

Whedbee, Charles ^[1]

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by Esther Evans, 1996

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Charles Whedbee, lawyer, legislator, and prime mover in the establishment of county libraries in North Carolina, was born in Hertford, the son of James Monroe and Fannie Skinner Whedbee. He was the nephew of [Thomas Gregory Skinner](#) ^[2], who served two terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, and of [Harry Skinner](#) ^[3], who served one term in the House, and the brother of Judge Harry Whedbee, of the superior court. He received his secondary education at Hertford Academy and afterward studied law independently. Prior to taking the bar examination, he attended one summer session of [The University of North Carolina Law School](#) ^[4]. He began practicing law in Hertford around 1898 and was attorney for [Perquimans County](#) ^[5] from 1920 to 1945. Under his leadership, the white high schools in 1926 were consolidated into the Perquimans County High School, the first such merger on a countywide basis in the state. For forty years he was affiliated with Major and Loomis, a lumber company, filling the office of secretary.

Much of his professional life was devoted to statewide activities. He was a trustee of [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[6] from 1903 to 1945, and for almost all of that time he served on the executive committee. In 1929 and 1931 he held a seat in the state senate. As chairman of the finance subcommittee in 1931, he was instrumental in the passage—through the senate and the house of representatives—of the local government act that more than anything else stabilized the economy in urban areas and reportedly "controlled and saved millions in debt service for constructive social and civic enterprises." Also in 1931, in connection with a controversial school tax bill, Whedbee declared publicly: "I may be consigned to the pit of everlasting destruction, so far as politics goes, but I will never, as long as I keep my proper sense of right, hold out to my people a false hope that they have attained something they may desire when I know in my heart this is false and untrue and as baseless as the fabric of a dream." During the administration of J. C. B. Ehringhaus ^[7] he was appointed to the [State Highway and Public Works Commission](#) ^[8], and he played an important part in the establishment of [rural electrification](#) ^[9] in North Carolina. His most significant service in the mid-1930s was as legislative adviser to Governor Ehringhaus during the 1933 and 1935 sessions of the legislature.

Whedbee worked steadily for an appropriation for statewide library service; in 1940, at his own expense, he visited every county and consulted every legislator. He awakened such interest in public libraries and created so much demand for them that on 8 Mar. 1941 the North Carolina Assembly passed an act appropriating money for the purpose of "promoting, aiding and equalizing library service in North Carolina. . . . [The fund] shall be known as the Public Library Service Fund." The American Library Association later cited him for his unparalleled accomplishment, but illness prevented his attending its annual meeting and receiving an award.

In 1943 The University of North Carolina conferred on him an honorary LL.D. degree. Dr. Frank P. Graham summarized his achievements in the citation, which reads in part: "Charles Whedbee of Hertford, N.C., alumnus, lawyer, legislator . . . constantly and quietly in the center of movements for the building of better roads, better institutions and a better state. For over a quarter of a century a devoted trustee of the University . . . one of the builders of the present University and of the consolidated University of North Carolina. . . . With a solid background of legislative competence and distinctions in his own right it was in the critical sessions of 1933 and 1935 as the personal representative of the governor he drafted and helped pilot through both houses the administrative bills all but two of which became the law of the land. . . . In the last several sessions of the legislature he tirelessly and effectively worked for state appropriations for the countywide library service which now takes books to the people everywhere in North Carolina."

He was twice married: to Mabel Martin of Wilmington on 13 Jan. 1901, and to Evelyn Copeland of Hertford on 3 Jan. 1917. By his first marriage he was the father of one son, Silas M., and one daughter, Jocelyn (Mrs. Robert O. Applewhite). An Episcopalian, a Democrat, and a charter member of the Hertford Rotary Club, he died in a Norfolk, Va., hospital after an extended illness and was buried in Cedarwood Cemetery, Hertford.

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Whedbee family, personal contact.

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