

Rodenbough, Grace Taylor ^[1]

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By Charles D. Rodenbough, 1994

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Grace Taylor Rodenbough, educator and legislator, was born Grace Pemberton Taylor at Danbury, Stokes County ^[2], of English ancestry. Her father was James Spotswood Taylor, a wealthy tobacco farmer, at one time the second largest grower of fluecured tobacco in the world. Her mother was Nellie Pemberton Moon, a Quaker ^[3], whose mother, Mary Moon Meredith, had been a world renowned Quaker evangelist. Grace was raised in the small courthouse town of her birth, surrounded by a large family of brothers and sisters. Among other business enterprises, her parents owned and operated the Piedmont Springs Hotel, a mineral springs resort a few miles above Danbury, where the family spent its summers. Grace attended the public schools until 1912, when she entered Guilford College ^[4]; she was graduated with an A.B. degree in 1917. For the next several years she taught in various school systems in Stokes ^[2] and Rockingham ^[5] counties. On 12 Nov. 1929 she married Rex Exum Stuart, and they located in Winston-Salem ^[6], where she became an instructor of history and government at Salem College ^[7]. She was divorce ^[8]d on 24 Nov. 1936 and returned to Danbury.

Becoming active in politics, she was president of her county's Young Democrats ^[9] (1936–37) and then became vice-president of the North Carolina Young Democrats ^[10] (1938–39). She also began taking a leadership position in the field of education, serving as president of the Stokes County ^[2] chapter of the North Carolina Education Association ^[11] (NCEA) in 1939–40. During World War II she was involved with various service committees: she was president of the Stokes County Red Cross (1942–43) and county chairman of War Savings Bonds sales (1943–45). In 1943 Governor J. Melville Broughton ^[12] appointed her to head the county recruiting campaign for the Women's Army Corp ^[13]. In 1943 she was elected a trustee of The University of North Carolina ^[14], the first citizen of Stokes County ^[2] chosen for that board; reelected three times, she held her seat until her death.

In 1945 she became executive director of the American Red Cross in Tallahassee, Fla., but returned to North Carolina in 1946 as a field representative for the Red Cross. She was married for a second time, on 4 Aug. 1947, to Stanley Leigh Rodenbough, Jr. They purchased and restored the old Covington home north of Walnut Cove. In 1948 she was appointed supervisor of schools for Stokes County ^[2]. To become more qualified for this job, she entered the University of North Carolina at Greensboro ^[15] and received her master's degree in education (1952).

Two of Grace's brothers, Ed and John, had served in the North Carolina legislature, and John was sheriff of Stokes County ^[2] from 1928 to 1948. Active in all the campaigns involving her family, Grace had become popular throughout the county. In 1952 she decided to seek a seat in the North Carolina House of Representatives ^[16] and was elected handily to the 1953 legislature, the first woman elected to any office from Stokes County. She was the only woman in that session of the legislature, the eleventh in the history of the state. Mrs. Rodenbough was reelected seven more times, and her thirteen years in office far exceeded the tenure of any other legislator from Stokes.

In Raleigh ^[17], her chief interests centered on education and agriculture. She was an early supporter of Governor William B. Umstead ^[18] and her friends Luther Hodges ^[19] and Terry Sanford. In the campaign of 1964 she actively supported her close friend Richardson Preyer, but when Dan K. Moore ^[20] was elected, she gave her legislative endorsement to him. Thus, she usually found herself in harmony with the state executive and could be counted on for crucial support. Throughout the state she became a favorite speaker on the emerging cause of wider involvement of women in business, government, and the professions. She did not advocate major shifts in the law but did introduce legislation creating more equal opportunity and a more humane application of the law. She said, "Men have run the affairs of this world a long time. I believe we can help them run it more humanely."

In 1953 Governor Umstead ^[18] appointed her as the only legislator on the Commission on Higher Education ^[21]. As a direct result of the work of this group, she introduced the bill that created the State Board of Higher Education. In 1956 she was a member of the special legislative subcommittee to consider school desegregation ^[22]. That year Mrs. Rodenbough also was a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Governor Hodges ^[23] named her to the Commission to Study the Cause and Control of Cancer in North Carolina. She fought against the Speaker Ban Law ^[24], which limited speakers who could appear on the campuses of state-supported colleges, and she helped in the successful repeal of the law in the next legislature. In 1965, in her last legislative session, she was appointed chairman of a special Committee on the Status of Women, a reflection of the growing significance of female awareness. In this last session Grace also was made vice-chairman of the House Finance Committee, the first woman to hold a major finance post in the state legislature. Because of declining health she did not run for reelection in 1966.

Grace Rodenbough was on the board of governors of the Governor's School ^[25], an educational experiment she fostered in the legislature. She was a trustee of the Northwestern Regional Library, director of Carolinas United, president of the Hanging Rock ^[26] Park Foundation, and a member of Delta Kappa Gamma, Daughters of the American Revolution ^[27],

United Daughters of the Confederacy^[28], North Carolina Literary and Historical Association^[29], North Carolina Society for the Preservation of Antiquities^[30], and American Association of University Women^[31]. She was raised both in the Quaker church of her mother and the Methodist church of her father, but after her second marriage she joined the Presbyterian church. She had no children of her own but had two stepsons, Stanley Leigh and Charles Dyson Rodenbough. Her oil portrait hangs in the South Stokes High School. She died at Baptist Hospital in Winston-Salem after an extended illness and was buried in the family plot at Danbury.

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