

Norwood, William ^[1]

Norwood, William

by Mary Claire Engstrom, 1991

15 Jan. 1767–29 Jan. 1842

William Norwood, attorney and planter, borough representative in the [General Assembly](#) ^[2], and superior court judge, was born in [Bute County](#) ^[3] near the site of modern Louisburg, [Franklin County](#) ^[4], the oldest of eight children of planter [John Wall Norwood](#) ^[5] (1728–1802) and his second wife, Leah Lenoir Whitaker (1737–1831), widow of William Whitaker and sister of General [William Lenoir](#) ^[6]. He was the grandson of Thomas Lenoir (d. 1763) and his wife Mourning Crawley (b. 1707) of Brunswick County, Va., and [Edgecombe County](#) ^[7], N.C. (John Wall Norwood's first wife was Lydia Ledbetter [1732–64], by whom he had two sons.)

Essential records of the John Wall Norwood family appear to have been lost in a fire that destroyed the Franklin County home of Colonel John Branch and his wife Elizabeth Norwood (b. 1770), the oldest sister of William Norwood. William L. De Rosset's *Sketches of Church History in North Carolina* ^[8] (1892) reported that "distinct memories and associations in the Norwood family connect Mr. [George] Micklejohn and John Norwood, of Franklin Co., who was a most zealous and faithful lay reader. . . . After Mr. Norwood's son, the late Wm. Norwood, had removed to Hillsboro, his was one of the families Parson Micklejohn regularly visited."

There seems to be no certain record of William Norwood's formal education and legal training, but his preserved license to practice law in the superior courts of [Granville County](#) ^[9], dated 18 Oct. 1794, was "given at Hillsborough" before [Samuel Ashe](#) ^[10] and [John Williams](#) ^[11]. Records of the transfer to him, on 10 Aug. 1796, of Hillsborough town Lot 68 and the highly significant conveyance to him, on 6 Oct. 1798, of [Edmund Fanning](#) ^[12]'s home Lots 23 and 33 (which Norwood prudently held undisturbed for another quarter of a century) indicate that he had early settled in Hillsborough and begun his successful law practice well before the close of the eighteenth century. It is also known that early in his practice he enjoyed a fair amount of business in [Guilford County](#) ^[13] and adjoining counties.

In 1800, at age thirty-three, he married Robina Hogg (30 Dec. 1772–18 May 1860), a native-born Scotswoman and the youngest of five children of the eminent Scottish merchant, [James Hogg](#) ^[14] (d. 1805) and his wife Elizabeth McDowell Alves (d. 1801). The Norwoods lived with Robina's ailing parents at their second home on the south bank of the Eno, variously known as Bluffs of Eno, Poplar Lawn, and finally Poplar Hill. There they had eight children: Eliza Alves, John Wall, James Hogg, William, Walter Alves, Jane Burgess, Joseph Caldwell, and Helen Mary. Because of James Hogg's precarious health after a stroke, William Norwood purchased in two separate parcels in 1803 and 1804 his father-in-law's large and valuable estate on the Eno, originally bought, after considerable difficulty, from the heirs of Colonel [Francis Corbin](#) ^[15] and [William Churton](#) ^[16].

From the outset, Norwood was a highly respected member of the Orange County bar and the Hillsborough community. In February 1803 he contributed one hundred dollars towards finishing South Building on [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[17] campus. In 1806 he represented the borough of Hillsborough in the House of Commons, and in 1807 he was reelected. Essentially a reserved and private man, Norwood seems never to have been seriously attracted to public life nor to have reached out for public office. Unlike his younger colleagues [Frederick Nash](#) ^[18] and Thomas Ruffin, he never accepted law students. A simple red brick law office, still standing on Court Street in downtown Hillsborough, is thought to have been William Norwood's.

Also in 1806, he joined with [Duncan Cameron](#) ^[19], [John Steele](#) ^[20], William Duffy, and other eminent lawyers in vigorously opposing the new Judiciary Act of 1806, which established superior courts in every county, thereby reducing the importance of such old court towns as Hillsborough. A public dinner of appreciation was held for the Orange County lawyers who had opposed the bill.

Norwood served as a trustee of the [Hillsborough Academy](#) ^[21] (1816), backed a stamp issue in its favor, and steadily supported it in various ways. In 1826 he served as chairman of the academy's nine-man board. Although an [Episcopalian](#) ^[22] by birth and heritage, he rented a pew in the new [Presbyterian](#) ^[23] church of 1815–16, then the only church in the town and the first church erected after the [American Revolution](#) ^[24]. In 1824 Norwood, Thomas Ruffin, [Francis Lister Hawks](#) ^[25], Walker Anderson, and Jonathan Sneed formed a reorganized Episcopal vestry to build a second St. Matthew's (Episcopal) Church on land informally donated by Ruffin. William Norwood was elected the first junior warden of the reorganized church. In 1825 he also served as second vice-president of the active Orange County Sunday School Union and joined in presenting a memorial to the General Assembly requesting aid for twenty-two Orange County schools for the poor.

In 1820 [Archibald DeBow Murphey](#) ^[26] exerted personal influence to have Norwood, then fifty-three, appointed to his place on the bench as a [superior court judge](#) ^[27]. "He will be a pleasant man to the Bar," wrote Murphey, "and acceptable to the

People." On 22 Nov. 1820 Governor [John Branch](#) ^[28] offered Norwood the temporary appointment, and he served in the post for sixteen years. Of particular note was the celebrated case of *Hoke v. Henderson* in 1833, tried at Lincoln Superior Court. The case was appealed to the state supreme court, but Judge Norwood's ruling was sustained. Increasing ill health and general debility finally forced him to resign in 1836 at age sixty-nine. He died at Poplar Hill six years later.

Although Norwood's will devised a family burying ground to be laid out and plotted "in the cedar grove on the river . . . in the old garden" behind Poplar Hill, this was not done, and he was buried in the Hogg-Norwood plot in Hillsborough's Old Town Cemetery. No portrait of William Norwood is known to exist.

The William Norwood Tillinghast Papers (located at the Duke University Library), a remarkable collection of weekly letters written by Robina Norwood from Poplar Hill to her daughter, Jane Burgess Tillinghast, at Fayetteville covering a period of some thirty years, provide numerous vignettes of Norwood's later life at Poplar Hill.

References:

[Walter Alves Papers](#) ^[29], [James Hogg Papers](#), and [Hogg](#) ^[30] and [Norwood Family Papers](#) ^[31] (Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill).

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Additional Resources:

Wheeler, John H. (John Hill). *Historical sketches of North Carolina, from 1584 to 1851*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo. 1851. <https://archive.org/details/historicalskech00whee> ^[36] (accessed October 1, 2014).

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