thermal belts" in western North Carolina.

After the [Civil War](#) ^[8], in the face of advancing age and declining fortunes, McDowell gave up his lands and businesses and devoted his remaining years to writing historical and autobiographical pieces, romances based on events of his youth, and sketches and poems illustrating the local landscape. He had a wide circle of friends and correspondents, among whom were Zebulon Vance, [Hinton Rowan Helper](#) ^[9], [David Lowry Swain](#) ^[10], [Moses Ashley Curtis](#) ^[11], [Thomas Clingman](#) ^[12], Asa Gray, and Lyman Draper. There is a collection of McDowell's materials in the [Southern Historical Collection](#) ^[13] at [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[14].

On 15 May 1828 McDowell married Elizabeth Erwin (1806–48), whose mother, Patience Lowry, was a half sister of David Lowry Swain. They had eight children, six of whom lived to maturity. McDowell died on his farm near Franklin, N.C., and was buried in Franklin.

References:

Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography, vol. 4 (1888).

J. P. Arthur, *Western North Carolina: A History* (1914).

J. W. Davidson, *The Living Writers of the South* (1869).

T. F. Davidson, *First Annual Transactions of the Pen and Plate Club of Asheville* (1905).

G. S. Dunbar, "Silas McDowell and the Early Botanical Exploration of Western North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review* 41 (1964), and "Thermal Belts in North Carolina," *Geographical Review* (1966 [portrait]).

Additional Resources:

Silas McDowell Papers, 1827-1968 (collection no. 01554). The Southern Historical Collection. Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
<http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/m/McDowell,Silas.html> ^[15] (accessed August 1, 2013).

"Silas McDowell 1795-1879." N.C. Highway Historical Marker Q-50, N.C. Office of Archives & History.
<https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program/Markers.aspx?sp=Markers&k=Markers&sv=Q-50> ^[16] (accessed August 1, 2013).

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