

# James DeWolf

**James DeWolf** (March 18, 1764 – December 21, 1837) was a slave trader, a privateer during the War of 1812, and a state and national politician. He gained notoriety in 1791 when indicted for murdering a slave said to have smallpox, whom he said threatened the lives of all of the other slaves and crew because of the disease. The case was ultimately dismissed and was considered justifiable under contemporary law. During his lifetime, his name was usually written "James D'Wolf".

He served as a state legislator for a total of nearly 25 years, and in the 1820s as a United States senator from Rhode Island for much of a term. Along with the slave trade, DeWolf invested in sugar and coffee plantations in Cuba and became the wealthiest man in his state; by the end of his life, he was said to be the second-richest person in the entire United States.

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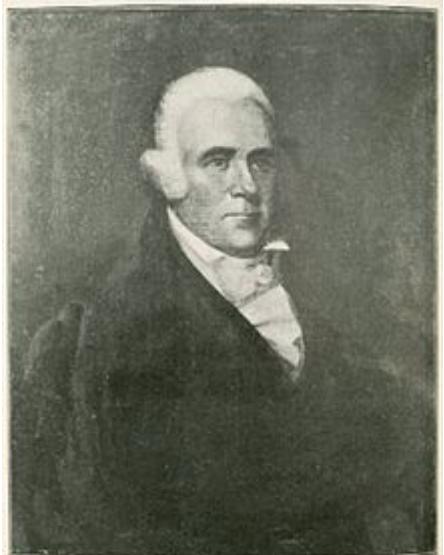
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## Biography

James DeWolf was born in Bristol, Rhode Island, in 1764 to Mark Anthony DeWolf (1726–1792) and his wife, Abigail Potter (1726–1809). He had brothers: Charles, John, William and Levi DeWolf.<sup>[1]</sup> Their father and uncle Simeon Potter were slave traders before the American Revolutionary War.<sup>[2]</sup> James DeWolf went to sea at an early age, shipping as a sailor on a private armed vessel during the late years of the American Revolutionary War. He participated in several naval encounters and was captured twice by the British.

After the war, DeWolf was selected as captain of a ship in his 20s. He began to engage in commercial ventures, including slave trading, often purchasing seasoned slaves from Cuba and other ports in the West Indies and transporting them primarily to southern markets in the United States. His father and uncle had been involved in slave trading since 1769.<sup>[3]</sup> Although Rhode Island outlawed slave trading in 1787, DeWolf and his family continued to finance and command slaving voyages to West Africa.<sup>[4]</sup>

**James DeWolf**



HON. JAMES DE WOLF 65,  
BRISTOL, R. I.,  
BORN MARCH 18, 1764; DIED DEC. 21, 1837.

### United States Senator from Rhode Island

#### In office

March 4, 1821 – October 31, 1825

Preceded by William Hunter

Succeeded by Asher Robbins

### Member of the Rhode Island House of Representatives

#### In office

1798–1801

1803–1812

1817–1821

1829–1837

### Personal details

Born	March 18, 1764 Bristol, Rhode Island
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Died	December 21, 1837 (aged 73) New York City, New York
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Political party	Democratic-
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In 1790, DeWolf married Nancy Ann Bradford, the daughter of William Bradford, deputy governor and a future U.S. senator from Rhode Island.<sup>[4][5]</sup> They had a family together, including a daughter Abby DeWolf.

In 1791, DeWolf was indicted for murder by a grand jury in Newport, Rhode Island. The case was widely reported in the New England press.<sup>[3]</sup> He was alleged to have directed the murder of a female African slave in 1789 who was sick with smallpox on the ship *Polly*, which he commanded; after having been treated to the best of the crew's knowledge, she was bound to a chair and lowered overboard.<sup>[1][6]</sup> Such cases were known at the time, as all the persons on a ship were threatened in cases of severe disease outbreaks. The judge in charge of the case ultimately accepted the prosecuting attorney's filing of *nolle prosequi*, a formal declaration "that he did not wish to pursue the case."<sup>[3]</sup> When DeWolf heard the indictment, he had immediately left for the Gold Coast of Africa.

DeWolf was later charged in the case in Saint Thomas, where he was then living. Two members of the crew, one of whom had taken part in the murder, as he had already had smallpox and was considered immune, said in a 1794 deposition taken in St. Eustatius, Leeward Islands, that the slave had to be thrown off in order to save the remainder of the slaves and crew from the infectious disease. This was justifiable according to contemporary maritime law.<sup>[3][6]</sup> In 1795 DeWolf testified about the case in court in Saint Thomas, West Indies, with no one present to oppose his testimony; the Danish judge ruled in his favor.<sup>[7]</sup>

DeWolf financed another 25 slaving voyages, usually with other members of his family. His father had started slave trading in 1769, and his nephew George DeWolf kept it up illegally until 1820.<sup>[3]</sup> In total, the DeWolf family is believed to have transported more than 11,000 slaves to this country before the United States banned the African slave trade, effective in 1808.<sup>[4]</sup>

James DeWolf also owned a rum distillery for use in trade in West Africa, and with his brothers and nephews started the Bank of Bristol, with two generations of family, and an insurance company, which together financed and insured their slave ships.<sup>[4]</sup> From 1805-1807, their Mount Hope Insurance Company insured 50 slaving voyages.<sup>[4]</sup> A family member established a slave auction house in Charleston, South Carolina, the destination for many of their slave ships.<sup>[3]</sup>

