

Webb, William Edwards ^[1]

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by Claiborne T. Smith, Jr., 1996

ca. 1777–1829

William Edwards Webb, educator, legislator, and first professor of classics at [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[2], was probably born in the town of [Halifax](#) ^[3], the son of John and Rebecca Edwards Webb. His mother was the daughter of Colonel William Edwards, of Brunswick County, Va., whose brother Isaac was the private secretary of Governor [William Tryon](#) ^[4]; Rebecca Edwards, the second wife of Colonel [Allen Jones](#) ^[5], was a sister of Colonel Edwards. John Webb, the father of William Webb, was the only child of Anne, the daughter of Daniel Pugh of Nansemond County, Va., who married first one Webb. Circumstantial evidence is strong that he was the Reverend William Webb, a graduate of [Oxford University](#) ^[6] who immigrated to Virginia in 1746, served as minister to the Upper Parish in Nansemond County (1747–60), and was master of the grammar school at the [College of William and Mary](#) ^[7] (1760–62). There is no record of Webb thereafter. His widow Anne then married James Gibson, a merchant in Suffolk who was a [Tory](#) ^[8] in the Revolution.

The Reverend William Webb's career is significant in view of the later achievements of his grandson William. John Webb, the father of William E. Webb, as of [Chowan County](#) ^[9], bought a house and lot in Halifax in 1774 and settled there to practice law. He represented the borough in the Assembly in 1775. Active in the Revolution, he was a delegate to the first three [provincial congresses](#) ^[10] from the town of Halifax. John Webb's promising career was suddenly cut short and he died soon afterwards. Benjamin Edwards, the brother of Rebecca whom he had married in 1776, was appointed guardian of their only child. Benjamin Edwards was later the father of [Weldon Nathaniel Edwards](#) ^[11], the noted North Carolina statesman.

There is little known about William E. Webb prior to his attending The University of North Carolina. In the early days of that institution students arrived so poorly prepared that a preparatory school was established. In 1798 young Webb, as a promising member of the senior class at the university, was called to assist in this phase of the university teaching. In the following year, although he had not been graduated, he was made professor of ancient languages, being the first to hold this chair. These were difficult days for the infant university. In the term preceding the commencement of 1799, there was a student uprising in which William Webb was waylaid and stoned. He signed a newspaper advertisement for the next session of the university in February 1799 "by order of the President, William Webb, secretary." Intending to continue his academic career in Chapel Hill, he bought Lots 1 and 2 in the village later in 1799.

There was a change of plan, however, and by 1802 Webb had returned to Halifax County. On 15 March of that year he advertised for sale his two lots in Chapel Hill which were described as commanding a good prospect of the public buildings. Becoming active in politics, he represented Halifax County in the House of Commons in 1809, 1810, 1811, and 1812. While serving in the legislature William Webb wrote and printed circular letters that he mailed to his constituents in which he detailed the activities currently taking place in the [General Assembly](#) ^[12] and explained the positions he had taken in regard to them, a common practice in the late-twentieth-century America but possibly unique in early-nineteenth-century North Carolina.

From 1809 to 1818 Webb was a trustee of the university. After a lapse of twelve years, though a trustee, he returned to academic life and finished the work on his degree that had been interrupted when he joined the faculty. He was granted an A.B. degree in 1812 and an A.M. degree in 1815. William E. Webb then returned a second time to his native county. During 1817–19 he finally disposed of the Chapel Hill real estate that he had advertised for sale in 1802. In 1817 he sold Lot 2 and one-half of Lot 1 to William Pannill of Warrenton. Two years later Webb sold the remainder of Lot 1 to Lucy Hilliard.

On his final return to Halifax County, Webb devoted himself to teaching. In 1815 as "William E. Webb, A.M. former professor of Classical Languages at the University" he was listed as principal of the Union Academy, located in western Halifax County, roughly between the present towns of Littleton and Weldon. A former student from Scotland Neck wrote that from 1824 to 1827 he had attended the Hyde Park Academy, in the upper part of Halifax County, run by Mr. Webb whom he referred to as a famous classical scholar. It is not known whether this school succeeded the Union Academy. In an advertisement of the Hyde Park Academy in 1828 William Webb was not listed as a member of the faculty, but notation was made that boarding could be obtained at his residence nearby.

In 1804 William E. Webb married Sarah, the daughter of Lewis Williamson of [Northampton County](#) ^[13], and sister of Priscilla, the wife of his former guardian Benjamin Edwards. She died in 1807 without issue at Black Heath in Halifax County. Webb then married Ann, the daughter of George and Ann Lindsey Zollicoffer of Halifax County. On the death of his first wife William Webb had inherited a large plantation on Great Creek in Halifax County and here he resided. When he died intestate in 1829, the property was divided between his widow and their six children. One part of the division was referred to as the Hyde Park tract. William Webb and Ann Zollicoffer had three sons, Albert G., Richard, and William, and

three daughters, Cornelia, Rebecca, and Ann S. Of the daughters, Rebecca married Charles C. P. Campbell and Ann married William Thweatt of Prince George County, Va. The son Richard is thought to have settled in Tennessee.

A French language textbook once owned by William E. Webb, printed in Philadelphia in 1804, has descended in the collection of the Alston family of Cherry Hill in Warren County [14]. It bears his book plate, an oval with the inscription—"Libertas et Natale Solum—William E. Webb, Chapel Hill, North Carolina."

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