

Payne, Bruce Ryburn ^[1]

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by J. Isaac Copeland, 1994

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Bruce Ryburn Payne, college president, was born in the Mull Grove community of [Catawba County](#) ^[2], the son of Jordan Nathaniel and Barbara Anne Eliza Warlick Payne. The elder Payne was a teacher and a Methodist minister who, though licensed, was never ordained. Young Payne received his preparation for college at the Patton School of Morganton, entered [Trinity College](#) ^[3] (now [Duke University](#) ^[4]) in 1892, and was graduated with a bachelor of arts degree in 1896.

Payne had made plans to study medicine, but on leaving college he accepted the position of principal of Morganton Academy and soon decided upon a career in education. After teaching in Morganton for three years, in the last of which he also held the office of superintendent of schools for [Burke County](#) ^[5], Payne in 1899 returned to [Durham](#) ^[6] to teach in the local high school. While teaching he took advantage of the opportunity to continue his studies at Trinity. He received a master's degree in 1902 and in the fall of that year enrolled at Teachers College, [Columbia University](#) ^[7], where he was awarded a Ph.D. degree in 1904.

Payne taught for a year at the [College of William and Mary](#) ^[8] and then moved to the [University of Virginia](#) ^[9], where he was professor of secondary education and later head of the summer session. At the university his instructional load at one time or another included courses in philosophy, psychology, logic, and ethics—all in addition to education. When Payne was placed in charge of the summer session, he was apparently given a free hand because substantial reorganization soon took place. The course offerings were expanded to include a generous number in the field of arts and sciences, university officials agreed to accept credit for the courses offered, and the summer session became an integral part of the university's program.

Payne's association with the University of Virginia lasted only five years, yet his influence on the state may well have been greater even than on the university. In close cooperation with the State Board of Education and the State Board of Examiners, he worked to prepare a course of study for the public schools; not content with this, he urged the establishment of more and better high schools. When classes were not in session, Payne and a colleague would frequently start out separately, crossing the state to reach citizens in every area, and speak before interested groups about the importance of a high school education. Their talks stressed such basic issues as sanitation, adequate school buildings and equipment, and the necessity for cooperation between school and home.

In January 1911 Payne accepted with considerable reluctance the invitation to become president of [George Peabody College for Teachers](#) ^[10] in Nashville, Tenn. Peabody Normal School of the University of Nashville had been closed in 1909, with plans made to move the institution to a new campus in another part of the city and to give it a new name, George Peabody College for Teachers. Payne's responsibility was to raise the money needed to match a \$1.5 million gift from the Peabody Education Fund, plan for and supervise the development of the new campus, and select a faculty. In an amazing display of ability, he was able in a few decades to make Peabody the most influential institution in the South for the training of teachers and one of the three or four most influential in the nation.

Payne's study at Teachers College had brought him in touch with a group of leading educational theorists—Paul Monroe, John Dewey, and Edward L. Thorndike, plus Frank M. McMurry, who was his major professor. Although these men had made an impression on him, Payne was one to chart his own course. The faculty selected for Peabody College included able educators, as one might expect, but in addition there were sound scholars in mathematics, history, English, geography, psychology, and languages. Furthermore, the courses offered reflected Payne's commitment to the liberal arts as fundamental in the preparation of teachers.

Any description of Payne calls forth memories of a restless, energetic, and determined man—one frequently thought of as aloof, yet in reality warm and humane. If he appeared to be distant it was because his mind was preoccupied with thoughts of the college and the education of America's children, both black and white. In less than three decades, almost single-handedly, he brought the assets of the college from \$2 million to \$8 million and saw the enrollment, including summer school, reach more than four thousand. Payne was a man of medium height and stocky build. Ingrained in him was a love of beauty and a deep, unemotional religious faith. His appreciation of beauty is reflected in the buildings and grounds of Peabody College, in both of which he took a personal interest. And his writings—particularly those messages addressed to the graduating classes—reveal his awareness of the beautiful in literature, nature, and art, and the importance of religion in his daily life.

Payne married Lula Carr of [Kinston](#) ^[11] in 1897, and they were the parents of a son, Maxwell Carr, who became a successful Nashville businessman. Throughout life Payne was active in civic and religious affairs, and at the time of his death he was the Nashville chairman of a committee seeking additional endowment funds for Fisk University. O. C.

Carmichael, vice-chancellor of Vanderbilt, said of him that "few . . . in the South have achieved so distinguished a career of service to education"; Thomas E. Jones, president of Fisk, referred to Payne as "not only a great educator, but a great humanitarian" and one whose "educational philosophy extended to all the people." Trinity College (1917), Miami University (1920), and Columbia University (1929) conferred honorary degrees upon him.

Payne died suddenly of a heart attack. Funeral services were conducted in Peabody's Social-Religious Building by his pastor, Dr. Costen J. Harrell of West End Methodist Church, assisted by Dr. W. F. Powell, pastor of the First Baptist Church. Interment was in Mount Olivet Cemetery, Nashville.

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