

Flowers, William Washington ^[1]

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by Mattie U. Russell, 1986

5 Nov. 1874–1 May 1941

William Washington Flowers, business executive, was born at York Collegiate Institute near Taylorsville, the third of eight sons and two daughters of Colonel George Washington Flowers and Sarah Jane Haynes Flowers. At the age of sixteen he entered [Trinity College](#) ^[2], then located in [Randolph County](#) ^[3], where he became an outstanding scholar, athlete, and campus leader. After graduation in 1894 he began teaching in the public school system of [Durham](#) ^[4], the new location of Trinity College since 1892. From 1897 to 1899 he was superintendent of schools in Durham. Meanwhile, he had received the M.A. degree from Trinity (1896) and undertaken advanced study in Germany and at Harvard. In 1899 Flowers became an instructor in German at Trinity College and after only one year was named adjunct professor of French and German. With a leave of absence for the academic year 1900–1901, he entered [Harvard](#) ^[5] in the fall. Ill health soon forced him to leave, however.

After returning to Durham in 1900, Flowers was employed by the [American Tobacco Company](#) ^[6]. His health was restored, and by 1906 he was general manager of the former Blackwell tobacco factory in Durham. After the dissolution of the American Tobacco Company in 1911, he was transferred the following year to the Liggett and Myers Tobacco Company. At Liggett and Myers he was successively promoted to director in charge of operations (1913), vice-president (1919), and chairman of the board of directors (1936). Between 1933 and 1935 he also served the federal government as a member, and later chairman, of the code committee for the tobacco industry.

Flowers's continuing interest in Trinity College and [Duke University](#) ^[7], of which his brother [Robert Lee](#) ^[8] was president from 1941 to 1948, was demonstrated by his services as trustee from 1925 until his death. Furthermore, he was a generous patron of the Duke Library, where, in conjunction with other members of his family, he established the [George Washington Flowers Memorial Collection](#) ^[9] in honor of his father, a longtime trustee of Trinity College. It was due largely, however, to his own gifts and an endowment fund created by his will that the Flowers Collection became, and remains, the most important single collection in the Duke Library and one of the most notable collections on the South. Will Flowers was genuinely interested in books, read widely, and was a charter member of the Trinity College Historical Society. It is appropriate, therefore, that an ever-expanding library collection exists as a monument to him as well as to his father.

A handsome, quiet, soft-spoken man, Flowers gained wide respect for his gentlemanly qualities as well as for his sound judgment and close application to business. He was a member of several social clubs and the Methodist church, which was among the beneficiaries of his generous spirit. Although he lived in New York for many years, he kept close ties with his family in Durham. He never married and spent most of his last two years in the home of his sister, Estelle, and her husband, Judge Marshall T. Spears of Durham. He was buried in the Flowers mausoleum in Maplewood Cemetery, Durham.

References:

Durham Morning Herald, 2 May 1941.

Durham Sun, 2 May 1941.

Flowers family papers (in possession of Mrs. Marshall T. Spears, Durham).

New York Herald Tribune, 2 May 1941.

New York Times, 2 May 1941.

Various records and scattered publications of Trinity College and Duke University, 1899–1941.

Robert H. Woody, "William Washington Flowers, 1874–1941," *Library Notes* 1 (1941).

Additional Resources:

Preliminary Inventory of the Robert Lee Flowers Records, 1891 - 1968, Duke University:

<http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/findingaids/uapresflowers/> ^[10]

Inventory of the George Washington Flowers Collection of Southern Americana Records, 1931-1981, Duke University:

<http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/findingaids/uagwfcoll/> ^[9]

Preliminary Inventory of the Duke Memorial Records, 1929 - 1936, Duke University:

<http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/findingaids/uadukemem/> [11]

Durden, Robert Franklin. *The launching of Duke University: 1924 - 1949*. Duke University Press, 1993.

[http://books.google.com/books?](http://books.google.com/books?id=M1XhMW_vK6EC&dq=W.w.+flowers+duke&source=gb_s_navlinks_s&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false)

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