

Perry, William Joel ^[1]

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by Percival Perry, 1994

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William Joel Perry, physician, planter, businessman, and state senator, was born in [Union County](#) ^[2], near Ames (now Wingate), the fifth of nine children of William Marion and Martha Moore Perry. His forebears on each side served in the Revolutionary War and were among the earliest settlers of the region. His father, a Confederate veteran, farmer, and skilled mechanic, established a milling complex in Ames in 1892 and, eager to provide better educational opportunities for his children, was one of the founders of the Wingate School in 1896. Young Perry grew up on his father's farm, attended the Marshville Academy, and in 1898 was one of three students who were graduated in the first class at Wingate, where he had gained distinction as a debater.

Perry entered the Atlanta College of Physicians and Surgeons (now part of [Emory University](#) ^[3]) and was graduated with the M.D. degree in 1900. He began medical practice in Taxahaw, near Lancaster County, S.C., but in 1905, at the request of a number of prominent citizens of Chesterfield County, moved there. In 1905 and again in 1907 he received graduate medical training in the New York Polyclinic Medical School and Hospital.

Resuming his practice in Chesterfield, he became active in the economic life of the community, entering partnerships in several mercantile establishments and serving as a bank director. He helped usher in the automobile age by purchasing the first automobile in Chesterfield in 1908 and later developed several automotive garages in the area. Perry acquired farms and became an active promoter of agricultural interests. In a county devoted primarily to the cultivation of cotton, he constantly experimented with new crops and with new methods for growing them.

Law and politics rivaled his interest in medicine, and he was elected to the state house of representatives in 1922 and 1924 and served as senator from 1927 to 1930. His primary efforts in the General Assembly were in behalf of improving public schools, farm-to-market roads, the medical college, and the state's charitable and penal institutions. Perry was singularly responsible for the defeat of a bill providing for a bond issue for paving intercity highways in the 1920s on the grounds that concrete highways were in an experimental stage and that through delay South Carolina could profit from the mistakes of others and ultimately build a better system for one-third less cost, wisdom borne out by subsequent developments. An ardent Democrat, he made the only speech in the county in behalf of the unpopular Democratic presidential nominee, Alfred E. Smith, in 1928.

These wide interests did not divert him from the practice of medicine, for which he was best remembered. Skilled in surgery and obstetrics, his practice covered a radius of twenty miles and extended into neighboring [Anson County](#) ^[4], N.C. Regarding his practice more as a mission to heal the sick and relieve suffering, he refused to send statements of accounts, trusting his patients to pay him when they could. His supreme effort came in the great influenza epidemic of 1918, which partially wrecked his health. A coronary, suffered under the strain of World War II, forced his retirement in 1945. He was a member of the Chesterfield County Medical Society, which honored him at a testimonial dinner in 1953, the [South Carolina Medical Association](#) ^[5], the [American Medical Association](#) ^[6], and the [Masonic order](#) ^[7].

An excellent public speaker and a delightful raconteur, Perry had the gift for being at ease whether in the hut of the humblest tenant farmer or among his peers on the senate floor. Passionately devoted to education, he served as chairman of the local school board and often made loans to worthy students for their college education. His empathy for the disadvantaged was legendary.

In 1899 he married Martha V. Griffin, daughter of Enoch W. and Margaret Bivens Griffin, of Wingate, who died in 1905. In 1907 he married Essie Burns Buchanan, eldest daughter of Miriam DeLoss Melton and Jesse Burns Buchanan, a planter and former mayor of Chesterfield, and they had three sons: William Louis and Jeremiah Buchanan, who followed him in the practice of medicine, and Percival, who became professor of history at [Wake Forest University](#) ^[8]. He died of a cerebral hemorrhage at his home in Chesterfield and was buried in the Chesterfield cemetery. An oil portrait by Stanislaw Rembski, painted three months prior to his death, is in possession of his son in [Winston-Salem](#) ^[9].

References:

Chesterfield Advertiser, 2 Sept. 1954.

J. Wilson Gibbs, *Legislative Manual of South Carolina* (1927).

Family records (possession of the author).

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