

Bruton, John Fletcher ^[1]

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by Hugh B. Johnston, Jr., 1979

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John Fletcher Bruton, lawyer, educator, banker, civic leader, and churchman, was born at Wentworth in Rockingham County ^[2], a son of the Reverend David Rasberry Bruton and his wife, Margaret Nixon, both notable in private education. After graduation from the Bingham Academy, Bruton moved to Wilson in the autumn of 1881 as a teacher in the Wilson Graded School. Although elevated to the rank of superintendent in June 1883, he soon afterward entered The University of North Carolina ^[3] Law School and then, in the latter part of 1884, secured his license.

Returning to Wilson, he practiced for nearly two years in partnership with John Exum Woodard before establishing an independent practice, which he maintained for the remainder of his long career. Although he was never a candidate for political office, many honors resulted from the public confidence in his dedication to principle. From 1894 to 1897 he served as mayor of Wilson. He became vice-president and attorney of the First National Bank in 1897 (serving as its president from 1904 to 1932), and in the same year he was one of the organizers of the North Carolina Bankers Association ^[4], of which he was later a president. Bruton was a director of the Federal Reserve Bank in Richmond for ten years and was subsequently a member of the Federal Advisory Council to the Federal Reserve Board. He was a director and attorney for the Wilson Home and Loan Association for forty-five years and for a considerable time the president of the Wilson Trust and Savings Bank. He was a director and vice-president of the North Carolina Home Insurance Company and also served on the board of directors of the Carolina Telephone and Telegraph Company. For three years he was chairman of the Wilson County Board of Education.

In 1889, Bruton organized and was elected captain of Company F, Second Regiment of the North Carolina State Guard. Three years later he was commissioned colonel of the regiment, but the pressure of business commitments forced his resignation in 1900. He expressed a continuing interest in education by taking an active part in the founding of the Kinsey Female Seminary in 1897 (known as Atlantic Christian College since 1902). In 1900 he was elected a trustee of Trinity College ^[5], becoming chairman of the board in 1912. He continued as chairman of the board of trustees of Duke University ^[6] from 1927 until his death. For more than fifty years he served on the board of the Wilson Methodist Church and also taught the Bible class that still bears his name.

On 15 Nov. 1887, Bruton was united in marriage by his father to Hattie Tartt Barnes (12 June 1863–10 Nov. 1954), daughter of John Thomas Barnes and his wife, Elizabeth Obedience Tartt. Bruton and his wife died in Wilson and were buried in Maplewood Cemetery, survived by two sons: John Barnes (28 Oct. 1888–27 Jan. 1960), who married Gladys Smith; and Howard Barnes (1 Nov. 1893–11 July 1971), who married Almira Woodard.

There is a portrait of Bruton in the Wilson County Courthouse.

References:

Who's Who in America, 1928.

Wilson Daily Times, 4 Dec. 1950, 18 Dec. 1951.

Additional Resources:

Inventory of the University Archives Photograph Collection, 1861-ongoing, Duke University:
<http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/findingaids/uaphoto/> ^[7]

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