

Johnson, Kate Ancrum Burr ^[1]

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By Mollie C. Davis, 1988

14 Feb. 1881–22 Aug. 1968

Kate Ancrum Burr Johnson, public welfare administrator and civic leader, was born in Morganton. Her father was Frederick Hill Burr, whose American ancestry traced back to 1630 in Massachusetts and whose North Carolina ancestry went back to the early nineteenth century and to [Wilmington](#) ^[2]. Her paternal grandfather, Colonel James Green Burr, served on the staff of Governor Zebulon B. Vance. Her mother was Lillian Walton whose Walton ancestors settled in Virginia before moving to [Burke County, N.C.](#) ^[3], where descendants built Creekside and Brookwood, two beautiful antebellum homes.

Kate Ancrum Burr received preparatory education in Morganton and at [Queens College](#) ^[4], Charlotte. On 14 Apr. 1903 she married Clarence A. Johnson (d. 9 Sept. 1922), and they became the parents of two sons, Clarence A. and Frederick Burr. Although devoting most of her time to her family, she undertook civic activities in [Raleigh](#) ^[5], where the couple had settled following their marriage. By 1915 her public service had gained her the vice-presidency of the [North Carolina Conference for Social Service](#) ^[6] (1915–16), but that proved to be only the early phase of a lifelong commitment to human rights and public welfare.

Although most of her career from 1915 fell in the area of public welfare, she early demonstrated her concern for women's rights and connected this dedication with her interest in penal reform, child welfare, and social justice. From involvement in the Episcopal church and its auxiliary activities she moved into the women's club movement, serving in various official capacities including president of the Raleigh Woman's Club, of which she was a charter member, and promoting [woman suffrage](#) ^[7] and child welfare in the state. As president of the [North Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs](#) ^[8] (1917–19), Mrs. Johnson worked effectively to interest women in social reform. She won respect for her capable leadership and was further recognized by her outstanding service (1917–18) to the state Liberty Bond commission.

In 1919, after a brief association with the [North Carolina Department of Insurance](#) ^[9], Kate Burr Johnson joined the staff of the [Board of Charities and Public Welfare](#) ^[10]. Established by the state constitution of 1868, the board supervised and inspected all charitable and penal institutions. In 1917 the board's activities were expanded, a system of county superintendents was added, and the phrase "and Public Welfare" was appended to its title. Under this newly expanded board Mrs. Johnson served as director of child welfare from 1919 to 1921. During this time she received additional training through summer courses at the New York School of Social Work and [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[11]. When the commissioner resigned in 1921, the board, various women's clubs, and even the governor endorsed her appointment as replacement. In July of that year she became the first woman in the nation to serve as a state commissioner of public welfare and the first North Carolina woman to head a major state department.

Commissioner Johnson served the state admirably from 1921 to 1930. Her tenure was marked by expansion of the board's work and staff, its reorganization into specialized bureaus, establishment of new institutions and more effective supervision of existing institutions, increased public and financial support of the board's activities, and changes in existing laws. Although a Democrat, the commissioner was first a devoted humanitarian and public servant; and, despite her limited training, she was in the forefront of professionalism in a neglected but rapidly emerging field in North Carolina. Under her supervision, studies were made of the problems and deficiencies in the penal system. Effective public relations work aided in gaining support for the board's programs, to which various women's organizations gave valuable assistance.

Kate Burr Johnson advocated separating inmates in all North Carolina institutions for criminals, delinquents, mental patients, and public wards into treatable groups by age, sex, and category. She promoted better understanding of the penal system, children's and women's conditions in industry, mental health and hygiene, and public welfare programs. Among the achievements either promoted by the board or introduced in North Carolina during her administration were a Mother's Aid program, institutions for juvenile offenders, a farm colony for women offenders, appropriations—though meager—for the institution for delinquent black girls established by the North Carolina Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, minor amendments to the child labor law, growth and development of public welfare programs, and improvements in conditions in prisons and on work gangs.

The Board of Charities and Public Welfare under Kate Burr Johnson persistently made proposals and budget requests to every session of the General Assembly. Frequently aiding her efforts was the Legislative Council of North Carolina Women, a clearinghouse for the legislative activities of seven major women's organizations in the state. A crusader, Mrs. Johnson utilized the Legislative Council, with which she had been affiliated almost from the moment of its inception in 1921, and other kindred groups to marshal pressure on governors and legislators. Although the commissioner herself remained aloof from direct political involvement, the Legislative Council and other organizations with which she was associated were politically active in promoting social justice.

In 1930 she accepted the post of superintendent of the New Jersey State Home for Girls^[12] in Trenton. There she continued her work in experimenting with new ideas and approaches. Among her achievements was the creation of a program of work classification for female offenders in New Jersey. She worked with authorities to develop local programs and agencies to deal with a variety of social problems, especially those related to child health and protection. In 1948, at age sixty-seven, she retired and returned to her home in Raleigh, where her career had begun decades before.

Over the years Kate Burr Johnson won national attention. She was either a member of or appointed to the American Association of Social Workers^[13], National Probation Association, National Conference of Juvenile Agencies, New Jersey Conference of Social Work, American Prison Association, Executive Committee of the Child Welfare League of America^[14], Business and Professional Women's Club^[15], and American Academy of Social Sciences. From 1948 to 1953 she served on the North Carolina Prison Advisory Commission. In 1951 she was awarded the doctor of humane letters by the Woman's College of the University of North Carolina^[16]; and in 1954, the North Carolina Distinguished Service Award for Women by the Epsilon Beta chapter of Chi Omega fraternity.

Mrs. Johnson died at the Mayview Convalescent Home in Raleigh and was interred at the city's Oakwood Cemetery.

References:

Kate Ancrum Burr Johnson Papers (Manuscript Collection, East Carolina University Library, Greenville)
Raleigh News and Observer, 23 Aug. 1968; Gary Trawick and Paul Wyche, *100 Years, 100 Men, 1871–1971* (1971)
Charles L. Van Noppen Papers (Manuscript Collection, Duke University Library, Durham [portrait])
Who's Who in America, vols. 13–25 (1924–49)

Additional Resources:

Kate Ancrum Burr Johnson Papers (Manuscript Collection, East Carolina University Library, Greenville):
<http://digital.lib.ecu.edu/special/ead/findingaids/0091/>^[17]

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Authors:

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Origin - location:

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Wake County^[23]

From:

Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press.^[24]

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