

Blacknall, Oscar William ^[1]

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by B. W. C. Roberts, 1979

6 Sept. 1852–6 July 1918

Oscar William Blacknall, business executive and author, was born on his father's farm near Kittrell. His father, Colonel Charles C. Blacknall, served the Confederacy ^[2] in the Twenty-third North Carolina Regiment until he fell mortally wounded at the Battle of Winchester. The Blacknall family was seated in Buckinghamshire in England as early as the fourteenth century, on an estate known as Sulgrave Manor. The Reverend John Blacknall ^[3], a graduate of Magdalen College, Oxford, accompanied Sir Richard Everard ^[4], who had been appointed to succeed Governor George Burrington ^[5], to North Carolina in 1725. His grandson, Thomas Blacknall, enlisted as a revolutionary soldier at the age of sixteen. In 1795, Thomas Blacknall settled in Granville (presently Vance ^[6]) County, where he married Polly Kittrell, a granddaughter of Jonathan Kittrell, one of the first settlers in the area, near the present town of Kittrell.

At the age of fourteen, having experienced poverty and a limited education, Oscar William Blacknall was employed as a clerk in a country store. Later he was employed by W. H. and R. S. Tucker and Company, a mercantile establishment in Raleigh ^[7]. While in Raleigh, he studied law under R. H. Battle ^[8].

In 1871, because of poor health, he returned to Kittrell and there organized his own tobacco ^[9] business, with Mazeppa his major brand of plug tobacco. After five years of hard work, this marginal business venture became successful enough to allow him time to pursue his literary interests. His first three articles were published in a North Carolina newspaper, and he was complimented and encouraged. Afterward he was successful in having his articles accepted for publication in *Atlantic Monthly*, *Oliver Twist*, *The Youth's Companion*, and *Kate Field's Washington*. He wrote articles dealing with life in the South during the Civil War ^[10], character sketches, and informative articles on fruit culture, many of which were syndicated in leading farm journals. He sometimes used the pseudonym ^[11] David Dodge.

In 1888 he organized Continental Plant Company, a highly successful nursery business specializing in strawberry plants.

Blacknall married his double first cousin, Carrie Thomas Blacknall, on 27 July 1875. The first of seven children, Oscar ("Ossie") William, Jr., was born in 1880. The other children included Charles Harry, Shields Mallette, Gladys, Kate McClannahan, a child whose name is unknown, and Harcourt.

The family suffered a number of tragedies: the oldest son died of tuberculosis; two of the other children were suicide cases; and the sixth child died as an infant. On 6 July 1918, Blacknall shot his wife and his daughter Kate and then committed suicide. Newspaper accounts described it as a "triple tragedy" and expressed sorrow for the loss of the "head of the South's largest nursery" and members of his family.

In 1928, Blacknall's son Shields presented his father's collection of books to the Library of The University of North Carolina ^[12].

References:

Henderson Daily Dispatch, 10 July 1918.

Samuel Thomas Peace, *Zeb's Black Baby* (1955).

Raleigh News and Observer, 7 July 1918.

C. L. Van Noppen Papers ^[13] (Manuscript Department, Library, Duke University, Durham).

Weeks Scrapbook (North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) 3 (1893), 8 (1892).

Additional Resources:

"Kittrell's Springs." N.C. Highway Historical Marker G-42, N.C. Office of Archives & History.

<https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program/Markers.aspx?sp=Markers&k=Markers&sv=G-42> ^[14] (accessed May 17, 2013).

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