

John Randolph was born on June 2, 1773 at what is now Hopewell, Virginia to John Randolph a wealthy tobacco planter and Frances Bland. He was a cousin to Thomas Jefferson and descendant of Pocahontas. Randolph was often in ill health and when he was a young man he was struck with an illness that left him with a shrilling high pitch voice and unable to grow a beard. Despite his voice and eccentricities, at the age of 26 he was elected to the US House of Representatives and would serve as an elected and appointed official for nearly 35 years.

During his career he served as a US Representative and Senator, chairman of the Committee on Ways and Means, Minister to Russia, and a member of the Virginia Constitutional Convention in 1829. Once elected to office he soon rose to the Democratic-Republican party leader. After breaking with Jefferson in 1806, he founded the Tertium quids, a faction of the Democratic-Republican Party that called for a return to the Principles of 1798 and renounced what it saw as creeping nationalism.

He was not in favor of the War of 1812 and lost his seat in the house due to his opposition to the War. Despite his opposition to the war he offered his services to his native State of Virginia once the British sacked Washington. Not having any prior military service, Governor Barbour appointed him to his staff as an engineer and gave him orders to perform reconnaissance work just below the confluence of the Pamunkey and Mattaponi rivers. Once it was learned that the British had moved north to Baltimore he was relieved of his duties.

Randolph was one of the three founders of the American Colonization Society, which was an effort to return free blacks to a colony in Africa later named Liberia. Randolph's will ordered that all his slaves be freed (318 in all), and provided for their maintenance in a free state.

Randolph was an eccentric character. Of sharp wit and opinion, Randolph was an intimidating figure to both his enemies and friends. Constantly in poor health, Randolph turned to alcohol and opium late in life. He lived alone on his plantation on the Little Roanoke River in present-day Charlotte county, Virginia. On 24 May 1833, Randolph died in Philadelphia, and was buried facing west (according to his own instructions) so that he could continue to keep an eye on his old enemy Henry Clay.

John Greenleaf Whittier's wrote a poem titled "Randolph of Roanoke," which captures his "strange" brilliance:

Mirth, sparkling like a diamond shower,
From lips of life-long sadness;
Clear picturings of majestic thought
Upon a ground of madness
While others hailed in distant skies
Our eagle's dusky pinion,
He only saw the mountain bird
Stoop o'er his Old Dominion!
All parties feared him; each in turn
Beheld its schemes disjointed,
At right or left his fatal glance
And spectral finger pointed