

Mull, Odus (or Otis, Odes) McCoy ^[1]

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by Henry S. Stroupe, 1991

18 Sept. 1880–27 Nov. 1962

Odus (or Otis Mull, Odes) McCoy, lawyer, legislator, and educational leader, was born on a farm in Township Ten, [Cleveland County](#) ^[2], the son of Houston (or Houston) E. and Margaret Ann Carpenter Mull. In 1795 his great-grandfather, Jacob Mull, had migrated from Pennsylvania to [Burke County](#) ^[3], where he became a planter. John Mull, grandfather of Odus, was a planter and merchant and also operated a tannery. Houston E. Mull, Odus's father, died in 1881, leaving the young child in the care of his twenty-two-year-old mother in a log home on a rocky hillside where farming was difficult. Her subsequent marriage to Julius E. Smith made it possible for the youth to be educated.

Odus attended Belwood Institute (1892–96) and Piedmont High School (1896–98), both located near his home. Intending to continue the family tradition of farming, Mull, in a year of hard labor, produced four bales of cotton for which he received \$98.67 or 41/2¢ per pound. As a result of this discouraging experience, he decided to go to college. In 1899, after teaching briefly in the public schools for \$25 a month, he entered [Wake Forest College](#) ^[4], where he became captain of the baseball team and a campus leader. He was graduated in 1902 with a B.A. degree and, after completing the two-year law course in one year, received an LL.B. degree *magna cum laude* in 1903. Mull immediately began practicing law in Shelby, becoming a partner of two brothers, James L. and [E. Yates Webb](#) ^[5].

Mull's senior thesis at Wake Forest, in which he signed his name Odes McCoy Mull, was entitled "The Isolation of the South." It deplored the South's lack of influence in national affairs, a situation that he believed could be corrected by the development of industry and educational facilities in the region. During the next half century Mull was himself able to contribute substantially to the achievement of this goal.

In 1907 he served his first term as a Cleveland County member of the state house of representatives. He returned to the legislature in 1919, 1929, 1939, 1941, and 1947, serving as speaker in 1941. During the 1919 session he was coauthor of the important Mull-McCoin Bill, the first law authorizing state and county cooperation in road building. In the same session he secured passage of a bill establishing vocational education in North Carolina. Beginning in 1928, when he was elected to the first of two two-year terms as chairman of the state Democratic executive committee, Mull exerted a widely felt influence over political affairs in North Carolina. That year he bore the brunt of [O. Max Gardner](#) ^[6]'s successful campaign for election as governor.

Two years later Mull discontinued the practice of law to become general manager and financial adviser of the Cleveland Cloth Mills, one of the businesses with which he and Gardner were associated. By this time he was one of the leading landowners and agriculturists of Cleveland County. Mull was a member of the board that built Shelby Hospital and chairman of the county chapter of the American Red Cross. From 1915 to 1928 he was city attorney for Shelby, and for several years he was chairman of the county Democratic executive committee. In 1936 he resumed the practice of general civil and corporation law, serving also as a director and counselor of several textile mills and as an attorney for several banks. He was a member of the Sigma Chi fraternity, the Shelby Kiwanis Club, and the local, state, and national bar associations.

Throughout his career Mull was active in the affairs of the Baptist denomination in the county and state. He served the First Baptist Church of Shelby as chairman of the board of deacons, superintendent of the Sunday school, and teacher for thirty years of the O. M. Mull Bible Class. Despite the importance of his role in the "Shelby dynasty," along with Gardner, the Webbs, [Clyde R. Hoey](#) ^[7], and Lee B. Weathers, editor of the *Shelby Daily Star*, Mull is better remembered for his key leadership in establishing the Bowman Gray School of Medicine of [Wake Forest University](#) ^[4] and in moving Wake Forest College from [Wake County](#) ^[8] to Winston-Salem.

In 1935 the Council on Medical Education of the American Medical Association voted not to recognize two-year medical schools in the future. Although this particular action was rescinded, the preferred solution to the plight of the two-year schools was expansion to four-year status. In 1937 Governor Hoey appointed a medical school commission consisting of Mull and six others to study needs and make recommendations to the next General Assembly. When it appeared that state funds to expand the two-year school at [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[9] were lacking, Mull told the commission: "If you will give me about a month, I will go around the state and see if I can get the money from private sources." In the fall of 1938 he informed the commission that the person in charge of "a large charitable trust fund had expressed a willingness to make a commitment to the medical school, provided it could be located in the home city of the donor." He was referring to James A. Gray of Winston-Salem and the Bowman Gray Foundation. After the commission voted four to two to recommend that a four-year school be built in Chapel Hill, Mull arranged a conference attended by himself; Gray; [Thurman D. Kitchin](#) ^[10], president of Wake Forest; and Coy C. Carpenter, dean of Wake Forest's two-year medical school. Mull explained to Gray what had happened at the meeting of the commission and requested that the same offer be made

to Wake Forest. The details of the gift were soon worked out, and in 1941 the medical school began operating in Winston-Salem as a four-year school. Mull was a member of the building committee for the medical school and also of the committee in charge of enlarging the North Carolina Baptist Hospital.

In about 1944 Mull, a trustee of Wake Forest, conferred with J. S. Lynch, president of the hospital board of trustees, about obtaining income from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation ^[11] of Winston-Salem for the college. In a subsequent meeting in Shelby, Mull, Judge E. Yates Webb, and C. J. Jackson, a representative of Wake Forest, formulated plans—to present to North Carolina Baptists—to move the college to Winston-Salem and receive financial support from the foundation. After approval by the Baptist State Convention in 1946, the plans were implemented. The Wake Forest trustees made Mull permanent chairman of the committee charged with raising funds, erecting buildings, and moving the college. Fourteen buildings costing more than \$20 million had been completed when the move was made in June 1956.

On 17 Sept. 1955 a portrait of Mull painted by Walter Keul was presented to the Bowman Gray School of Medicine. The state's press described Mull's achievements at length, referring to him as one of the last survivors of the "famed 'Shelby Dynasty'" and as "Mr. Baptist" of North Carolina. He was characterized as a friendly person, with a genuine desire to serve others. A deep, powerful voice and a fluency with words in the spellbinding tradition had contributed to his success. In 1957 Wake Forest College awarded him a doctor of civil law degree.

On 12 June 1907 Mull married Montrose Pallen McBrayer of Shelby. They had one child, Montrose McBrayer, who married Earl Meacham. She died on 24 May 1972, leaving two children, Montrose Pallen and Otis Mull Meacham. Mull was buried in Shelby's Sunset Cemetery.

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