

Peele, William Joseph ^[1]

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by Richard Walser, 1994

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William Joseph Peele, lawyer and cultural leader, was born near Jackson in Northampton County ^[2], the youngest of fourteen children of Isaac (1807–91) and Nancy Thompson Cobb Peele (1812–78). He was the brother of John Hardy (b. 1829), Mary Elizabeth (Mrs. C. C. Hardee, 1831–1922), Thomas Moseley (1833–41), Benjamin Evans (b. 1834), Frances (1836–1916), William Isaac (1837–91), Joseph Richard (1840–41), Henrietta Hannah (Mrs. William L. Fetcher, b. 1841), Elizabeth Rebecca (Mrs. Samuel N. Buxton, 1845–1928), Rennie (Mrs. James H. Buxton, b. 1847), Susan Alice (b. 1849), Isaac Edward (b. 1851), and Robert Evans (b. 1852), father of Herbert Peele ^[3], a newspaper editor of Elizabeth City. Isaac Peele, whose father Dr. John Peele was a book-reading Quaker ^[4], moved from Virginia first to a farm near Rich Square and later to another three miles north of Jackson.

William Joseph Peele attended Bush Horn Academy, and in 1875, upon the reopening of The University of North Carolina ^[5], became a freshman at Chapel Hill, financed there by his two Buxton brothers-in-law. He studied the classics and was graduated in 1879, realizing full well that he had not been prepared to earn a living. His senior essay was on the necessity of reform, and it became his lifelong theme. Based on his impecunious predicament in the moneyless late 1870s, Peele became convinced that North Carolina could no longer ignore the need for industrial education. He studied law in Jackson and then in Raleigh, where he obtained his license and formed a partnership with Ernest P. Maynard.

In 1884 Peele founded the Watauga Club ^[6], a group of young men whose primary goal soon became the establishment of an industrial school for the training of farmers, mechanics, and manufacturers. Three members of the club—Arthur Winslow, Walter Hines Page ^[7], and Peele—memorialized the General Assembly ^[8] early in 1885 to create an institution for instruction in "wood-work, mining, metallurgy, practical agriculture and in such other branches of industrial education as may be deemed expedient." Many of Peele's Wataugans ^[6] appeared before the Legislative Committee on Education to argue in favor of the proposal. Thomas Dixon, Jr., ^[9] a member of the club, helped push the bill through the house. Later Peele wrote of how, "with the powerful assistance of many others," it became law, but "not without considerable difficulty. Some opposed it because they were fossils and oppose everything; some feared it would ultimately draw the Land Scrip Fund away from the University." The latter fear was justified. Two years later Peele's Wataugans and Leonidas L. Polk ^[10]'s organized farmers saw to it that the fund was transferred from the university, and in 1888 the cornerstone was laid for the first building of the North Carolina College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts (now North Carolina State University ^[11]).

Peele was active on many other fronts. He promoted the first chair of history at The University of North Carolina and after serving (1891–97) on the board of trustees, he acted in a similar capacity for the North Carolina College of Agriculture and Mechanics beginning in 1899. In 1897 he formed the North Carolina Publishing Society to bring out Lives of Distinguished North Carolinians ^[12], which he compiled. His other books were Index to the Law of Exemptions in North Carolina of Homestead and Personal Property (1892) and Civil Government of North Carolina and the United States ^[13] (1907). In 1901 he helped organize the State Literary and Historical Association ^[14] and was chairman of the committee to draft its constitution. The next year he was involved in the Roanoke Island Celebration Committee. Peele drew up one of the first lists of North Carolina books. In 1903 he wrote the bill for the establishment of the North Carolina Historical Commission ^[15], was primarily responsible for nursing it through the General Assembly, was appointed by Governor Charles B. Aycock ^[16] as one of its first five members, served as its first chairman, and remained on the commission until his death.

On 4 Sept. 1909, after a twenty-one-year courtship, Peele married Elizabeth Bellamy of Raleigh. He was a Baptist ^[17] and a Democrat ^[18]. In 1969 an oil portrait of Peele by Jacques Busbee ^[19] hanging in Peele Hall, a classroom building on the North Carolina State University campus named in his honor, was stolen and slashed by vandals.

In spite of his many interests, Peele led a lonely life. His renowned eloquence and felicitous literary style were placed in the service of a more history-conscious, more cultured, and more prosperous North Carolina. "One could not conceive of Peele as a careless, frolicsome boy; he was always old," wrote his friend Robert W. Winston ^[20]. "Great sums of money simply terrified him! He could not understand how people got rich honestly." In truth, Peele was preeminently a philosopher, a dreamer, and a planner.

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Origin - location:

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