

Spoon, William Luther, Jr. ^[1]

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18 Mar. 1862–29 Aug. 1942

William Luther Spoon, Jr., engineer, inventor, and farmer, was born near Kimesville, [Alamance County](#) ^[2], the only son of George Monroe and Nancy Stafford Shoffner Spoon. He attended the public schools of Alamance County, Oakdale Academy, and the Friendship School in Coble Township, Alamance County. Spoon entered Graham Normal College (later [Elon College](#) ^[3]) at Graham in 1880 and studied at [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[4] from 1887 to 1891, graduating with bachelor degrees in science and engineering.

In the years immediately following his graduation from the university, Spoon worked as a civil engineer in private practice, served briefly on the staff of the North Carolina Geological Survey, produced a widely acclaimed map of Alamance County, taught school, and held the office of county engineer for Alamance. In 1902 he became a special agent for the Office of Public Roads, [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#) ^[5], serving until 1909, when he went on leave to become, first, highway engineer with the North Carolina [Geological Survey](#) ^[6] and then, from 1911 to 1913, highway engineer for [Forsyth County](#) ^[7]. In 1913 Spoon returned to his position in the Office of Public Roads, where he worked until 1920. After leaving government service he joined C. F. Lewis to form the engineering firm of Spoon and Lewis, which remained in business until 1939.

An early and forceful advocate of improving public roads, Spoon spent a large part of his professional career as a road builder. At a time when individual farms, small communities, and even whole counties could be isolated for weeks because of impassable roads, and travel by railroad was awkward and time consuming, he was one of a small but articulate group of scientists, engineers, and interested citizens who argued that a relatively small investment in the construction and maintenance of highways would bring a large return in prosperity and public welfare. As a government engineer he traveled extensively in the South, Southwest, and Midwest demonstrating road-building techniques and encouraging the organization of county highway departments.

Spoon, who was particularly interested in rural areas, became an expert in the construction and maintenance of sand clay roads—inexpensive and durable, they were well suited to rural needs and resources. His publication for the Department of Agriculture, [Sand Clay and Burnt Clay Roads](#) ^[8] (1907), remained a standard work for years and helped earn him the title, "the father of the sand clay road." He wrote that a sense of the importance of his work to future generations sustained him through many setbacks and frustrations. Although his contribution was largely forgotten, he had the satisfaction of seeing his early efforts evolve into the modern American highway system.

Also a farmer and a land developer, Spoon obtained patents on a number of agricultural and household inventions, including a water cooler, a cotton press, a cotton picker, and a coat donner (to enable a people with physical disabilities to slip into a coat).

In 1897 he married Susan Addeline Vernon Neville (24 Apr. 1868–6 Nov. 1936), the granddaughter of North Carolina congressman [Richard Stanford](#) ^[9]. They were the parents of two children, William Mozart, who died in childhood, and Nancy Miriam. The couple also raised and educated several children of relatives. In 1940 Spoon married Ruth Baldwin, and they were the parents of a daughter, Willie Ruth.

Spoon's funeral was held at Frieden Lutheran Church and he was buried in the Mount Pleasant Methodist Church cemetery, both at Kimesville.

References:

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[Daniel L. Grant, *Alumni History of the University of North Carolina* \(1924\).](#) ^[10]

[John William Leonard, *Who's Who in Engineering: A Biographical Dictionary of Contemporaries, 1922–1923* \(1922\).](#) ^[11]

[William Luther Spoon Papers \(Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill\).](#) ^[12]

Additional Resources:

Spoon, William L. (William Luther); United States. Bureau of Public Roads. *The construction of sand-clay and burnt-clay roads*. Washington: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Office of Public Roads, G.P.O. 1906.
<https://archive.org/details/constructionofsa27spoo> ^[8] (accessed April 22, 2014).

William L. Spoon Papers, 1705-1928. Manuscript Collection #170, Joyner Library, East Carolina University. http://www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/s/Spoon,William_L.html [12] (accessed April 22, 2014).

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