With wealth gained from the trade, James DeWolf also bought and operated three sugar and coffee plantations in Cuba. Like similar plantations in the US Deep South, these depended on slave labor.<sup>[3][4]</sup>

During the War of 1812, DeWolf fitted out privateers under the authority of the President of the United States. One of his ships, *Yankee*, became the most successful privateer of the war, intercepting British ships.<sup>[3]</sup> The privateer captured a total of 40 British vessels worth more than \$5 million during the war.<sup>[4]</sup>

At this time, DeWolf also became a pioneer in cotton textile manufacturing, which expanded rapidly in New England. With his wealth from the slave trade, he became a founding member of a consortium that formed the Arkwright Manufacturing Company in 1809. The company built the Arkwright Mills in Coventry, Rhode Island in 1810.<sup>[8][9]</sup> The textile mills of New England relied on cotton cultivated by slaves throughout the Deep South and shipped to the North. There were strong economic ties between the regions through the period of the American Civil War.

Republican
<b>Spouse(s)</b>
Nancy Ann Bradford DeWolf
<b>Profession</b>
Politician, Captain, Slaver

## Political career

DeWolf became active in politics and highly influential in the new state during the decades of the Federal period. He was first elected as a member of the Rhode Island House of Representatives in 1798, and served until 1801. He served again from 1803–12, 1817–21, and 1829–37. He was elected as speaker of the House from 1819 to 1821.

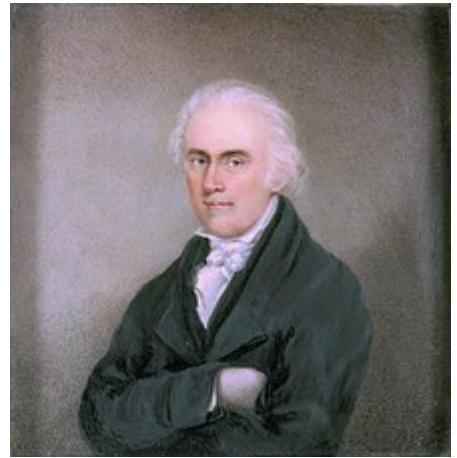
DeWolf advanced to national office when elected by the state legislature as a Democratic-Republican (later Crawford Republican) to the U.S. Senate, as was the procedure before popular election of US senators was authorized by constitutional amendment in the 20th century. He served part of his six-year term, from March 4, 1821, until he resigned on October 31, 1825.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Personal life

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He married and had a family. When his daughter Abbey DeWolf married Charles Dana Gibson, a wedding present was 60 acres of DeWolf family land in Bristol.<sup>[11]</sup> They built a large house, known as Longfield (Bristol, Rhode Island), for their family. They were the grandparents of the artist, Charles Dana Gibson, renowned for his "Gibson Girl" illustrations and later an editor and owner of Life magazine. DeWolf was also related to Mark Antony De Wolfe Howe, the first bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Central Pennsylvania; the bishop's son, Mark Antony De Wolfe Howe, a writer; and the writer's son, Mark De Wolfe Howe, a civil rights leader.

DeWolf died in New York City in 1837 at the age of 73, thought to be a millionaire and the second-wealthiest man in the United States. His body was returned to Rhode Island, and he was buried in the DeWolf private cemetery on Woodlawn Avenue in Bristol. His estate included properties in Bristol, New York, Maryland, Kentucky, and Ohio.<sup>[4]</sup>



DeWolf in his later years.

## Legacy

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- DeWolf is featured prominently in a 2008 documentary, *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North*, co-produced and directed by Katrina Browne, a DeWolf descendant, which describes the DeWolf family's major role in the United States slave trade.<sup>[3]</sup> It was nominated for an Emmy Award.

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2. Erik J. Chaput, "Book review: In Bristol, building an empire in an outlaw business" (<http://www.providencejournal.com/article/20140601/Entertainment/306019986>), *Providence Journal*, 2014, accessed 27 June 2018
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ⓘ This article incorporates public domain material from the Biographical Directory of the United States Congress website <http://bioguide.congress.gov> (<http://bioguide.congress.gov>).

## Further reading

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## External links

- United States Congress. "James DeWolf (id: D000295)" (<http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=D000295>). [Biographical Directory of the United States Congress](#).
- *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North* (2008) (<http://www.tracesofthetrade.org>), a documentary produced/directed by Katrina Browne, about the legacy of the northern U.S. role in slavery and the slave trade, shown on PBS and nominated for an Emmy Award
- Thomas Norman DeWolf, *Inheriting the Trade* (<http://inheritingthetrade.com>) (2007), a memoir about the legacy of slave trader James DeWolf and his descendants
- DeWolf Papers (<http://www.rihs.org/mssinv/Mss382.htm>), Rhode Island Historical Society
- James DeWolf Business Records (<https://id.lib.harvard.edu/ead/bak00653/catalog>), Baker Library, Harvard Business School
- James DeWolf (<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/7187923>) at [Find a Grave](#)

U.S. Senate		
Preceded by <b>William Hunter</b>	<b>U.S. Senator (Class 1) from Rhode Island</b> March 4, 1821 – October 31, 1825 Served alongside: <b>Nehemiah R. Knight</b>	Succeeded by <b>Asher Robbins</b>

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