

Kitchin, William Walton (from Research Branch, NC OA&H) ^[1]

WILLIAM WALTON KITCHIN

Governor: 1909-1913

by Christopher Meekins

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<https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program> ^[2]

See also: [Musette Kitchin](#) ^[3], [Claude Kitchin](#) ^[4] (brother)



William Walton Kitchin, photograph. From the Audio Visual and Iconographics Collection, Division of Archives and History Photograph Collection, State Archives of North Carolina.

Member of a Halifax County family prominent in North Carolina politics for three generations, William Walton Kitchin (1866-1924) focused the state's attention on economic reform. Born on October 9, 1866, near Scotland Neck to William Hodge ("Buck") Kitchin and his wife, the former Maria Arrington, "Little Buck" was educated in local schools, among them Vine Hill Academy. His father served a single term in the United States House in 1879-1881. His brother, Claude Kitchin, served in the U.S. House from 1901 to 1923, where he rose to majority leader. William, upon graduation from Wake Forest College in 1884, edited the local Scotland Neck newspaper Democrat for one year. He then studied law with his father and at the University of North Carolina. In 1888 William entered practice in Roxboro. In 1892 he married Musette Satterfield of Person County; they had five children.

William Walton Kitchin began his political career in 1890 as party chairman of the Democrats in Person County. In 1892, he ran unsuccessfully for the North Carolina Senate but in 1896 Kitchin was the only NC Democrat elected to either chamber of the US Congress, winning the Fifth District against incumbent Thomas Settle. From this position of power, he helped lead the Wilmington Coup of 1898 wherein white supremacists subverted the election process through violence and intimidation to secure power for the Democrats – it has been called the only successful coup d'état in the history of the United States. White supremacists expelled opposition African American and Caucasian political leaders from the city, destroying the property and businesses of African American citizens (including an independent African American owned newspaper), and killed an unknown number of people (estimates run from 60 to more than 300).

The Kitchins were active participants in amending the state constitution in 1900, placing numerous limitations on the right of African American North Carolinians to vote. In January, 1901, George Henry White, a Republican who was African-American, used his Congressional Farewell speech to single-out William Walton Kitchin. White stated that no politician had done more to bring the African-American into disrepute than had Kitchin. Understanding that he could not win re-election with the restraints in place on African American voters, White did not run for the office. This resulted in William's brother Claude winning the seat. William Walton Kitchin would go on to serve six terms in the United States House of Representatives, from 1897 to 1909; his position secured by the erosion of African American voter rights.

As a Congressman William Walton Kitchin served on the Committee on Naval Affairs and the Democratic Party's Congressional Campaign Committee. He defended the white supremacy and suffrage amendments and took a "progressive" stance toward other issues, advocating direct election of senators, regulation of business, and an income tax.

In the 1908 race for governor, U.S. Senator Furnifold Simmons and ex-governor Aycock backed Locke Craig. In the party

convention Kitchin, then in his twelfth year in Congress, was the candidate of those opposed to the “Simmons machine.” He triumphed on the sixty-first ballot over Craig and Ashley Horne, but only after an informal agreement was reached that Craig would be the nominee four years later. Campaigning largely on an antitrust platform and as the “people’s choice,” Kitchin soundly defeated Republican J. Elwood Cox. Voices were raised warning of the radical nature of Kitchin’s positions, some even indicating that his plans were socialist.

As governor, Kitchin increased expenditures for education, public health, care for the mentally handicapped, and drainage of swamplands. In line with the national efforts to break up trusts and regulate business, Kitchin backed legislation to strengthen antitrust laws, require better sanitation and set a ten-hour workday in factories, prohibit work by children under the age of thirteen, and license foreign corporations which did business in the state. During his term 1300 miles of roads were constructed; his administration favored study of road needs before setting a comprehensive construction policy.

In 1912 four influential Democrats competed for the nomination to the U.S. Senate. Incumbent Simmons, who controlled the conservative wing of the party, withstood challenges from Governor Kitchin, state Supreme Court Chief Justice Walter Clark, and ex-governor Aycock, who split the liberal vote (Aycock died during the campaign). Kitchin returned to the practice of law, setting up a partnership in Raleigh with James S. Manning. In 1919 a stroke forced him into retirement, and he returned to Scotland Neck. A stroke also felled his brother Claude and the two spent much time together in their final years. William W. Kitchin died on November 9, 1924, and was buried in the Baptist Cemetery in Scotland Neck.

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