

Wilkinson, Frank Smith ^[1]

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by Dorothy Battle Wilkinson, 1996

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Frank Smith Wilkinson, teacher and scholar, was born in [Edgecombe County](#) ^[2], probably in Lower Fishing Creek Township, the youngest of eleven children of Charles Wilkinson and the ninth child of his second wife Nancy. His father died at age forty when Frank was a year old. After graduation from [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[3] in 1857 he began teaching in Raleigh and the following year was appointed principal of the Tarborough Male Academy. It was a private or quasi-public school established in 1813, when the General Assembly passed "an act for the erecting of an Academy in the Town of Tarborough"; two acres of land from the Town Common were given on which to build. The Tarborough academy, like a scattering of others throughout North Carolina, was private in the sense that policy was made and enforced by independent trustees but quasipublic because it did receive some aid from the local, state, and occasionally federal government.

In many ways Wilkinson was typical of the teachers during the years before public schools were established. A strict disciplinarian with a stout switch handy, he was the sole instructor much of the time, with pupils ranging from beginners to those preparing for college. As one writer remarked, his methods apparently were successful in view of the affection he instilled in his students, many of whom later became leaders in the state. His reputation as a teacher was such that The University of North Carolina would admit any student certified by him without requiring an entrance examination. The Right Reverend [Joseph Blount Cheshire](#) ^[4], bishop of the Diocese of North Carolina, who attended the academy from age eleven to sixteen (1861–66), was one of his pupils. Years later Cheshire wrote that Wilkinson "was devoted to the profession of teaching, laboring faithfully to interest his pupils and giving them the best of himself." According to the bishop, a large proportion of his students studied both Latin and Greek. His academic course, consisting mainly of classical subjects, meant they were to be written down, memorized, and recited. Wilkinson was a man of "moral and gentlemanly deportment," stern in manner and exacting absolute obedience from his pupils.

On 24 Nov. 1885 the Tarborough Male Academy was destroyed by fire. It was never rebuilt, but Wilkinson opened a private school of his own for both males and females on the corner of St. Patrick and Wilson streets. He added a few business courses, two instructors for the girls, and an assistant to him for the boys. Wilkinson also served as county superintendent of public instruction, working diligently to improve the caliber of county schools and their teachers. During the 1890s, as superintendent in Edgecombe, his son, William Stronach Wilkinson, held the same position in the [Nash County](#) ^[5] school system. When the [Fusion party](#) ^[6] came into power in 1897–99, Frank Wilkinson was replaced, but his academy continued until well after 1910. He spent his last years at the home of his son William in Rocky Mount, where, approaching eighty years of age, he conducted special tutoring classes for older boys in a small one-room school on Main Street. Always the dedicated teacher, he continued his classes until a short time before his death, having devoted over sixty years to the education of the young. He was buried beside his wife and infant children in Calvary churchyard, Tarboro.

In the early 1860s Wilkinson married Annie Stronach (1837–1901), of Raleigh, the oldest child of [William](#) ^[7] (1803–57) and Sarah Moody Savage (1814–66) Stronach. In 1833 Wilkinson's father-in-law had traveled to Raleigh from his native Scotland to be in charge of the stonework of the capitol then being built. The children of Frank and Annie who lived to maturity were Nancy W. Cheney, Sarah Ellen W. Roberson, William Stronach, Sue W. Jones, and George Alexander.

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[J. Kelly Turner and John L. Bridgers, Jr., *History of Edgecombe County, N.C.* \(1920\).](#) ^[8]

Ruth S. Williams and Margaret G. Griffin, *Bible Records of Early Edgecombe* (1958).

Additional Resources:

Fleming, Monika. "Old Man Frank Wilkinson - a legendary educator." *The Daily Southernor* (Tarboro, NC), May 9, 2011. # (accessed March 12, 2014).

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