

Cooper, John Downey ^[1]

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by George T. Blackburn II, 1979

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John Downey Cooper, tobacconist, manufacturer, financier, and public servant, was born at Willow Hill in [Granville County](#) ^[2], the son of Alexander Cooper, a planter and county official, and Harriet Young Cooper. His brothers [David Young](#) ^[3] and James Crawford became prominent in the economic development of Henderson; another brother, Madison Cooper, became a wealthy banker and capitalist in Waco, Tex.

Cooper received his primary education from his mother and supplementary instruction at the [Horner Military School](#) ^[4] in Oxford. Following a brief attempt at farming, he journeyed to Texas, where he herded stock for Millet and Mabry, then the largest stock raisers in Texas. His travels continued, leading him to Kansas, California, Nebraska, and the Dakota Territory, where he prospected for gold. He was a member of the second party to explore the Black Hills region. In 1876 he returned to North Carolina and settled at Henderson, becoming a tobacco buyer for the Allen and Ginter Company of Richmond, Va. He continued as agent for the [American Tobacco Company](#) ^[5] when that combination absorbed Allen and Ginter in 1914. The city council of Henderson appointed Cooper to fill a vacant mayoralty, and he was subsequently elected to a full term in 1883. As mayor and later as chairman of the Vance County Highway Commission, he was instrumental in developing improved roads and city streets for the area. His life of public service included vigorous support for the development of the Henderson public school system.

In 1890, Cooper organized the Cooper-Parham Supply Company, first of the many successful, independent enterprises he promoted. He joined with his brother [David Y.](#) ^[3] to organize the Henderson Cotton Mill in 1895 and the Harriet Cotton Mill in 1898; together, they soon became the largest producers of hosiery yarn in the country. Cooper is chiefly noted as founder of the Carolina Bagging Company in 1908, for some time the largest manufacturer of cotton bagging in the United States. He was also president of the Farmers' and Merchants' Bank in Henderson and of the Vance-Guano Company.

Seven sons and a daughter were born to Cooper and his wife, [Fannie Spotswood Burwell](#) ^[6], of a prominent Virginia family: George, John Downey, Jr., Lewis Ginter, James Wesley, [David Alexander](#) ^[7], Henry Burwell, Marshall Young, and Fannie Cooper Zollicoffer.

Cooper was a member of the Methodist Episcopal church and a Shriner. He was buried in Elmwood Cemetery in Henderson. A portrait by Mary Burwell is in the home of Mrs. John D. Cooper, Jr., Henderson.

References:

History of North Carolina, vol. 4 (1919).

North Carolina: The Old North State and the New, vol. 3 (1941).

Additional Resources:

"John Downey Cooper." *History of North Carolina: North Carolina biography* vol. 4. Chicago [Ill.]: Lewis Publishing Company. 1919. 127. <http://books.google.com/books?id=k0Q4AQAAAMAJ&pg=PA127#v=onepage&q&f=false> ^[8] (accessed January 15, 2014).

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[Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press](#).^[13]

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