

Perry, William Marion ^[1]

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by Percival Perry, 1994

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William Marion Perry, Confederate veteran, farmer, millwright, merchant, banker, and a founder of [Wingate College](#) ^[2] and the town of [Wingate](#) ^[3], was born on Niggerhead Creek, in [Union County](#) ^[4], the third of seven children of Jeremiah and Elizabeth Griffin Perry. Forebears on each ancestral side had served in the Revolution and settled in the county. William Marion Perry spent his early years on his father's farm without opportunities for education, a circumstance that greatly influenced him in later life.

Too young to enlist at the beginning of the [Civil War](#) ^[5], he was apprenticed to work in a bayonet factory in [Wadesboro](#) ^[6] until his enlistment at age seventeen in August 1864 in the Second North Carolina Junior Reserves, Company F. Later transferred to a regular regiment, he served principally in eastern North Carolina guarding the railroad that was the lifeline for General Robert E. Lee's army in Virginia.

Returning home after the war, he married Martha Emmaline Moore, daughter of Samuel Rode and Mary Ross Moore, in September 1866, and they had nine children prior to her death in 1888. In October 1868 his parents gave him 70 acres of timberland on which he constructed a log house; he moved in in January 1870, before he had completed the roof or hung the doors. During the next twenty-six years he farmed and purchased an additional 225 acres and cleared 100 for farming. He also developed other skills: he used the metallurgical knowledge gained in the bayonet factory to become a blacksmith and wheelwright for the community; he made a pair of forceps in his shop and served as the local "dentist," extracting teeth for his neighbors; and he was a cobbler and a carpenter.

Perry's early ambition in life was to become a physician. Denied educational opportunities as a youth, he was determined to provide them for his children. The only schools available locally were subscription schools, taught irregularly for brief intervals. In 1890, following the death of his first wife, he married Katherine M. Rushing, a schoolteacher, and with her support resolved to abandon farming and enter the milling business in [Marshville](#) ^[7], where his children could attend the academy. When these plans went awry, his brother-in-law, G. M. Stewart, aware of his mechanical skills, offered to sell him a choice block of land at a minimal price if he would move to Ames Turnout on the railroad and enter a partnership with him. Perry agreed provided they would build a school for the community. In 1895 the Union Baptist Association was searching for a site for an Associational school. Stewart offered to give the Association ten acres of land, with a spring on it, and Perry offered to saw the lumber gratuitously at his mill from logs contributed by people in the community. The school, named Wingate in honor of a former president of [Wake Forest College](#) ^[8], was opened in the fall of 1896. In the same year Perry built one of the first houses in the new town that developed around the school. In 1901 the town was incorporated and its name changed from Ames to Wingate.

In addition to the lumber mill and cotton gin, established in 1892, Perry and Stewart developed a corn and flour mill and a general merchandise store. In 1896 Perry added a planer mill, specifically to dress the lumber for the new school. In 1909 they organized, with others, the State Bank of Wingate, with Perry as vice-president, a position he held until his death. Although limited in resources, the bank survived the economic collapse of 1929.

A man of quiet temperament, sound judgment, and genial good humor, Perry never sought the limelight but was content with his service to others. He assisted many students in obtaining an education by boarding them in his home and extending them loans in time of need. He regarded the Wingate School as his lifework and remained an ardent supporter, serving for many years on the board of trustees and as chairman of its building committee for a new brick building in 1911. When the state public school system of the 1920s threatened the existence of the private academies, he supported the conversion of the Wingate School to a junior college in 1923 to assure its perpetuity.

After the death of his second wife in 1921, he married Alice Threatt, a registered nurse, in 1924. He died at his home from advanced years and gradual heart failure and was buried in the Wingate cemetery. He was a lifelong member of Meadow Branch Baptist Church, the [Democratic party](#) ^[9], and the [Masonic order](#) ^[10]. All by his first wife were his children Clarence, Cora, Julia, James, William (who realized his father's ambition by becoming a physician), Mary, Wilma, and Martha.

References:

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