

Ruffin, Peter Browne ^[1]

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by Mary Claire Engstrom, 1994

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Peter Browne Ruffin, hillsborough merchant, financier, and for many years treasurer of the [North Carolina Railroad](#) ^[2], was the seventh child and fourth son of Chief Justice Thomas (1787–1870) and Anne M. Kirkland Ruffin (1794–1875). He was the grandson of Sterling and Alice Roane Ruffin of Essex County, Va., and [Rockingham County](#) ^[3], N.C., and of William and Margaret Blain Scott Kirkland of Ayr Mount, near Hillsborough. Young Ruffin, named for his father's devoted friend, the Scots Highlander [Peter Browne](#) ^[4] (d. 1833), a native of Knockandock in Aberdeenshire, who lived in North Carolina for more than forty years and became an influential Raleigh banker, was born at Thomas Ruffin's first home on the eastern boundary of Hillsborough, a small estate later named Burnside by the [Paul C. Cameron](#) ^[5] family.

No record of Ruffin's early education appears to have been preserved, but it is possible that he may have been sent to the [Warrenton Male Academy](#) ^[6] at Warrenton, which his father had attended. He enrolled as a freshman at [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[7] in 1838 but remained only through the 1838–39 year. Kemp P. Battle's *History of the University of North Carolina* recounts an amusing tale of Ruffin's schoolboy nickname, noting that it was then the campus vogue to exchange a student's real name for some ludicrous one that was often extended to younger brothers: "Peter Browne Ruffin (1838–39) had a favorite anecdote in which the upsetting of a stage was the chief incident. So he was universally known as Stage Ruffin. When his brother Thomas (1844), late Judge of the Supreme Court, matriculated, he became Hack Ruffin, a hack being of inferior dignity to a stage. Even when he attained his highest eminence at the bar an old student would give him this ridiculous nickname." Battle further lists P.B. Ruffin as a nongraduate of the class of 1842. It should be noted that, in preserved letters in J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton's edited *Papers of Thomas Ruffin*, Chief Justice [Thomas Ruffin](#) ^[8] usually referred to his son Peter Browne as "Browne."

Although it is almost certain that the younger Ruffin began his highly successful business career in Hillsborough with little or no actual capital in pocket, he quickly established himself in the town's mercantile affairs. On 14 Nov. 1843, at age twenty-two, he married twenty-year-old Mary Rebecca Jones (10 Nov. 1823–20 Dec. 1878), daughter of [Colonel Cadwallader, Sr.](#) ^[9], and Rebecca Edwards Long Jones of West Hill, near the western boundary of Hillsborough. In a letter [William A. Graham](#) ^[10] noted that "the wedding of Mr. Ruffin was a large party," attended by his [Graham's] own family "and all the world besides."

The P.B. Ruffins had eleven children, including three sets of twins: Rebecca Edwards, b. 15 Sept. 1846; Mary Browne (Min), b. 20 Sept. 1850; twins Thomas and Susan Brodnax, b. 25 Nov. 1852; Cadwallader Jones, August 1854–June 1870; Sarah (Sallie) Jones, 1 Feb. 1856–25 Apr. 1859; twins Sterling and Allen Jones, b. 27 Dec. 1857; twins Sarah (Sallie) Jones (known as Lily) and Annie Kirkland (known as Daisy), b. 22 Aug. 1860; and Joseph Roulhac, b. 1862. In addition, the Ruffins took into their home, adopted, and reared a niece, Mary Cameron Jones (b. 10 July 1843), the daughter of Dr. Pride and Mary E. Cameron Jones.

As a home for his daughter and her family, Cadwallader Jones, Sr., with the aid of builder-architect Captain [John Berry](#) ^[11], renovated and enlarged a house at 320 West King Street, "the old Davie place," former home of Jones's near relative, the turfman and horse fancier, Major Allen Jones Davie. With additional purchases the Ruffins acquired in all a small home estate of eight acres, six of which, including the house, were on the north side of West King Street, with two acres, including servants' quarters and garden, on the south side. The Ruffin family continued to own the place until 1913, when it was sold and broken up for development. The Peter Browne Ruffin house, however, still stands and has been restored.

Ruffin had very early demonstrated a distinct flair for business and finance and rapidly became a vigorous leading merchant and civic figure in the Hillsborough area. From about 1844 onwards, he consistently bought real estate, particularly the river lots and holdings of the Thomas Faucett heirs. Among other business ventures, he established a large and flourishing tannery on a two-acre tract southwest of his home and operated a sizable general store in downtown Hillsborough to the east of Court Square. Hillsborough deeds and mortgage records reveal that he was frequently named the trustee in deeds of trusts. Many years later his brother-in-law, Colonel Cadwallader Jones, Jr., observed that Ruffin had "an enviable character for integrity and honor."

In 1849 Ruffin was named one of a committee of six to tender a public homecoming dinner to Governor William A. Graham, who pleased his Hillsborough friends and neighbors with a speech and toast warmly endorsing their efforts to improve public transportation. In 1857 Ruffin was a member of the Court of Wardens of the Poor, a commission of seven prominent citizens appointed by the county justices to serve three-year terms. On 11 May he served on a committee to inspect the Poor House Building. Later he assisted in repairing the west building, and on 5 Apr. 1858 he and Dr. Pride Jones constituted a committee to examine the vouchers and expenditures of the superintendent. In 1857 Ruffin was also made a trustee of the briefly revived Episcopal Female Seminary on East Tryon Street.

Like his father-in-law, Ruffin seems never to have been attracted to political office. His prime interests were always business, industry, and finance, and in all those areas he was preeminently successful.

In the late 1840s leading Hillsborough residents made a vigorous, concerted effort to ensure that the route of the new North Carolina Railroad would be laid by Hillsborough rather than by Chapel Hill. The most powerful promoters of the Hillsborough route, who were also stockholders and generous donors to the project, included Ruffin, his father-in-law Cadwallader Jones, Sr., [John W. Norwood](#) ^[12], former Governor William A. Graham, and [Paul C. Cameron](#) ^[5], as well as [Giles Mebane](#) ^[13] and other property owners along the route. The case for the Hillsborough route was immensely strengthened by Chief Engineer [Walter Gwynn](#) ^[14]'s report that the projected Hillsborough route was both cheaper and more efficient than the Chapel Hill one. The railroad, when completed, skirted Jones's property (later sold as the site of the new [Hillsborough Military Academy](#) ^[15]) and was immediately adjacent to Ruffin's tannery, located on the northern side of the tracks near the Hillsborough depot and siding. On one occasion Ruffin mentioned a contract for some \$20,000 worth of hides from his tannery. For many years he served as the highly respected treasurer of the North Carolina Railroad, eventually moving his office from Hillsborough to [Company Shops](#) ^[16] (Burlington).

Mrs. Ruffin died at age fifty-six, and her husband, twenty-two years later at age seventy-nine. Both were buried in St. Matthew's Episcopal churchyard, Hillsborough, as were various members of their families. A portrait of Peter Browne Ruffin, painted in his mature years by [Garl Browne](#) ^[17], later was owned by his grandson, Peter Browne and Virginia Bellamy Ruffin of Wilmington. The portrait showed Ruffin to have been a massive, imposing man with a handsome, square bearded face and keenly penetrating eyes.

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