

Weatherford, Willis Duke ^[1]

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by George P. Antone, 1996

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Willis Duke Weatherford, educator, religious leader, writer, and social pioneer, was born near Weatherford, Tex., the son of Samuel Leonard and Margaret Jane Turner Weatherford. His family was part of the extensive migration from the hills of North Carolina and Tennessee that moved into the western territories just before and after the Civil War. Weatherford received a B.S. degree from Weatherford College ^[2] (1895) and A.B. (1899), M.A. (1900), and Ph.D. (1907) degrees from Vanderbilt University ^[3].

In college Weatherford was active in the student YMCA ^[4] movement, and on leaving Vanderbilt he accepted a position with that organization. From 1902 to 1919 he was international student secretary for the colleges of the South and Southwest. The position required almost constant travel, as he periodically visited the approximately two hundred colleges for which he was responsible. During the summer he organized meetings and training sessions for YMCA personnel, and in 1907, seeking a permanent location for these programs, he proposed and founded the Blue Ridge Assembly ^[5] on a tract near Black Mountain, N.C. He raised approximately \$500,000 to finance the project and eventually acquired some 1,500 acres. As president of the organization he was largely responsible for the operation of the assembly until 1944. He built a house on the grounds that he maintained as his summer residence and after 1946 as his permanent home.

In 1919 Weatherford left his post as student secretary to devote full time to the establishment of the Southern College of the YMCA, later known as the YMCA Graduate School. The college was located in Nashville, Tenn., in the midst of an academic community consisting of Vanderbilt University, George Peabody College ^[6], and Scarritt College ^[7]. Its purpose was to provide specialized training for the position of YMCA secretary. This was Weatherford's most enterprising educational project, and for the next sixteen years he was completely committed to its success. The school operated throughout the year; summer programs and courses were conducted at the Blue Ridge Assembly grounds in North Carolina. Economic conditions forced Weatherford to close its doors in 1936, with the loss of a recently completed half-million-dollar plant. The college survived as a summer operation at Blue Ridge until the early 1940s.

From 1936 to 1946 Weatherford taught in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Fisk University ^[8], a predominantly Black school in Nashville. This was consistent with a concern he had developed early in his career. During his years of travel for the YMCA he became increasingly sensitive to the plight of Black people in the South, and in 1910 he published Negro Life in the South ^[9] as a study book for college students in YMCA programs. The volume was widely distributed and had a liberalizing effect on thousands of southern students. He published a number of other works on racial issues, among them The Negro from Africa to America ^[10] (1924) and Race Relations ^[11], with Charles S. Johnson, (1934). Weatherford organized college-level courses on Black life and race relations during summer sessions at Blue Ridge and eventually supported interracial student conferences on the assembly grounds. In 1919 he was instrumental in the founding of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation and served on the board until it was reorganized as the Southern Regional Council.

At age seventy Weatherford left Fisk University to accept a position at Berea College ^[12] and to embark on a new phase of his long career. A trustee of the college since 1916, he had been concerned with the conditions of life in the southern mountains. He believed that education was the best means of improving life for the people of Appalachia, and at Berea he served as fund-raiser, teacher, and recruiter of students. He spent most of his time traveling in the mountains, especially in North Carolina. In 1957 Weatherford and Berea College received a grant of \$250,000 from the Ford Foundation to conduct a survey of the problems of Appalachia. The resulting study, coauthored with Earl D. C. Brewer, was published in 1962 as Life and Religion in Southern Appalachia ^[13]. The appearance of this study was a prime factor in encouraging the federal government to establish a number of programs to improve living conditions in the region.

In 1903 Weatherford married Lulu Belle Trawick of Nashville, Tenn. The marriage was tragically short as she died during childbirth in 1907. In 1914 he married Julia McRory of Evans, Ala. (d. 1957). A son, Willis Duke, Jr., was born in 1916. Weatherford was an elder of the Methodist church, a member of Phi Beta Kappa and Pi Gamma Mu, and a life member of the Southern Regional Council. He was buried on the grounds of the Blue Ridge Assembly.

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Additional Resources:

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