

Kendrick, Benjamin Burks ^[1]

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by Clyde Wilson, 1988

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Benjamin Burks Kendrick, historian, was born at Woodland, Talbot County, Ga., the son of William Thomas and Levicie Maddox Kendrick. The Kendrick family was substantial and of English origins. After graduating from [Mercer College](#) ^[2] in 1905, Kendrick taught for four years in the public high schools of Georgia. In 1909 he entered Columbia University, where he remained until 1923 as graduate student, instructor, assistant, and associate professor. Like many other southern students he took his doctorate with William A. Dunning (1914), but was perhaps equally influenced by another member of the Columbia faculty, Charles A. Beard.

In 1923 Kendrick went to Greensboro as professor of history at the [Woman's College](#) ^[3] of the [University of North Carolina](#) ^[4]. From 1930 until a stroke forced his retirement in 1943, he was chairman of the college's Department of History and Political Science. Kendrick was one of the signers of the original organizational notice of the Southern Historical Association, of which he was president in 1941. He also served on the executive council of the [American Historical Association](#) ^[5] and was active in the Social Science Research Council, where he was chairman of the Southern Regional Committee (1930–35).

Kendrick's first published work was his dissertation, *The Journal of the Joint Committee of Fifteen on Reconstruction* ^[6] (1914), in which he edited the record of proceedings of that important congressional committee (previously unavailable to the public) and wrote a history of the committee. *The Journal* included the first serious examination of the genesis of the [Fourteenth Amendment](#) ^[7] and its controversial application to business corporations. He next published, with Louis M. Hacker, who had been his student at Columbia, a college textbook, *The U.S. Since 1865*, which appeared in three editions (1931, 1934, and 1938). Kendrick also wrote at least ten articles, chiefly contemporary social commentary. A progressive social scientist, he was dedicated to the social and economic uplifting of the South, but, unlike many others, he was a regional loyalist as well, ready to vindicate the past of the South which he believed had been more sinned against than sinner.

In *The South Looks at Its Past* ^[8] (1935), a still interesting interpretation of southern history written by Kendrick and his colleague Alex M. Arnett, the authors sought to reconcile the progressive thrust of the 1930s with the best in the social and cultural heritage of the Old South, thus falling somewhere between the Chapel Hill and Nashville schools of southern thought.

Kendrick's stance as a historian is perhaps best illustrated by his presidential address to the Southern Historical Association, entitled "The Colonial Status of the South," delivered one month before Pearl Harbor. This paper clearly revealed him as a combination of southern loyalist and Beardian progressive. The main theme of three centuries of southern history, according to Kendrick, was the region's colonial exploitation by the business interests of the Northeast. History had offered only one opportunity to escape that status, which had been lost when the South joined the North in one government in 1787. "At present," Kendrick believed, "finance capitalism and imperialism," which might even then be maneuvering the United States into the war, "hold the region in so firm a grip that no escape from the colonial status appears possible" without some catastrophic upheaval.

In 1909 Kendrick married Elizabeth Shields at Hudson, N.Y. They had four children. Described as redhaired, stocky, friendly, forthright, and practical, Kendrick was a Presbyterian and was active as a bank director and real estate developer in Greensboro. At the time of the consolidation of [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[9], he was elected by the faculty of the Woman's College as its representative on the Consolidated University Advisory Council. In 1934 he was a major candidate for appointment as president of the [University of Tennessee](#) ^[10]. He died at his retirement home in Cedar Grove, Maine, and was buried nearby at West Dresden.

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