Huffman, Robert Obediah [1]

Huffman, Robert Obediah

by Henry S. Stroupe, 1988

15 May 1890–2 Feb. 1978

A photograph of Robert Obediah Huffman (1890-1978). Image from the Internet Archive.

[2]Robert Obediah Huffman, industrialist and businessman, was born in Morganton, the son of Samuel and Martha Ann Hildebrand Huffman. His father, a Morganton businessman, was one of five founders and the first president of the Drexel Furniture Company [3] of Drexel. Young Huffman attended the Morganton city schools and The University of North Carolina [4], where he received the A.B. degree in 1913 and an honorary LL.D. degree in 1954.

Although Huffman held positions in many different businesses and industries, he was most active in hosiery and furniture manufacturing. He was treasurer (1927–44) and president (1944–58) of the Morganton Full Fashioned Hosiery Company; president (1935–56) and chairman of the board (1956–59) of Drexel Knitting Mills; and president (1935–58) of Huffman Full Fashioned Mills, Morganton. In 1935, when the death of his brother, Frank O. Huffman, left the office vacant, he became president of the Drexel Furniture Company; that year the company had sales of $1,336,119. To illustrate the impact of his career on the community, in 1968 at the time of Huffman's retirement as chairman of the board of Drexel Enterprises, which included the Drexel Furniture Company, the corporation had reached annual sales of $78,400,000 and employed 6,300 persons. Drexel Enterprises, a holding company, had been organized in December 1961, with Huffman as president and chairman of the board. Earlier, in 1957, Drexel Furniture had acquired Morganton Furniture Company and Heritage Furniture Company of High Point through stock exchanges. These two companies became known as the Heritage-Morganton division of Drexel Enterprises. In 1962, through a merger, the Southern Desk Company of Hickory also became a division of Drexel Enterprises.

In the fields of banking and insurance, Huffman served one or more terms as director of the First National Bank, Morganton; Charlotte Branch, Wachovia Bank and Trust Company [5]; Jefferson Standard Life Insurance Company, Greensboro; North Carolina Board, Liberty Mutual Insurance Company, Charlotte; and Federal Reserve Bank, Richmond, Va. Additional positions included president of the Burke Farmers Cooperative Dairy (1940–61) and of the Business Foundation at The University of North Carolina (1950–51). For many years he was a director of Grace Hospital in Morganton.

Among his professional associations he was president of the Southern Hosiery Manufacturers' Association (1933–34), vice-president of the National Association of Hosiery Manufacturers (1939); and a director of the American Thread Company, the National Association of Manufacturers, and the Southern Furniture Manufacturers' Association.

During World War II and the postwar period, Huffman served the U.S. government in various positions. He was chief of the men's hosiery unit, textile division, War Production Board (1943); a consultant on hosiery, chief of the hosiery and underwear section, and price executive of the manufactured articles branch, Office of Price Administration (1944); and assistant director of the consumer soft goods division, Office of Price Stabilization (1951).

Huffman was long active in the civic and religious life of his community, including sometime mayor of Morganton and chairman of the Morganton School Board. He was a member of the board of trustees of Mars Hill College [6] and of the Development Council and Board of Visitors of Wake Forest University [7]; on both campuses a building was named for him. He also served on the board of trustees of South Mountain Institute, a child-caring institution at Nebo. For fifteen years he was chairman of the Board of Deacons of the First Baptist Church, Morganton, where for thirty years he taught a men's Bible class.

In 1956 the Rotary Club, with Senator Sam J. Ervin, Jr., as speaker, presented to Huffman the Morganton Man of the Year Award. During a dinner held in Charlotte in 1963, the Newcomen Society in North America honored Huffman and Drexel Enterprises for the leadership they had given the southern furniture industry in the previous quarter century. Huffman was said to have taught the South how to style and market furniture. He explained at the dinner that the most significant element in the philosophy behind Drexel's success was "that every person who works for the company is important . . . that employees may vary in ability and responsibility, but Drexel considers each an individual, himself, and important in the operation."

Huffman was a member of Phi Beta Kappa, Beta Gamma Sigma, and the Golden Fleece. He was a 32nd degree Mason [8]. Other memberships included Kiwanis, New York Athletic Club, Merchants and Manufacturers Club (Chicago), Biltmore Forest Country Club (Asheville), Mimosa Hills Golf Club (Morganton), and Linville Golf Club (Linville). In addition to golf, his hobbies were raising Guernsey cattle and fishing. He was a Baptist and a Republican.

On 4 Nov. 1915, Huffman married Pearl Trogdon of Winston-Salem. They had three daughters, all of whom survived their father: Pearl Trogdon (Mrs. Roy O. Scholz of Baltimore, Md.), Anne Lancaster (Mrs. Jeter C. Pritchard of Morganton), and Martha Roberta (Mrs. Robert Scott Langley of Kinston). Huffman was buried in Forest Hill Cemetery, Morganton.

References:

Asheville Times, 23 July 1963.

Burke County News and Morganton Herald, 29 Mar. 1956.

Drexel Enterprises, Inc., News Release, 7 Mar. 1968.

Home Furnishings Daily, 13 Nov. 1963.

Morganton *News Herald*, 2 Feb. 1978.

William S. Powell, ed., *North Carolina Lives* (1962).

Reflections: A History of Drexel Enterprises, Inc., 1903–1963, with a foreword by R. O. Huffman (n.d.).

Who's Who in America (1952–53, 1966–67).

Additional Resources:

Robert O. Huffman Papers, 1908-1994 (collection no. 05057). The Southern Historical Collection. Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. http://www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/h/Huffman,Robert_O.html [9] (accessed September 30, 2013).

Robert Obediah Huffman." The American Furniture Hall of Fame Foundation, Inc http://www.furniturehalloffame.com/inducted_members.aspx#Huffman [10] (accessed September 30, 2013).

Image Credits:

"Robert O. Huffman." Photograph. *The E.S.C. Quarterly* 11, no. 1-2 (Winter-Spring 1953). 11. Internet Archive. https://archive.org/stream/escquarterlyv912nort#page/10/mode/2up [2] (accessed September 30, 2013).

Subjects:
Biographies [11]
Business leaders [12]
Furniture industry and trade [13]
Textile industry [14]
Authors:
Stroupe, Henry S. [15]
Origin - location:
Morganton [16]
From:
Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press. [17]

1 January 1988 | Stroupe, Henry S.

Links
[1] https://ncpedia.org/biography/huffman-robert-obediah [2] https://archive.org/stream/escquarterlyv912nort#page/10/mode/2up [3] https://ncpedia.org/drexel-furniture-company [4] https://ncpedia.org/university-north-carolina-chapel-hi [5] https://ncpedia.org/wachovia-corporation [6] https://ncpedia.org/mars-hill-college [7] https://ncpedia.org/wake-forest-university [8] https://ncpedia.org/freemasons [9] http://www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/h/Huffman,Robert_O.html [10] http://www.furniturehalloffame.com/inducted_members.aspx#Huffman [11] https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/biography-term [12] https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/business-leaders [13] https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/furniture-industr [14] https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/textile-industry [15] https://ncpedia.org/category/authors/stroupe-henry-s [16] https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/morganton [17] https://ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/dictionary-no