

Huntington, William ^[1]

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by Mary Claire Engstrom, 1988

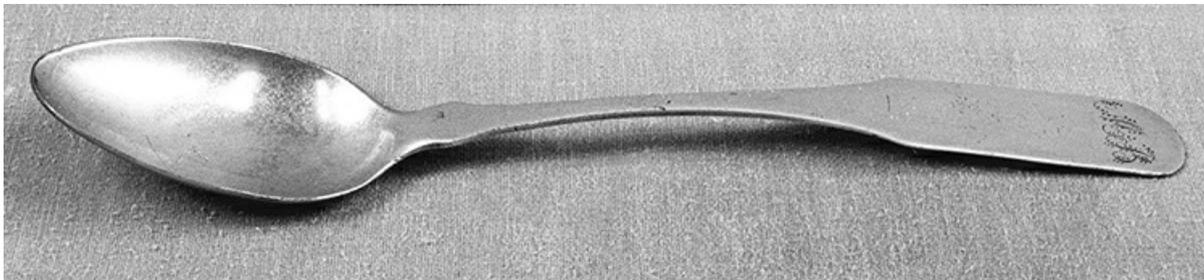
8 Sept. 1792–27 Oct. 1874

William Huntington, Hillsborough [silversmith](#) ^[2] and engraver, Presbyterian churchman, and businessman, was born in Hillsborough, the oldest of three sons of silversmith [Roswell Huntington](#) ^[3], a native of Connecticut, and his wife Mary (May) Palmer; all three sons were trained as silversmiths in their father's Hillsborough shop. Nothing further is known of William's early education, but the quality of his surviving letters, poems, and inscriptions suggests careful schooling possibly received in the [Hillsborough Academy](#) ^[4].

By December 1815, at age twenty-three, William had set up his own silversmith's shop in Hillsborough "next door above David Yarbrough & Co.'s store" and advertised that he was ready to execute work "in the most faithful and fashionable manner and upon the shortest notice." On 27 May 1819, he formally joined the new Hillsborough Presbyterian Church of which the Reverend [John Knox Witherspoon](#) ^[5] was the youthful first pastor, and there began one of the great and enduring spiritual experiences of his life. He served until 1833 as stated clerk, ruling elder, and church treasurer, and scores of numbered vouchers survive in his exquisitely neat copperplate handwriting.

On 9 Dec. 1819 Huntington married Frances Robeson Howze (28 Dec. 1802–9 July 1877), oFranklin County ^[6], the daughter of John and Patsy Yarbrough Howze, and began a long married life of remarkable felicity.

In the 1820s William and his two brothers, Martin Palmer and John, formed various short-lived partnerships to operate jeweler's and silversmith's shops in the neighboring towns of Milton, Oxford, Salisbury, and Charlotte. Beginning in 1819, William appears to have been a silent partner in the Milton firm of Martin Palmer Huntington & Co.; in 1824 he joined his younger brother John in a similar venture in Oxford. John then briefly joined Robert Wynne in Salisbury in 1827, and in 1828–32 was the partner of the Virginia-born silversmith, Thomas Trotter, in Charlotte. In 1834 he returned to Hillsborough to work with the Huntingtons' apprentice, Lemuel Lynch.



Huntington, William. "Dessert Spoon, Accession #: H.1946.56.2." 1815-1833. North Carolina Museum of History.

^[7]

Survived signed pieces of William Huntington silver from the Hillsborough period, bearing the mark "W. H.," indicate that he had a fair amount of custom in his native town and its environs. Extant teaspoons, tablespoons, large serving spoons, [cream ladles](#) ^[8], and punch ladles—either in private collections or museums—are all graceful, strong pieces with initials and sometimes dates flowingly inscribed, as on Nancy Cabe Latta's second set of wedding silver on the occasion of her 6 Nov. 1820 marriage to Major [Robert Donnell](#) ^[9]. Miss Mary W. ("Polly") Burke, William's lifelong friend, is known to have given small (5 1/2-inch) "W. H." spoons as annual merit prizes at her day school on East Queen Street in Hillsborough; and the Strudwicks, Moores, Waddells, Webbs, Hollemans, and other old [Orange County](#) ^[10] families all ordered Huntington silver for special family occasions. Possibly the outstanding surviving "W. H." piece from the Hillsborough period is a magnificent cream ladle with a unique twisted handle (ca. 1830) now in a private collection.

During these years Huntington also undertook a variety of other business ventures. He early formed a brief partnership with local merchant John Van Hook, Jr., he advertised that he would engrave tombstones "in a handsome manner" (but none bearing his stonecutter's mark has as yet been found in Orange County), he opened a blacksmith's shop in Hillsborough opposite his silversmith's shop, he invested in farmlands northwest of Hillsborough and in town lots (land speculation, in fact, appears to have been in his blood), and he even embarked on a business partnership in Pittsboro, [Chatham County](#) ^[11], at the same time he was operating a Hillsborough general store in which he sold "Family Flour" and sundry patent medicines. From 1829 to 1833 he reopened the silversmith's shop, which had been closed briefly, in his own home just east of the new Masonic Hall on West King Street. He also served as town commissioner of Hillsborough for twelve years (1821–33) and as a manager of the Orange County Sunday School Union for over a decade.

In December 1833, Huntington and his family and three of his four sisters accompanied their aging father to a new home

in Marion, Perry County, Ala., where William set up shop on the same lot where his stone dwelling house stood. His second son, William Henry (the only one of the Huntingtons' seven sons to survive the parents), worked with him as apprentice and partner. Preserved Alabama pieces carry either the mark "W. H." or "W. H. & Son."

Many of these later works are special gift pieces with handsomely engraved presentation inscriptions, such as "Grand Parents to Fannie" on six tablespoons made for William Henry's daughter, Fannie Huntington. Extant silver of the Alabama period includes a dozen tablespoons, a baby cup, and a sugar shell. Notable later gift pieces were two massive gold finger rings, apparently William's last work, both made to send back to his native Orange County. On one, designed in 1869 for Mrs. [Cornelia Phillips Spencer](#) ^[12] of Chapel Hill, were engraved these words inside the heavy plain gold band: "In memory of the University of N.C. as it was. Caldwell, Phillips, Mitchell, Hooper, Swain. A tribute to Mrs. Cornelia P. Spencer." The ring is now thought to have been buried with Mrs. Spencer. The other similar ring, sent to [William A. Graham](#) ^[13] of Hillsborough in March 1874, had the names "Clay, Calhoun, and Daniel Webster" engraved on the inside band. The *Hillsborough Recorder* of 25 Mar. 1874 noted, "The remarkable feature is that Mr. Huntington made the ring and executed the engraving at the age of eighty-one years."

A gentle man of sentiment and sensibility with a marked poetic strain, William Huntington invariably celebrated the passing years, birthdays, his golden wedding anniversary, and so forth with original poems and inscriptions beautifully copied and sent on stiff cards to friends and relatives. For thirty-five years he served as ruling elder and stated clerk in the Marion Presbyterian Church, and his fugitive poetry reflects his lifelong devotion to "the doctrines, order, and fellowship" of his church. He was buried in the Marion Cemetery. A picture of Huntington and his wife exists, as does an old set of silversmith's tools, found in a family desk, which may have been used by several Huntington silversmiths.

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