

Thompson Children's Home ^[1]

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by Louis P. Towles, 2006

Additional research provided by Sheila Bumgarner.

Thompson Children's Home had its beginning in the work of two men-Benjamin Bronson of [St. Peter's Episcopal Church](#) in [Charlotte](#) ^[2] and [Edwin A. Osborne](#) ^[3], a recent convert to the Episcopal faith. Bronson initiated the effort by facilitating the purchase of more than 250 acres on what was then the outskirts of Charlotte in order to establish a much-needed school for local youths. On part of the property, he opened a denominational academy in 1870. It was named for the Lewis Thompson family, which furnished much of the initial funding. Although the effort failed for lack of management, the idea was not lost, and in the 1870s Osborne, long interested in educating and caring for "destitute orphans" of every faith, approached Bronson about using the abandoned school for that purpose. In 1866, at Osborne's instigation, the [Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina](#) ^[4] accepted 61 acres and two buildings and paid part of the debt associated with the Bronson school.

Osborne, the orphanage's first superintendent (1886-98), worked energetically to make his dream a reality. Beginning without money and with the existing facilities in poor condition, he solicited food, used clothing and furniture, and money. With the latter he refurbished the old structures, built new ones, and hired a staff to assist him. By 1888 the school had 30 children, a number that would double within 12 years.

In 1898 Osborne resigned and was replaced by Walter J. Smith (1898-1922). William H. Wheeler (1922-40) and M. D. Whisnant (1940-65) also served as superintendents. Smith and Wheeler tapped new sources of revenue and virtually rebuilt the school. By the 1950s, however, needs were changing. There were fewer orphans, meaning declining numbers at Thompson each year, and children lacking one or both parents were increasingly being served by federal or state agencies. It became clear that Osborne's vision was no longer valid and that the church could not indefinitely fund a traditional but archaic institution.

Two independently based reports supported this conclusion, and under superintendent Robert Noble (1965-78) and director John Powell the mission of the institution was dramatically changed. Instead of concentrating upon orphans, the school would now focus upon the treatment of emotionally disturbed children between the ages of 6 and 12. These children would be drawn from across the state and were to be housed in specially designed treatment cottages. The centers were to be served 24 hours a day with rotating staffs.

Now named Thompson Children's Home, the institution was moved from inner [Charlotte](#) ^[2], which had gradually surrounded the orphanage, to a 40-acre location on the outskirts of the city. With branches at Fletcher and Goldsboro, a child development center in Charlotte, and a strong foster care system, Thompson Children's Home provides a variety of services to more than 300 children and families annually.

References:

Lawrence Foushee London and Sarah McCulloh Lemmon, eds., *The Episcopal Church in North Carolina, 1701-1959* (1987).

Barbara Lockman, *A Century's Child: The Story of Thompson Children's Home, 1886-1986* (1986).

Subjects:

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Authors:

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Origin - location:

[Charlotte](#) ^[12]

From:

[Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.](#)^[13]

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