

Whitsett, William Thornton ^[1]

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by Gilbert Edwin Southern, Jr., 1996

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William Thornton Whitsett, educator and historian, was born in what is now Whitsett, near Gibsonville, in eastern [Guilford County](#) ^[2]. Of Scots-Irish and German ancestry, he was the only son of Joseph Bason and Mary Foust Whitsett. Instructed by tutors and in public and private schools, Whitsett began a career in education by teaching in public schools at age sixteen. He later attended [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[3] (1886–88) and [North Carolina College](#) ^[4] in Mount Pleasant (A.M., 1901; Ph.D., 1903).

Influenced by the efforts of [Brantley York](#) ^[5] and other pioneer educators who had attempted to establish a school for young boys on the same site, Whitsett in 1888 founded Whitsett Institute, succeeding the earlier Fairview Academy. The village of Whitsett grew around the institute in later years. A boarding academy for boys, the institute operated until 1918, when it was destroyed by fire. Averaging from 200 to 250 students per year in liberal arts, business, and teacher preparatory courses, it drew the student body predominantly from North Carolina and other southern states and many from Cuba. In fact, Whitsett Institute was the first school in North Carolina to accept Cubans and the first to enroll Cuban students at The University of North Carolina. Whitsett also conducted teacher institutes in several counties in the state.

He organized the North Carolina Association of Academies and was secretary and treasurer of the North Carolina Teachers Assembly, serving as its president in 1905–6. A trustee of The University of North Carolina from 1897 to 1919, he was also a member of the Guilford County Board of Education from 1897 to 1918 (chairman, 1906).

In his later years Whitsett, a member of several literary and historical societies, turned to historical research and occasional literary activity, publishing numerous brief works. A volume of his poetry, *Saber and Song* ^[6], was published by Whitsett Institute in 1917, and he wrote short reviews and essays on contemporary literary trends, often for regional newspapers. As an active [Lutheran](#) ^[7], he devoted much of his historical research to the early church history of North Carolina. As the official historian of Guilford County, he carried out extensive research into the early history of Guilford and Alamance counties, particularly into the genealogical histories of their older families. The results of his research were often given in addresses before family reunions, where Whitsett was a familiar figure in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Many of these addresses later appeared as *Whitsett's Historical Monographs*. Whitsett also addressed civic clubs and state and national Lutheran groups. He received an honorary doctor of letters from [Lenoir-Rhyne College](#) ^[8] in 1933. In 1906 Whitsett married Carrie Brewer of [Salem](#) ^[9]. A graduate of [Salem College](#) ^[10], she became president of the Women's Lutheran Missionary Societies of North Carolina and of the State Federation of Home Demonstration Clubs (33,000 members in 1929). The couple had four children: Lucille Elizabeth, William Thornton, Carrie Brewer, and Joseph Gordon.

Whitsett died at his home after a brief illness and was buried in the graveyard of Friedens Evangelical Lutheran Church near Gibsonville.

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