

Burgin, William Olin ^[1]

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by Tyndall P. Harris, Jr., 1979

28 July 1877–12 Apr. 1946

William Olin Burgin, congressman, lawyer, and businessman, was born on a farm in McDowell County ^[2], one of five children of Merrett Burgin, farmer, merchant, and Confederate Army ^[3] veteran, and his wife, Mary Elizabeth Smith. Prior to Merrett Burgin's death in 1893, the family moved to Rutherfordton, where William attended a school conducted by Captain W. T. R. Ball and later worked on the family farm. After his father's death he went to work to help support the family, beginning a business career as a clerk in a general store. He attended the Rutherfordton Military Institute in 1903 and 1904, after which he became a traveling salesman. While in this position he became favorably impressed with Thomasville and opened a small dry goods store there.

He apparently was well liked in Thomasville, for he was elected mayor in 1908; he served until January 1910 and again from August 1910 to June 1911. As mayor he attracted attention through liberal positions on public questions. While mayor, Burgin became interested in the practice of law and, under the direction of A. F. Sams, a young Thomasville lawyer, read law at night. He fulfilled bar requirements after attending The University of North Carolina School ^[4] of Law in the winter of 1912 and the spring of 1913. He married Edith Lee Greer of Lexington, on 12 Dec. 1912.

Upon acquisition of his license to practice law in 1913, Burgin moved to Lexington, where he resided for the remainder of his life. He did not abandon his business enterprises, for in 1909 he was one of the founders and the president of the People's Savings and Loan of Thomasville. Once in Lexington, Burgin began his practice, primarily in civil law, but continued to stay interested in corporate business. He was a smart businessman; that he was well respected is evidenced by his inclusion on the board of directors of the Mutual Savings and Loan in Lexington in 1919; his presidency of the Carolina Panel Corporation, founded in 1927; and his directorship of the Industrial Savings and Loan Association, which he helped found in 1928. Burgin also held the position of director of the Bank of Lexington.

When Burgin moved to Lexington in 1913, he joined the National Guard ^[5]; as a captain of Company L, he saw service on the Mexican border in 1916.

During the twenties, Burgin prospered materially (all his business connections were profitable); yet he gained a good deal of experience working with and for the people, both as a private lawyer and, from 1922 until 1928, as the county lawyer for Davidson County ^[6]. He continued his law practice, but, in order to become engaged in solving the problems that faced the state in the depression, he ran for the North Carolina House of Representatives in 1930. The 1931 term proved the beginning of a political career. He was elected to the state senate in 1932, where, in 1933, he sponsored unemployment compensation and social security legislation, withdrawing his support only when he became convinced that it could not be enacted. After his term in the state senate, Burgin returned to private life until his election to the U.S. House of Representatives on 8 Nov. 1938. His election came after an unprecedented campaign and primary election between Burgin and C. B. Deane. A question was raised about the absentee ballots; the results had originally certified Burgin the winner by a hundred votes, yet Deane and the state board of elections maintained that if the illegal absentee ballots were thrown out, Deane would win by twenty-three votes. Arbitrators for the election dispute were selected, and the court ruled Burgin the victor just a few hours after Deane withdrew.

In January of 1939, Dwight L. Pickard, judge of Davidson County, entered into a partnership with Burgin, for civil practice only, and maintained the office while Burgin was in Congress.

In Congress, Burgin was appointed to the Committee on Foreign Affairs, of which he remained a member for the rest of his life. As representative of North Carolina's Eighth District, he was known for his ability, for close attention to his congressional duties, and for many qualities that made him a useful member of the House. Despite his difficulties in his first election to Congress, Burgin worked diligently and created a good record for himself. He ran on this record, and the people of his district endorsed him by overwhelming majorities for the next three elections. In Congress he was a steadfast supporter of Roosevelt's foreign policies and war measures.

On 23 Feb. 1946, Burgin announced that he would not run for reelection, yet he remained intensely concerned with the nation's foreign policy and until his death worked on a proposal calling for an immediate halt to the manufacture of atomic bombs.

From 1942 through 1946, Burgin suffered three heart attacks; on 10 Apr. he contracted a "coronary heart disease" that proved fatal less than two days later. The body was interred in the Lexington Cemetery.

His obituary listed his memberships in the Masons ^[7], Junior Order of United American Mechanics, and Knights of Pythias and noted that he was a steward of the Methodist ^[8] church.

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