

Bingham, William James ^[1]

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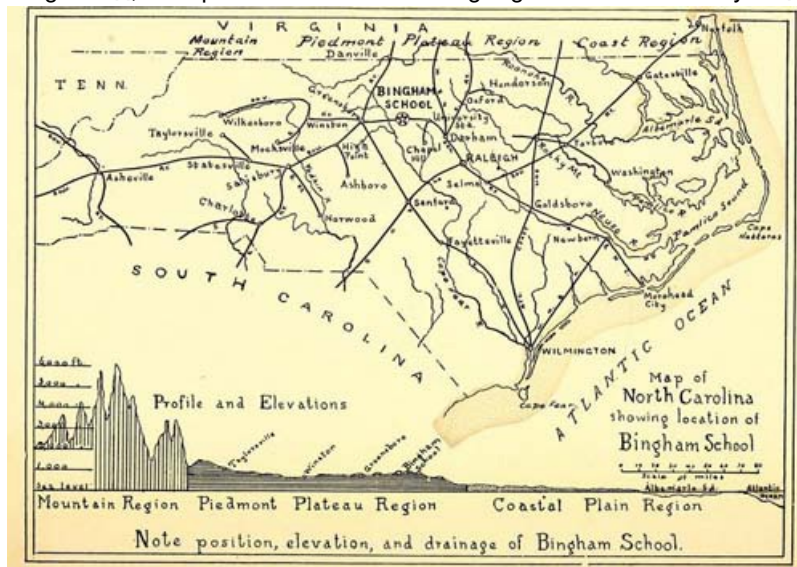
by Bennett L. Steelman, 1979; Revised November 2022.

[Bingham School](#) ^[2]; [Hillsborough Academy](#) ^[3]

6 Apr. 1802–19 Feb. 1866

See also: [Elizabeth Hobbs Keckly \(Keckley\)](#) ^[4]

William James Bingham, schoolmaster, educator, and enslaver, was born in Chapel Hill, the oldest son of [William Bingham](#) ^[5], then professor of ancient languages at [The University of](#) ^[6]



Map showing location of the Bingham school in NC. Courtesy of the Bingham School Catalogue.

[North Carolina](#) ^[6], and his wife, Annie Jean Slingsby. Most of his childhood was spent in Pittsboro and, after 1808, in Hillsborough, where his father maintained two private boarding schools.

Educated by his father, Bingham taught school in Williamsboro for some time before entering The University of North Carolina in 1821. After taking a B.A. with first honors in 1825, he read law in the offices of Archibald D. Murphey. His father's death in February 1826 forced him to return home to complete the term's instruction at the family school in the Mount Repose community of [Orange County](#) ^[7]. Shortly afterward, he decided to abandon law and to teach as a career. To prepare himself, he embarked on a lengthy tour of the better-known private schools of New England and Virginia in order to study their teaching methods.

In January 1827, Bingham returned the academy to Hillsborough, from which his father had moved it in 1818. There, it garnered a reputation for academic success. By the 1840s, Bingham's school hosted students from almost every state in the Union, and its tuition, \$150 per year, was allegedly the highest charged by any preparatory school in the nation.

Meanwhile, Bingham participated in several major reform campaigns of the period. A long-time elder in Bethlehem Presbyterian Church, he spoke frequently in favor of [temperance](#) ^[8] to public audiences. He was nevertheless a member of the [American Colonization Society](#) ^[9] and possibly one other local manumission organization. Despite his membership in these organizations, Bingham was recorded to have enslaved 4 total people on the 1830 U.S. census. While normally shunning public office in any form, he served as corresponding secretary of the [North Carolina Institute of Education](#) ^[10] (1831–32) and as a member of its executive board (1832–34). He was also among the founding members of The University of North Carolina Alumni Association.

As a prominent member of the Bethlehem Presbyterian Church, Bingham was close to its reverend, Robert Amistead Burwell and his wife, Margaret Anna Burwell. The Burwells were the enslavers of a woman named [Elizabeth Hobbs Keckly \(Keckley\)](#) ^[4]. Keckly, in her memoir, recounts her torture and abuse at the hands of the Burwells and their friend, William Bingham. In roughly 1838 (when Keckly "was 18"), Bingham reportedly "flogged" Keckly at the request of Margaret Burwell. This physical abuse recurred for weeks, until Bingham no longer accepted Margaret's requests to abuse Keckly. Keckly would later purchase her freedom and find her way to Washington, D.C. where she became a well-known dressmaker and friend to Mary Todd Lincoln. Keckly's memoir is titled: *Behind the scenes, or, Thirty years a slave and four years in the White House* ^[11].

In 1845, Bingham moved his school to the Oaks community, twelve miles southwest of Hillsborough, since he desired to raise his sons in the country as his father had done. At the same time, he reduced his enrollment from over a hundred to thirty, in order to give his students closer personal attention. During this period, Bingham conducted a model farm, which experimented extensively with new seed strains and new methods of cultivation. Agriculture was a lifelong concern of his: while still in Hillsborough, he had allowed two bondsmen to manage his farm without supervision, an exceptional step for the time.

Because of illness, Bingham was forced to suspend classes for some months in 1855. In January 1857, he admitted his oldest son, William, as a partner in the school, under the name W. J. Bingham and Sons. The younger son, Robert, was admitted as a partner six months later, upon his graduation. Soon enrollment increased to sixty, with Bingham taking charge of the younger pupils and leaving the advanced classes to his sons. He seems to have gradually retired from the school during this period, however, relinquishing complete control in late 1863.

Politically, Bingham was a Clay Whig ^[12] that opposed secession. Bingham ultimately accepted the government and legitimacy of the Confederacy ^[13], citing Lincoln' ^[14]s call for troops as his justification. He moved with his family to Mebane in 1864; he died there and was buried in Mebane City Cemetery.

In 1827, Bingham married Eliza Alves Norwood, the daughter of Judge William Norwood of Hillsborough and a maternal granddaughter of James Hogg ^[15] (1729–1805). The couple had seven children, five of whom survived to adulthood, including two sons: William ^[16] (July 7, 1835–Feb. 18, 1873), who succeeded his father as headmaster of the school; and Robert ^[17] (5 Sept. 1838–8 May 1927), who succeeded his brother.

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