

Erwin, William Allen ^[1]

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by Tom E. Terrill, 1986

15 July 1856–28 Feb. 1932

William Allen Erwin, textile manufacturer, was born in Burke County ^[2] near Morganton. His father, Joseph J. Erwin, served Burke County as clerk of the superior court and as a member of the legislature. His mother, Elvira J. Holt, was a daughter of William R. Holt ^[3] of Lexington, a physician, a graduate of The University of North Carolina ^[4], and a founder of the state agricultural society ^[5]. E. M. Holt ^[6], his great-uncle, was a leading pioneer in the textile industry in North Carolina.

Erwin attended local elementary schools and Finley High School in Lenoir, then studied at the University of Kentucky. After two years family misfortune forced him to leave the university and enter business in order to help his parents. He began his business career in 1874 as a salesman in the general store of Holt, Gant, and Holt at Company Shops (now Burlington). In 1877 he joined the North Carolina Railroad ^[7] as bookkeeper. Then, in 1878, he started his own mercantile business in Company Shops. He left it in 1882 to become secretary-treasurer and general manager of the E. M. Holt Plaid Mills under L. Banks Holt ^[8] and Lawrence E. Holt. Erwin remained there until 1892, when he moved to Durham and joined Benjamin N. Duke ^[9] to build the Erwin Mills.

The Erwin-Duke partnership flourished. In their first mill, in Durham, they began by producing tobacco bag cloth, then expanded to manufacture other textile products. By 1895–96, Erwin Mills was Durham's largest mill and one of the largest in North Carolina, employing a thousand workers and running 25,000 spindles and 1,000 looms. In 1900, Erwin succeeded Duke as president of the company and remained in the post until 1931. Eventually, Erwin Mills opened another mill in Durham, two mills at Erwin (formerly Duke), and one at Cooleemee. By 1932 Durham had incorporated the 5,000 residents of West Durham, site of the mills, into Durham; Erwin had 4,000 residents and Cooleemee, 2,500. At one time, William Erwin had more spindles under his management than any other textile executive. He also served as president of Pearl Mills in Durham, Oxford Mills in Oxford, Alpine Cotton mills in Morganton, Erwin Yarn, Incorporated, in Philadelphia, and the Bank of Harnett in Erwin.

At an early date Erwin became involved in welfare work at the mills he managed. He supported churches, schools, parks, and community centers, in several cases paying for construction of the facilities. As early as 1895, he became an advocate of reducing the workday from twelve to eleven hours and of prohibiting anyone under age twelve from working in factories.

An active Episcopal ^[10] layman, Erwin served variously as a Sunday school superintendent, men's Bible class teacher, delegate to several general conventions of the North Carolina diocese, and member of the board of trustees of St. Mary's School, Raleigh. He also was chairman of the committee that bought the building site for St. Mary's. He gave the money to build St. Joseph's Episcopal Church, Durham, in his parents' memory, and to construct a new sanctuary for the Chapel of the Cross Episcopal Church, Chapel Hill, in memory of his maternal grandfather, William R. Holt. During the administration of Governor Robert Glenn ^[11] (1905–9), his civic activities included service as a member of the state hospital commission that enlarged the facilities of the state mental hospitals. During World War I ^[12], he was district food administrator, chairman of the county Council for Defense, and chairman of the United War Work drive for seven North Carolina counties. He was also president of the American Cotton Manufacturers Association (1912–13).

On 2 Oct. 1889 Erwin married Sadie L. Smedes, daughter of Dr. Aldert Smedes ^[13], founder of St. Mary's School. They had six children, three of whom survived Erwin: Mrs. Hamilton O. Jones, Mrs. Jack Glenn, and Mrs. Hargrove Bellamy. His only son, William A., Jr., died in 1931. Erwin died in Durham and was buried in Oakwood Cemetery, Raleigh.

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