

Reynolds, Richard Joshua ^[1]

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by Nannie M. Tilley, 1994; Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, January 2023

20 July 1850–29 July 1918



Richard Joshua Reynolds. Image courtesy of Wake Forest University.

^[2]Richard Joshua Reynolds, founder of the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company ^[3], was born in the shadow of Nobusiness Mountain, Patrick County, Va. His father was Hardin William Reynolds, a manufacturer of tobacco, a merchant, and a farmer all on a substantial scale; his mother was Nancy Jane Cox from a family famed in Revolutionary ^[4] activities and long settled in northwestern Stokes County ^[5], N.C. Both were descended from English forebears. Reared in a comfortable home by strong and able parents, young Reynolds had ample opportunities for an education and escaped any drudgery in his early years by virtue of his father's large-scale enslavement of other people. He did begin early to work in his father's chewing tobacco factory situated in the rear of the home known as Rock Spring (a handsome but austere plain brick mansion afterwards restored by Nancy Susan Reynolds and entered in the National Register of Historic Places ^[6]) on the old Bristol-Norfolk highway. The emancipation of the people he enslaved had little effect on the financial standing of Captain Hardin W. Reynolds, since he and his two oldest sons plunged into work and the tobacco factory prospered in the late 1860s and 1870s.

Reynolds attended local subscription schools and possibly received additional training from a family tutor before attending Emory and Henry College ^[7] for two years (1868–70). He deserted his studies in 1870 and began working for wages in his father's factory. During the first part of 1873 he attended Bryant and Stratton Business College ^[8] in Baltimore at his own expense and while there solicited orders for chewing tobacco made in his father's factory, thus becoming familiar with the nature of city trade and the methods of wholesale dealers. Young Reynolds returned to Patrick County and on 1 July 1873 entered into partnership with his father in operation of the elder Reynolds's factory at Rock Spring. For a variety of reasons, including his father's desire to admit a younger but less able son into partnership, a need to be nearer flue-cured tobacco which grew in greater quantity farther south, and the need to locate in a town with railroad connections, Reynolds on 19 Oct. 1874 purchased a one-hundred-foot lot on Depot Street from the "Congregation of the United Brethren of Salem and its Vicinity" for \$388.50. Here, in present-day Winston-Salem ^[9], N.C., he built his first factory—38 by 60 feet—with railway connections to Greensboro on the main line of the Richmond and Danville railway system.



Reynolda House, Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Thomas Warren Sears Collection, Smithsonian Gardens.

Reynolds manufactured what was known as Southern flat plug chewing tobacco—150,000 pounds the first year and something more than one million pounds by the early 1890s. This type of chewing tobacco, made from flue-cured leaf, provided a durable chew, though it did not absorb sweetening agents as readily as chewing tobacco made from Burley leaf. In the late 1880s Reynolds made a revolutionary change in his formula for producing Southern flat plug by using saccharin as his chief sweetening agent, thus producing a sweeter and more durable chew than that made of the porous Burley leaf. Seeing his opportunity, Reynolds immediately built a large, modern factory by securing credit from every possible source but chiefly from his family and from the Parletts, wholesale handlers of chewing tobacco in Baltimore. This new plant was five times larger than his business then warranted. During these months Reynolds played a forceful role in building the Roanoke and Southern Railway^[11], which was completed in late 1891 and almost immediately taken over by the Norfolk^[12] and Western Railway, thus giving the towns of Winston and Salem shipping facilities to the east and west without dependence on the Richmond and Danville system, which in 1893 became the Southern Railway.

Within weeks of the completion of the Roanoke and Southern from Winston and Salem to Roanoke, Reynolds began his first official advertising. He was manufacturing more than five million pounds of chewing tobacco by 1898. His business had outgrown his capital, more was necessary for expansion, and James B. Duke's American Tobacco Company^[13] was beginning to undersell all manufacturers of chewing tobacco, whether flat plug or navy.

Either by force of Duke's monopoly or by Reynolds's need for capital, the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company became affiliated with the American Tobacco Company on 4 Apr. 1899. Reynolds resented Duke's control and, when not permitted to manufacture smoking tobacco, he began work on a formula for three brands of smoking tobacco in the hope that at least one would become successful. He held them off the market until 1907, when the U.S. government began its famous antitrust suit against the American Tobacco Company. By 1911 Prince Albert smoking tobacco had been established on a national scale; its success was also based on a radical change in formula—inclusion of both Burley and flue-cured leaf. In the same year the American Tobacco Company was dissolved, and Reynolds went on to create the Camel cigarette—a blend of flue-cured and Burley leaf with very little Turkish tobacco. It was the first truly American cigarette, which other manufacturers were forced to copy. Reynolds had the lead and for many years his company stood first in the sales of all three major tobacco products. Until 1954, no product developed by the company achieved any success except those created by Reynolds. He became an immensely wealthy man, and many who followed his plan of low salaries and investment in his company likewise became wealthy.

Reynolds was a generous and humane man who contributed freely to various projects designed to uplift the people of his area—a practice followed by his heirs with funds derived from the greatly increased sales of the Reynolds products. He enjoyed great camaraderie with his employees and went along with the notion that he had risen from poverty and ignorance—a matter that gave rise to the general belief that he was ignorant and uneducated. He was a strong Democrat^[14], departing from support of the presidential nominees only in 1896. He considered the income tax the fairest ever devised and carried no exaggerated idea of himself.

On 27 Feb. 1905 he married Mary Katharine Smith, his distant cousin. They were the parents of four children: Richard Joshua, Jr., Mary Katharine, Nancy Susan, and Zachary Smith. He grew up a Methodist but, perhaps influenced by his wife, later became a Presbyterian. Reynolds died at his home, Reynolda^[15], after a long illness of incurable cancer of the pancreas and was buried in the Salem Cemetery. For many years his portrait hung alone in the board room of the R. J. Reynolds Company until his successors in the early 1960s placed their own on the same walls.

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Winston-Salem Journal, 25 Apr. 1915, 30 July 1918.

Additional Resources:

RJ Reynolds in the NC Business Hall of Fame: <http://www.historync.org/laureate%20-%20RJ%20Reynolds.htm> [16]

Reynolds, Richard Joshua in Digital Forsyth: <http://www.digitalforsyth.org/photos/browse/people-individuals-reynolds-richard-joshua> [17]

"R. J. Reynolds 1850-1918." N.C. Highway Historical Marker J-72, 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=J-72> [18] (accessed July 17, 2013).

"Reynolda House." N.C. Highway Historical Marker J-54, N.C. Office of Archives & History.

Search for "Richard Joshua Reynolds" in the North Carolina Digital Collections: <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/documents?search=richard%20joshua%20reynolds&searchtypes=Metadata|Full%20text&applyState=true> [19]

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Reynolda House, Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Thomas Warren Sears Collection, Smithsonian Gardens. Available from <http://gardens.si.edu/collections-research/aag-sears-collection.html> [10] (accessed July 17, 2013).

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