

Harding, Henry Patrick ^[1]

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by Laura Page Frech, 1988; Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, June 2023

14 Aug. 1874–13 July 1959

Henry Patrick Harding, teacher and public school administrator, was known most of his life as Harry P. Harding. He was born in Aurora, one of eight children (two of whom died in infancy) of Confederate Army Major Henry H. and Susan Elizabeth Sugg Harding. Harry Harding grew up in Greenville, where his father was a teacher, farmer, and for four years superintendent of schools. He attended Greenville Male Academy and [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[2]. Following a family tradition, he left Chapel Hill between his sophomore and junior years to earn money to help pay for the education of his brothers and sisters but was graduated in 1899. While at the university, he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and to Sigma Alpha Epsilon social fraternity. He later received the M.A. degree from Columbia University (1931) and an honorary doctorate of pedagogy from [Davidson College](#) ^[3] (1951).

Early in life Harding decided to teach. From [Charles D. McIver](#) ^[4] and [Edwin A. Alderman](#) ^[5], who toured North Carolina in the 1880s and 1890s campaigning for better schools, he acquired what has been described as "a mystical belief" in [public education](#) ^[6]. While an undergraduate, he planned to teach Latin and Greek in college, but after receiving the B.A. degree he became principal of New Bern High School. In 1901 he left that position to organize the Oxford schools, and from 1902 to 1904 he was superintendent of the New Bern schools. In 1904, the superintendent of the Charlotte schools, [Alexander Graham](#) ^[7], another of the "evangels of education," persuaded Harding to become principal of one of three graded schools there. In 1912, he was appointed assistant superintendent but continued to teach mathematics. In 1913, he became superintendent.

During Harding's tenure, the Charlotte school system was greatly expanded and improved. In 1912, he supervised the organization of a high school where teachers specialized in one subject instead of teaching a grade. By 1923, Charlotte had the first junior high school in North Carolina; in 1924, it added the twelfth grade. During the years 1912–30, many elective courses were instituted, with the result that more students remained in school longer. Harding was more interested in building character, developing personality, and helping each child to "find himself" than in teaching facts. Many times he was instrumental in persuading Charlotte voters to approve special taxes and bond issues. The money went for new buildings; supplements to teachers' salaries; manual training, business, physical education, and music courses; ungraded classes for children with developmental disabilities; and health services. Harding was not satisfied until he had replaced old buildings with fireproof ones. In 1925, he convinced the school board to hire a professional consulting firm of architects.

Perhaps his toughest fight for funds came during the "dark days" of 1933 and 1934, after the state legislature annulled the charters that had allowed cities to levy special taxes for schools. Charlotte schools lost almost two-thirds of their budget, most of their special courses, many teachers, the twelfth grade, and a month of the school term. When the Charlotte school district regained the right to levy special taxes, the first attempt to do so failed. After Harding lobbied earnestly among the city's businessmen, voters approved a supplement in 1935.

Harding was quiet, unassuming, gentle, deeply religious, and dedicated to his work. He taught a Bible class at Charlotte's First Methodist Church for twenty years and held offices in the church. When he retired in 1949 at age seventy-four, 5,000 people heard U.S. Senator [Frank P. Graham](#) ^[8], the son of Harding's predecessor, describe Harding as a "soldier of peace," and one of those who, "without earthly rewards, build the future in the schools of the children of the people."

During his career Harding served as a trustee of The University of North Carolina and as president of the North Carolina Association of City School Superintendents, of the South Piedmont Teachers Association, and of the North Carolina Education Association. He taught for two summers at The University of North Carolina, served on the North Carolina High School Textbook Commission, and was a charter member of the "96 Club," made up of two school superintendents from each state. He was a Rotarian and a member of the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce and the Executives Club. After retirement, he continued to maintain an office and, as superintendent emeritus, to visit schools. He also served on the Charlotte Civil Service Commission.

In 1903, Harding married Lucia Ella Ives of New Bern. The couple had one daughter, Lucia Elizabeth, and a son who died in infancy. Harding's brothers also achieved distinction. William Frederick Harding, a Superior Court judge, lived in Charlotte. Fordyce C. Harding, a lawyer, served in the North Carolina Senate (1915–20). Jarvis B. Harding, a civil engineer, built roads in Mexico. Their sisters, Sudie Harding Latham and Mary Elizabeth Harding, were teachers.

Harry Harding was buried in Elmwood Cemetery, Charlotte. Two portraits of him hang at Harding High School nearby.

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