

Mitchell, William Watson ^[1]

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20 Dec. 1810–12 Sept. 1897

William Watson Mitchell, lay leader and benefactor of Baptist ^[2] causes, planter, and civic leader, was born in Bertie County ^[3], the son of William and Rena Mitchell. As a young man he moved from Bertie to adjoining Hertford County ^[4], where in 1830, with the labor of the people he enslaved, he built an imposing house on a 1,500-acre plantation. The plantation was also cultivated and maintained by enslaved laborers.

Chowan College ^[5] in Murfreesboro became the principal object of his bounty for half a century, and its survival during the Civil War ^[6] and Reconstruction ^[7] is attributed to him. In 1848 he was one of the group that gathered at Mulberry Grove, the home of Dr. Godwin C. Moore ^[8] in Hertford County ^[4], and set in motion the organization that became Chowan College ^[5]. He was a member of its board of trustees for twenty-eight years and chairman for nineteen years.

While Chowan College was his greatest interest, Mitchell also contributed large sums of money and property to Wake Forest College ^[9], the Baptist Orphanage ^[10] in Thomasville, and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, as well as to individual Baptist churches. It was his personal gifts to Chowan College, however, that enabled it to remain open during and immediately after the Civil War. Mitchell worked diligently to improve the quality of the college and to expand its campus. In 1854 he was instrumental in bringing Dr. William Hooper to the institution as president. Formerly an Episcopal ^[11] priest, Hooper had become a Baptist minister and educator and served as president of Wake Forest College in 1847–48. A graduate of The University of North Carolina ^[12] who had also studied at Princeton Theological Seminary, he brought progressive changes to Chowan College. Hooper left in 1862 to head the Fayetteville Female Seminary.

Mitchell was chairman of the county court of Hertford County and was chief magistrate of the county for twenty-five years. He built and maintained a neighborhood school and in 1846 was elected to the county board of superintendents of public schools. A frequent delegate to the Baptist association, he was a generous contributor to the Ahoskie Baptist Church, of which he was a member.

The first of his three marriages was to Martha C. Williford in 1832; she died three weeks after the wedding. His second wife was Martha E. Mitchell, daughter of John and Winnifred Saunders Mitchell and sister of James Saunders Mitchell, who represented the Bertie district in the state senate ^[13] in 1842. They became the parents of Nancy Emily, Mary Jane, Elizabeth Winnifred, and Sara Martha. Following the death of his second wife, Mitchell married her niece, Mary Elizabeth Winnifred Mitchell, the daughter of Senator Mitchell. They became the parents of seven children: James Saunders II, John Pipkin, Admira Hazeltine, Pauline Agnes, Betty Elva, William Judson, and Charles Emerson.

A portrait of Mitchell hangs in the main building of Chowan College.

References:

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Interviews with members of the Mitchell family by the author.

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J. Roy Parker, *The Ahoskie Era of Hertford County* (1955).

Charles B. Williams, *History of the Baptists in North Carolina* (1901).

B. B. Winborne, *Colonial and State History of Hertford County* (1906).
<https://archive.org/details/colonialandstat00winbgoog> ^[14] (accessed August 31, 2014).

Additional Resources:

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service. National Register of Historic Places -- Inventory Nomination Form [Gray Gables, James S. Mitchell House, Winton, N.C.]. <http://www.hpo.ncdcr.gov/nr/HF0029.pdf> ^[15] (accessed August 31, 2014).

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