

Little, Edward Herman ^[1]

Little, Edward Herman

by Chalmers G. Davidson, 1991

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Edward Herman Little, industrialist and philanthropist, was born on a farm in [Mecklenburg County](#) ^[2], the fifth of twelve children of George W. and Ella Howie Little. His family was of respectable standing in the community but of meager means. "A boy," Little often said in later years, "is fortunate, as I was, to have good parents, and especially a good mother." As a boy, he worked on the farm, sold melons, and did what he could to assist his family. He attended the Mecklenburg County public schools and Grey's Academy in Huntersville, but there was no money for a college education. Since he was athletically inclined, he entered many of the riding and javelin contests then popular with country southern youths. The reward was "crowning the queen of the tournament." He remembered years later that being the youngest of the lancers, he was too shy to claim his reward. That shyness changed over time to modesty, which endeared him not only to family and friends but to his business associates as well.

At seventeen Little entered the business world as a cotton buyer for a firm in Charlotte. Four years later he became a soap and toilet article salesman for Colgate and Company, and in 1906 he was made district manager for Colgate in Memphis, Tenn. Here he met and won the hand of Suzanne Heyward Trezevant, but before the wedding could take place it was discovered that he had tuberculosis. The physicians ordered him to Denver, Colo., immediately. His fiancée went with him and they were married on 24 Nov. 1910 in Denver. For three years, according to his later recollection, his wife left his bedside only twice. Her parents were socially prominent in Memphis and of distinguished southern lineage. E. H. Little always said he married "up" and his gratitude for the loyalty of his wife in less prosperous times knew no bounds. They had no children.

In 1914 Little joined the B. J. Johnson Soap Company as a salesman. In 1918, a year after Johnson Soap became the Palmolive Company, he was district manager for Palmolive in Los Angeles; in 1919 he held the same position in New York. In 1928, when Palmolive merged with Colgate, he took charge of foreign sales. Over the years Little was instrumental in establishing forty-two Colgate-Palmolive international subsidiaries. He became vice-president in 1933, president in 1938, and chairman of the board in 1953. He was the chief architect and builder of the company's foreign business, which accounted for more than half the total sales and profits by the time he retired in 1960.

On his retirement the board of directors of Colgate-Palmolive passed a resolution containing the following statement: "Under his inspired leadership and direction, sales have increased from \$100,000,000 in 1937 to the present \$600,000,000 per annum; profits and dividends have multiplied; a strong financial position has been established; plants have been modernized and expanded; research has been greatly augmented; liberal benefits have been provided for employees and their families; management has been decentralized; and substantial progress has been made toward diversifying the Company's business."

On Colgate's 150th anniversary in 1956, Little was responsible for a gift of half a million dollars to be divided among selected colleges in the Northeast. After his retirement, he devoted his time to philanthropy, especially for the advancement of southern institutions and colleges. It was estimated that he gave away at least \$5 million of his personal fortune before his death in 1981. Suzanne Little, who died on 18 Oct. 1964, left a sizable trust fund, 67 percent of which was to go to the University of the South at Sewanee, Tenn., on the death of her husband. In 1974 Little gave \$1 million to construct the Trezevant Episcopal Retirement Home in Memphis, Tenn. He had, for many years, divided his time between New York and Naples, Fla. When Trezevant Manor was completed in Memphis, he spent his remaining years there.

His major benefactions went to [Davidson College](#) ^[3] (ca. \$2.5 million), where there is a dormitory named E. H. Little Hall as well as the E. H. Little Library; to the [University of the South at Sewanee](#) ^[4] (ca. \$1.5 million, including Mrs. Little's trust fund), where there is a dormitory called Trezevant Hall; to [Queens College](#) ^[5], Charlotte (over \$500,000), where there is an E. H. Little Fine Arts Center; and to Southwestern at Memphis (ca. \$500,000), where there is a dormitory named Suzanne Trezevant Hall. Major benefactions also went to [Mary Baldwin College](#) ^[6], Staunton, Va.; to Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Va.; and to the Heinman Medical Research Center in Charlotte. Additional North Carolina institutions that benefited substantially from his generosity include Crossnore School; [St. Andrews College](#) ^[7], Laurinburg; [Montreat College](#) ^[8]; [Warren Wilson College](#) ^[9], Swannanoa; [Charlotte Country Day School](#) ^[10]; and the Presbyterian Retirement Home, Charlotte.

During his later years, Little was a liberal contributor to [Republican](#) ^[11] presidential campaigns and counted General Dwight D. Eisenhower among his personal friends. He received an honorary doctor of laws degree from Davidson College in 1953 and an honorary doctor of humanities degree from Southwestern at Memphis in 1972.

Although a [Presbyterian](#) ^[12], Little frequently attended Grace St. Lukes Episcopal Church, Memphis, with his wife and

made generous contributions to it. He was buried from that church a few days after his death in Memphis at the age of one hundred years, three months, and two days. Interment was in Elmwood Cemetery, Memphis.

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