

Ross, Robert Alexander ^[1]

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by Reece Berryhill, 1994

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Robert Alexander Ross, nationally known obstetrician and gynecologist, professor of obstetrics at [Duke University](#) ^[2], and first chairman of the Department of Obstetrics at [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[3], was born in Morganton of Scottish ancestry. He was the son of Dr. Charles Ellis Ross, a native of the Steele Creek Community on the outskirts of Charlotte, and the former Kate Lenoir Chambers of Morganton. The Ross family and some relatives—the Griers, the Strongs, and the Harrises—were among the early settlers of that area. His maternal ancestors included the Avery, Erwin, and Chambers families, early settlers in [Burke](#) ^[4] and/or adjoining counties. Among these was [Waightstill Avery](#) ^[5], an able lawyer who first lived in [Mecklenburg County](#) ^[6]. All of these families were members of the Presbyterian or the Associate Reformed Presbyterian church in their respective communities.

Ross entered The University of North Carolina as a premedical student in 1916 and received the B.S. in Medicine degree in 1920; the [University of Pennsylvania](#) ^[7] awarded him the M.D. degree in 1922. As a freshman in Chapel Hill and a member of the ATO fraternity, he earned the appellation, "Daddy," by which he was known to state, national, and international practitioners. The nickname had nothing to do with his professional activities. Rather, according to his university associates of the period 1916–20, it resulted from his kindness to colleagues and from his care of those who became rowdy and difficult to handle on Saturday night imbibing parties. For the remainder of his life as physician, teacher, or friend, he functioned superbly and quietly in this role.

In preparation for a career in obstetrics-gynecology, Ross was an intern and assistant resident at the Episcopal Hospital (1922–24) and a resident of the Kensington Hospital for Women (1924–26), both in Philadelphia. In 1926 he returned to North Carolina and began to practice in [Durham](#) ^[8]—unquestionably the first well-qualified specialist in his field in that community and one of the earliest and best in the state. Shortly afterwards he became chief of the Obstetrical-Gynecological Service at Watts Hospital, where he did much to improve the quality of care on that service. He also was instrumental in establishing the Salvation Army Home to care for unmarried mothers and assist in their deliveries and served as a consultant obstetrician and gynecologist on the staff of the Lincoln Hospital.

In 1930, with the opening of the [Duke University School of Medicine and hospital](#) ^[9], Ross joined the faculty and the staff of the hospital and began his career as an academician. He remained at Duke, with promotions over the years from assistant professor to professor, until 1952. In 1934 he was appointed a lecturer at The University of North Carolina School of the Basic Medical Sciences and continued in that capacity until 1952.

A superb student throughout life, Ross in 1931 became a diplomat of the [American Board of Obstetrics-Gynecology](#) ^[10]. Early in his career, in the search for the intellectual stimulus so important to his personal and professional life, he, together with a small group of his specialty in the South Atlantic states, provided a nucleus of men in an association that became the South Atlantic Association of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. Later he was the moving spirit in organizing the [North Carolina Obstetrical-Gynecological Society](#) ^[11]. In time Ross served as president of both organizations.

In 1940 he entered the Medical Corps of the U.S. Naval Reserve as a lieutenant commander, served in the Pacific in 1944, and rose to the rank of captain before his discharge in 1946; he was also a recipient of the Purple Heart. Continuing as a representative of the commandant of the Sixth Naval District, Ross was promoted to the rank of rear admiral in the Medical Corps at the time of his retirement in 1962, one of the few reservists in his specialty to reach that rank.

In 1952 he became professor and chairman of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at [The University of North Carolina School of Medicine](#) ^[12] at the beginning of its expansion to a four-year school and served in that post until his retirement in 1965. Because of his distinguished record as a clinician and teacher, he soon recruited a very able faculty—both full- and part-time. Positions in his residency program were much sought after by graduates of The University of North Carolina and other schools of medicine.

Ross's many contributions were recognized by his election to prominent scientific and honorary societies. He was the first North Carolinian to receive the honor of membership in the American Association of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (president, 1960) and the American Gynecological Society. A charter member of the American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology, he served as an associate examiner of the board from 1950 through his remaining active years. In addition, he was a member of the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology (president, 1968–69), North Carolina Chapter of the American College of Physicians (president, 1964), Association of Professors of Gynecology and Obstetrics, Chorionepithelioma Register, Pan-American Cytological Society, Intersociety Cytology Council, South Atlantic Association of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (president, 1947), and [North Carolina State Medical Society](#) ^[13] (president, 1967–68). He was an honorary member of the gynecological societies of seven states and Canada, Alpha Omega Alpha, and Sigma

Xi and a faculty member of the Southern Postgraduate Seminar at Saluda ^[14], N.C. (dean of Obstetrical Section, 1954–57). He was listed in *American Men of Science* (11th ed., 1967).

He was the author of more than one hundred papers, mostly scientific articles published in journals of his specialty and of the societies of which he was a member. These also included, however, chapters in textbooks on obstetrics-gynecology as well as lectures on a variety of topics. Ross had a continuing interest in the etiology of toxemias of pregnancy, particularly the relationship of dietary factors in this disease.

His scholarly interests and activities covered many areas in addition to those of his specialty, including not only the history of obstetrics-gynecology, but also that of North Carolina, the South, and the Bible. He was a member of the Democratic party and of the Presbyterian church.

On the occasion of his retirement as chairman of the department at The University of North Carolina in 1965, former residents, faculty members, and a few selected colleagues with whom he had worked closely for many years formed the Robert A. Ross Obstetrical and Gynecological Society ^[15] "not only for the promotion of scientific knowledge, but also to honor perpetually the man who had contributed so much to the education and training of all of its members. The members of the Society decided that their first project would be the establishment of a Trust Fund to endow a Professorship named for Dr. Ross." The latter objective was achieved with the establishment of the Robert A. Ross Professorship in 1971. The society contributed funds for the portrait of Ross that hangs, along with those of other department chairmen and former faculty members and deans of The University of North Carolina School of Medicine, in the Health Sciences Library. In addition, the Nick Carter Obstetrical-Gynecological Travel Club organized at Duke in honor of Dr. Bayard Carter, the first chairman of the department, presented a portrait of Ross to the Duke University Medical School. In appreciation of his outstanding contributions to medicine, the *North Carolina Medical Journal* dedicated a special issue to Ross (November 1966, vol. 27, no. 11).

In 1933 Ross married Rosalie Walters, of Orangeburg, S.C., who died in 1952. They were the parents of Robert Alexander, Jr., Charles Allen, and Rosalie Walters. Ross died at his home near Hillsborough and was buried in the family plot in the Durham cemetery.

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Additional Resources:

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