

Owen, William Hayes ^[1]

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by Robin Brabham, 1991

ca. 1807–ca. 1877

William Hayes Owen, teacher, was born in Virginia, the son of John and Rebecca C. Owen. His family moved to Oxford when he was a child. Owen was graduated with honors from [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[2] in 1833. He remained at Chapel Hill as tutor in ancient languages until January 1835, when he resigned to establish the Leasburg Classical School. When his expected replacement declined the tutorship, he was persuaded to return to his post; a year later he was also appointed university librarian. In 1838 he received an A.M. degree from the university, and in 1843 he was one of the organizers of the alumni association.

Owen was named professor of ancient languages at [Wake Forest College](#) ^[3] in 1843. On assuming his duties in January 1844, he also established and operated for four years a girl's boarding school, with his mother as matron and two of his sisters, Mary and Sallie, as teachers. During his fifteen years at Wake Forest, he served much of the time as secretary of the faculty. When President [John B. White](#) ^[4] contemplated resigning in 1852, Owen was elected acting president, a post to which he was reelected in December 1853, when White did resign. Owen served as acting president until June 1854.

At the commencement of 1858, the trustees asked Owen to resign—in part, because of the long-standing and undesirable influence that his able but intemperate brother, Hugh, had been exerting on the college students. Owen blamed his dismissal on "very unprofessional practices," which may have included the wish by some Baptists to rid the faculty of this Methodist professor. He terminated his connection with the college at the end of the fall term of 1858–59.

By February 1859 Owen was in Hillsborough teaching in a school that he and [Ralph Henry Graves](#) ^[5] operated as a partnership. In January 1862 he became an assistant at the Beulah Institute, a boy's preparatory school established in Madison by the Beulah Baptist Association and conducted by the Reverend Lewis H. Schuck, a former student of Owen at Wake Forest. Sometime after February 1863, when the school closed as a result of the [Civil War](#) ^[6], Owen moved to Tennessee, where he continued to teach in private schools until his death in late 1876 or early 1877. During the war he was the author of a tract advocating abstinence of alcoholic beverages, entitled *Soldiers, Conquer Your Great Enemy!*

Owen's service as librarian won him recognition from [Kemp Plummer Battle](#) ^[7], historian of The University of North Carolina, as "the most active of the early librarians." The "uncommon" dignity of his manner led the students at Chapel Hill to give him the title "Judge." Both Battle and Wake Forest students agreed that Owen had limited intellectual abilities, but they praised him for his command of his subject, his reputation as a teacher, and his character as a person. Owen taught at Wake Forest longer than any other full professor before the Civil War, and, in the opinion of [George Washington Paschal](#) ^[8], "in all probability contributed more to the education of the students of that period than any of his colleagues." He enthusiastically supported the young college, and he contributed several letters and articles to the [Biblical Recorder](#) ^[9] commending the school to the Baptists.

References:

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[Calvin H. Wiley Papers](#) ^[13] (Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill).

Additional Resources:

Owen, William Hayes, Documenting the American South: <https://docsouth.unc.edu/dusenbery/id/pn0001314> ^[14]

Report of the Librarian, June 4, 1840, Owen, William Hayes, ca. 1807-ca. 1877, Documenting the American South: <https://docsouth.unc.edu/unc/unc04-30/unc04-30.html> ^[15]

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