

Armstrong, John ^[1]

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by John R. Woodard, 1979

27 Nov. 1798–15 Sept. 1844

John Armstrong, Baptist minister and educator, was born in Philadelphia, Pa., the son of Robert and Mary Armstrong. His early life was spent in poverty, and he served an apprenticeship as a tinker. Before he was sixteen years old, however, he was converted and felt called to preach the Gospel. Armstrong placed himself under the care of the Reverend William Staughton, who directed his education, first in the Institute in Philadelphia and later at [Columbian College, Washington, D.C.](#) ^[2] He was graduated with a B.A. degree in 1825 and moved to Nashville, N.C., as headmaster of a school. Within two years he was recognized as one of the most prominent Baptists in the state and was named director of the [North Carolina Baptist Benevolent Society](#) ^[3] at its first meeting on 10 Feb. 1829.

A new epoch in Armstrong's life began with the organization of the [Baptist State Convention](#) ^[4] at Greenville, 26 Mar. 1830. He was one of the seventeen men who inaugurated this enterprise and was elected the first corresponding secretary of the convention, a place he held during his remaining seven and a half years in North Carolina.

In 1830, [Samuel Wait](#) ^[5] resigned the New Bern pastorate to become the agent of the Baptist State Convention. Armstrong was called to fill the vacancy in April 1830 and served the church until May 1834.

Armstrong's interest in ministerial education was manifested as early as 1831, when he proposed to the Baptist State Convention to give free instruction to any young ministers that the convention would send him. His greatest work in North Carolina was in connection with [Wake Forest College](#) ^[6]. His labors for Wake Forest began as soon as its establishment was proposed and continued with enthusiasm as long as he remained in the state. As corresponding secretary of the convention, he had the chief direction of the plans for its opening. He was a charter member of the board of trustees and a member of the committee that chose Samuel Wait as the first president. Armstrong was a very persuasive advocate of the manual labor feature of the Wake Forest Institute and on 19 Jan. 1833 delivered a lecture in [Raleigh](#) ^[7] on this subject.

The board of trustees decided in May 1834 to erect a large college building to house both dormitories and classrooms. The cost of this structure would be ten thousand dollars, and the trustees asked Armstrong to go into the field and raise the money. Though he had traveled in only five counties in eastern North Carolina, he had already raised more than \$13,500 when the convention met in November of that year. Before the first of February 1835, he had increased subscriptions to \$17,000. Of this amount, more than \$13,500 was collected. This accomplishment will appear more remarkable when it is realized that there were at that time not more than thirteen thousand Baptists in North Carolina.

As a college professor, Armstrong had a brief but most eventful career. Though elected to the chair of ancient languages at Wake Forest earlier, he did not enter upon its duties until the opening of the second session in February 1835. He made out the first course of studies for Wake Forest, and although the school was only a manual labor institute, his faith in the future of the school was such that he planned a college program. To Armstrong, Wake Forest owes the beginnings of its library; he served as first librarian of the school. Each of the literary societies had its own library, but the selection and purchase of books was under the care of Armstrong. He also had a leading role in the organization of the two literary societies. he had been at the institution only two weeks when, on 14 Feb. 1835, he delivered an address to the students on "The Value of Polemic Studies." At its conclusion, the Philomathesian and Euzelian societies were formed. [Dr. G. W. Paschal](#) ^[8] credits Armstrong with the writing of both society constitutions and the adoption of parliamentary procedures. In addition to the orations and other exercises of the societies, the students gave a play written by Armstrong, concerning the rescue of a maiden captured by the Indians. The play, which Paschal credits as being the first college play ever written and performed in North Carolina, was presented at night in a hollow north of the campus.

Armstrong was full of devices for the physical, moral, and spiritual improvement of the students. When he had been at Wake Forest for only a month, he lectured the students on the evils of coffee. As a result the students pledged themselves to substitute molasses and water for coffee for a space of three months; ten students "formed a society for the use of pure water." Later, under Armstrong's influence, nearly every student in the institution resolved to abstain from the use of tobacco.

Armstrong was a leader in religious activities at Wake Forest. It was said of him, "In the pulpit, in the prayer meeting, in the student Society of Inquiry, in Bible classes, in a special theological class for young ministers, in special addresses, in ordinary times and times of revival, he was indefatigable in his religious zeal and work." When the Wake Forest Baptist Church was organized on 30 Aug. 1835, he was most active and served, with Samuel Wait, as assistant pastor. The diaries of W. T. Brooks, a student, contain the texts of many of Armstrong's sermons and lectures, which demonstrate that during his tenure at Wake Forest he was possessed with a passion to provide the Baptists of North Carolina with an educated ministry.

In July 1837, Armstrong was granted a leave of absence for two years to study in Europe. On 17 July 1837 he embarked at New York for Havre. For two years in France and Italy he pursued a course of reading and visiting places of historical interest. In a series of letters published in the *Biblical Recorder* [9], he left a most interesting account of his observations from 30 Dec. 1837, when he was in Lyons, France, until he reached Geneva on 5 Apr. 1838. In not twice as many days, Armstrong wrote forty-eight letters of an average length of about three thousand words. He kept a journal of his notes and studies and even prepared a manuscript volume of his travels, but many travel books were appearing at this time and he hesitated to publish his. After his death the journals and manuscripts were lost. When he returned to Wake Forest, he found that his place had been filled during his absence. Armstrong appeared before the trustees in the fall of 1839 and offered his resignation. The trustees refused it, but he insisted and was released at a later board meeting. "Wake Forest never received a greater blow," according to a later historian.

He received an invitation from the church at Columbus, Miss., and began his work there in the spring of 1840. He led the church in paying off its heavy debt and increased the church membership. He moved to Noxubee County, Miss., in the spring of 1843 and lived on one of the plantations belonging to his wife. He continued to preach in the neighborhood and instructed a number of scholars in the classics. He attended the meetings of the *Mississippi Baptist Convention* [10] and was moderator of the Columbus Association in 1843.

Armstrong married Mrs. Pamela Pouncy, a member of the Columbus, Miss., Baptist Church, in July 1842. There apparently were no children. In 1844 Armstrong contracted a fever that, taking a severe form, brought him to his death.

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William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, vol. 6 (1860).

Additional Resources:

History of Wake Forest College, Volume I page 129 (of 694), Digital Publishing at Wake Forest University: <http://wfu.tizrapublisher.com/history-of-wake-forest-college-volume-i/129> [11].

Biblical Recorder online, Wake Forest Univeristy, <http://recorder.zsr.wfu.edu/Default/Skins/WakeforestA/Client.asp?skin=WakeforestA&AW=1358864462522&AppName=2> [9]

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