

Beddingfield, Eugene Crocker ^[1]

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by Lala Carr Steelman, 1979

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Eugene Crocker Beddingfield, farmer, legislator, and railroad commissioner, was born in Wake County ^[2] to Alexander Hanson and Palmyra La Fayette Chappell Beddingfield. His mother's original ancestor in America was Thomas Chappell, who in 1635 settled near the site of Petersburg, Va. Several members of Palmyra Chappell's family were Revolutionary War ^[3] soldiers; her grandfather Samuel Chappell joined the Continental Army before the Battle of Trenton ^[4] in 1776, was wounded and captured during the course of the war, but served until Cornwallis's ^[5] surrender at Yorktown. His son Edward, grandfather of E. C. Beddingfield, served as a soldier during the War of 1812 ^[6].

Military service was not limited to the maternal line. Beddingfield's father, born in Wake County, enlisted as a Confederate ^[7] soldier but died of pneumonia at Gordonsville, Va., on 17 Nov. 1863. Responsibility for the care of his thirteen-month-old son fell to his widow and her father, Edward Chappell, then seventy-five years old. Growing up on his grandfather's small farm, where life during the postbellum period was hard, young Beddingfield engaged in strenuous manual labor. He cut ditches, split rails, built fences, and performed other chores.

Eugene Beddingfield's educational opportunities were restricted. He attended a subscription school for a few months each year. At the age of fourteen he enrolled for one year in the Forestville Academy, whose principal was Dr. Richard H. Lewis II, an outstanding educator. Even this limited formal education necessitated sacrifices on his family's part, and Beddingfield was largely self-educated. His thirst for knowledge led him to fill his spare moments reading books, especially histories and biographies. A country doctor reported to his son, Hubert A. Royster ^[8], that the youth was often seen with a book resting on the plow handles. He borrowed books from friends, including Josephus Daniels ^[9]. At about age seventeen, Beddingfield began teaching school a few months each year and spending the other months engaged in farming.

Religion ^[10], as well as education, was an important factor in his life. At age fifteen he united with the Midway Missionary Baptist Church ^[11]. Always a faithful member, he moved with the church to Millbrook where his membership continued until his death. He also became a Mason ^[12] and held all the elective positions in his lodge, Neuse Lodge No. 97, except that of treasurer.

On Thanksgiving Day, 24 Nov. 1881, Beddingfield married Nancy Peebles. The couple had eight children: Alexander Edward (1882–1943), Eugene Thomas (1884–1954), Charles Amos (1886–1938), Rebecca Jane (1887–1918), Leroy Chappell (1891–1969), Louise Wilson (1893–), Charles Lemuel (1895–1973), and an infant son who died at birth in 1889.

Interest in the welfare of the farming class led Beddingfield into politics. In 1888 he was nominated by the Democratic County Convention ^[13] to the state house of representatives and subsequently elected. He served during the session of 1889.

In January 1890 he succeeded Leonidas L. Polk ^[14] as secretary of the North Carolina State Farmers' Alliance ^[15]. An energetic and aggressive Allianceman, he was an active campaigner in 1890 and later. He played a decisive role in pressing Alliance demands on candidates for public office, including Senator Zebulon B. Vance ^[16]. A supporter of Vance, he insisted nevertheless that the senator demonstrate concern for the farmer. Beddingfield had no sympathy with the Bourbon element in the Democratic party and was strong in his advocacy of Alliance reforms, but he opposed the formation of the Populist ^[17] party. He was especially interested in the Alliance proposal of legislation to create a railroad commission ^[18].

The legislature of 1891 created the Railroad Commission ^[18], and Beddingfield was elected one of the three commissioners for a term of six years. He resigned as secretary of the Alliance on 28 Mar. 1891, in order to take the new post. He was not reelected in 1897 by the Fusionist ^[19] legislature. Nevertheless, when the Democrats regained control of the General Assembly ^[20] in 1899 and replaced the Railroad Commission with the Corporation Commission ^[21], Beddingfield was chosen to the newly created commission. The Republican he displaced challenged the Beddingfield appointment, and the North Carolina Supreme Court ^[22] in *Abbott v. Beddingfield* (125 N.C. Reports 256) decided for the plaintiff.

In 1900, Beddingfield was again elected a state representative from Wake County ^[2]. He served on the Corporation Commission from April 1903 to January 1909. In a letter to the editor of the News and Observer ^[23], dated 9 Mar. 1908, he announced his intention of retiring from the commission when his term expired. Resuming his political career in 1918, he was elected to the state senate and served one term.

He also served on the Board of Commissioners ^[24] of Wake County. He was appointed by Governor Angus W. McLean

^[25]to the Board of Trustees of East Carolina ^[26] Teacher's College in Greenville for a four-year term beginning in April 1925.

Beddingfield died at Rex Hospital ^[27] in Raleigh; he was buried in the family cemetery in the Millbrook Community of Wake County with full Masonic honors.

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