Bingham, William James

by Bennett L. Steelman, 1979
Bingham School [2]; Hillsborough Academy [3]

6 Apr. 1802–19 Feb. 1866

See also: Elizaabeth Hobbs Keckly (Keckley) [4]

William James Bingham, popularly known as "the Napoleon of schoolmasters," was born in Chapel Hill, the oldest son of William Bingham [5], then professor of ancient languages at the University of North Carolina [6].

Educated by his father, Bingham taught school in Williamsboro for some time before entering The University of North Carolina in 1821. After taking a B.A. with first honors in 1825, he read law in the offices of Archibald D. Murphey. His father's death in February 1826 forced him to return home to complete the term's instruction at the family school in the Mount Repose community of Orange County [7]. Shortly afterward, he decided to abandon law and to teach as a career. To prepare himself, he embarked on a lengthy tour of the better-known private schools of New England and Virginia in order to study their teaching methods.

In January 1827, Bingham returned the academy to Hillsborough, from which his father had moved it in 1818. There it rapidly gained a nation-wide reputation for academic excellence. By the 1840s, Bingham's school could boast of pupils from almost every state in the Union, and its tuition, $150 per year, was supposedly the highest charged by any preparatory school in the nation.

Meanwhile, Bingham participated actively in several major reform campaigns of the period. A long-time elder in Bethlehem Presbyterian Church, he spoke frequently in favor of temperance [8] to public audiences. A slaveowner by inheritance, he was nevertheless a member of the American Colonization Society [9] and possibly one other local manumission organization. For a brief period in 1827, he reportedly considered freeing his slaves and moving to Ohio, but he was dissuaded when he discovered the intolerable conditions under which many free blacks in the North lived. While normally shunning public office in any form, he served as corresponding secretary of the North Carolina Institute of Education [10](1831–32) and as a member of its executive board (1832–34). He was also among the founding members of...
The University of North Carolina Alumni Association.

In 1845, desiring to raise his sons in the country as his father had done, Bingham moved his school to the Oaks community, twelve miles southwest of Hillsborough. At the same time, he reduced his enrollment from over a hundred to thirty, in order to give his students closer personal attention. During this period, Bingham gratified an old ambition by conducting a model farm, experimenting extensively with new seed strains and new methods of cultivation. Agriculture was a lifelong concern of his; while still in Hillsborough, he had allowed two bondsmen to manage his farm without supervision, an exceptional step for the time.

Because of illness, Bingham was forced to suspend classes for some months in 1855. In January 1857, perhaps for this reason, he admitted his oldest son, William, as a partner in the school, under the name W. J. Bingham and Sons. The younger son, Robert, was admitted as a partner six months later, upon his graduation. Soon enrollment increased to sixty, with Bingham taking charge of the younger pupils and leaving the advanced classes to his sons. He seems to have gradually retired from the school during this period, however, relinquishing complete control in late 1863.

A Clay Whig[11], Bingham opposed secession but accepted the Confederacy[12] after Lincoln[13]'s call for troops. He moved with his family to Mebane in 1864; he died there and was buried in Mebane City Cemetery.

In 1827, Bingham married Eliza Alves Norwood, the daughter of Judge William Norwood of Hillsborough and a maternal granddaughter of James Hogg[14](1729–1805). The couple had seven children, five of whom survived to adulthood, including two sons: William[15](7 July 1835–18 Feb. 1873), who succeeded his father as headmaster of the school; and Robert[16](5 Sept. 1838–8 May 1927), who succeeded his brother.

Additional information from NCpedia editors at the State Library of North Carolina:

William Bingham has also become known for his brutal and abusive treatment of Elizabeth Keckly (Keckley) who was for a time a slave owned by Bingham's colleague Armistead Burwell. Elizabeth Keckly would later purchase her freedom and find her way to Washington, D.C. where she became a well-known dressmaker and friend to Mary Todd Lincoln. In her memoir Keckly recorded the brutality of her treatment by Burwell and Bingham as well as assualt by another local Hillsborough resident that resulted in a child. This individual has been presumed to be Alexander Kirkland.

References:

An Address by William James Bingham Delivered before the College Temperance Society at Chapel Hill (1836).


Kemp P. Battle, History of the University of North Carolina vol. 1 (1907), and "Orange County," Western North Carolina Historical and Biographical (1890).


C. L. Raper, The Church and Private Schools of North Carolina (1898).


Southern Historical Collection (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), for letters of Bingham in various collections.


Additional Resources:


[28] https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/educators
[29] https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/unc-press
[30] https://ncpedia.org/category/authors/steelman-bennett-l
[31] https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmont-6
[32] https://ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/dictionary-no