

Wolstenholme, Hugh ^[1]

Wolstenholme, Hugh

by William S. Powell, 1996

1780 or 1785–1886?

Hugh Wolstenholme, Anglican priest, teacher, and hermit, was the son of Geoffrey Wolstenholme, of Horsley-Gate, Derbyshire, England, of an ancient family from the north of England. The clan claimed descent from Sir Geoffrey Wolstenholme of The Peak, Derbyshire, and from William Peverell to whom the Duke of Normandy had granted an estate in Derbyshire. Sir John Wolstenholme (1562–1639), also from Derbyshire, was a member of the Virginia Company Council in 1609 and had other American connections as well. Hugh studied at Sheffield Grammar School and entered Trinity College, Cambridge University, on 25 Oct. 1797 at age seventeen, according to university records. Graduated with a B.A. degree in 1802, he was ordained in the [Church of England](#) ^[2] and became vicar of a parish in Lancashire and of Hope Parish in Derbyshire. Wolstenholme told members of his family that he had helped Sir Walter Scott collect information of his novel *Peveril of the Peak* ^[3]. Scott's physical description of a character in the book, Geoffrey Crayon, closely fits that of Wolstenholme.

Wolstenholme became active in the cause of laborers and yeomen and joined them in expressing opposition to taxes considered to have been unjustly imposed. A man named Hunt organized the laborers, but troops were ordered to end their uprising. Wolstenholme was among those arrested and imprisoned, and he soon was dismissed from his church appointment. After his release, he entered into a partnership with James Montgomery, the poet and newspaper editor in Sheffield for whom [Joseph Gales](#) ^[4] had also worked before migrating to North Carolina in 1799. Montgomery's former newspaper, the *Sheffield Register*, became the *Sheffield Iris*, a radical reform paper. In 1818, following a warning from authorities, Hugh Wolstenholme left for the United States, having inherited "a goodly estate" from his father of which he gave a portion to his sister, Mary Wolstenholme Reavis.

It was perhaps from family recollections of Sir John Wolstenholme that Hugh acquired an interest in the [Lost Colony of Roanoke](#) ^[5]. He said that he chose to move to North Carolina in hope of finding some trace of relatives who had been among the Lost Colonists. His ship wrecked near Norfolk at what is now Virginia Beach, and he went to Norfolk to await the receipt of the proceeds from the sale of his father's property. The name of the North Carolina state capital, Raleigh, prompted him to settle there. His sentiments for reform remained with him in his new home, where he was described as "a man of strong convictions, aggressive spirit and fearless utterances." He spoke out against slavery and criticized the state's failure to support education for white youth.

In Raleigh Wolstenholme spent several hours each day reading to the apprentices in James J. Selby's tailor shop while they worked, and soon other people came just to listen to him. He read from the *Sheffield Iris* and the *London Quarterly Review*. One of the apprentices was [Andrew Johnson](#) ^[6], then illiterate but destined to become [president of the United States](#) ^[7]. Wolstenholme's reading inspired some of his listeners, Johnson among them, to accept his invitation to gather at his home on certain evenings each week to learn to read.

In England Wolstenholme had been a member of the Anglican church, but in North Carolina he found the Moravian denomination more to his liking; after all, that had been the church of his friend, James Montgomery, in Sheffield. The academy operated by the [Moravians](#) ^[8] in Salem won his approval, and on one occasion he mentioned that his favorite books were the Bible, the *Book of Common Prayer*, and Shakespeare. The Right Reverend [John Starke Ravenscroft](#) ^[9], bishop of North Carolina, once said in a letter of introduction that Wolstenholme was "reputed to be one of the most learned men in North Carolina." When Bishop Philander Chase was making plans to visit England in search of support for the establishment of the institution that in 1824 became Kenyon College, Wolstenholme provided him with letters of introduction to his old friend James Montgomery, to John Kenyon, vicar of Manchester, and to other prominent men.

When he grew tired of associating with so many people with whom he had little in common, Wolstenholme withdrew to far western North Carolina and built himself a small log cabin against the side of a precipice at the southern end of the [Bald Mountain range](#) ^[10]. His abode was described by a great-nephew, who visited him, as "an embowered nook or nitche" covered by vines and furnished with homemade but comfortable furniture, a bearskin rug, and a few of his favorite books. He slept on a narrow, low featherbed under which he placed the casket he had made in anticipation of his last day. In the casket was the surplice in which he would be buried—the last of five generations of clergymen. His native county in England had been the site for centuries of hermits who lived in caves where they studied and prayed, sometimes taught, and often assisted travelers. Wolstenholme modeled his life on them. His wife and two children, a son and a daughter, had been dead for a number of years, but his sister's children and grandchildren lived not too far away. When Wolstenholme was sixty-five, a visitor described him as over six feet tall, with steel gray eyes and shaggy eyebrows. He wore a Moravian or [Quaker](#) ^[11] style hat, close-fitting corduroy jacket, knee breeches of "Kentucky jeans," buckskin leggings, high-top, rawhide shoes, and a beaver skin cloak.

Tradition relates that the hermit often had visitors and that he received them cordially. Governor [Zebulon B. Vance](#) ^[12] is said to have called on him to discuss affairs of state and to seek his advice, and both local and state officials communicated with him.

Finally, disturbed about the [Civil War](#) ^[13] and his money nearly exhausted, Wolstenholme abandoned his cabin and moved into [Asheville](#) ^[14]. A long time afterwards, when he was over a hundred, he died in the public poorhouse; his funeral was conducted by the Reverend [Jarvis Buxton](#) ^[15] of Trinity Episcopal Church, and he was buried in Asheville. Many years later a great-nephew visited the site of his hermitage and found the structure in ruins. There he discovered an issue of the *Sheffield Iris* from 1832, a copy of the will of the hermit's sister, and an old gold coin supporting the belief that Wolstenholme had secreted coins under trees and rocks around his retreat.

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Additional Resources:

John Hewitt's My People of the Mountains, 1918 (collection no. 03778-z). The Southern Historical Collection. Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
<http://www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/h/Hewitt,John.html> ^[16] (accessed February 25, 2014).

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