

Mills, Luther Rice ^[1]

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Luther Rice Mills, educator, was the youngest of five children of the Reverend John Garland and Martha Williams Haymes Mills of Halifax County, Va. Ordained to the ministry in 1825, the elder Mills served as pastor of rural Baptist churches in the region, while earning a good livelihood for his family as owner-manager of a sizable plantation which was worked by numerous people whom Mills enslaved.

Young Mills received the rudiments of an elementary education under the tutelage of his father prior to enrolling at [Wake Forest College](#) ^[2] in 1857. He was awarded an A.B. degree in 1861, graduating at the head of his class. Afterwards he served in the [Confederate army](#) ^[3] (1861–65), attaining the rank of lieutenant. Captured on the retreat from Richmond (1864), he spent the last months of the conflict as a prisoner on Johnson's Island.

On his release from prison in mid-June 1865, Mills returned to [Halifax County](#) ^[4]. Earlier dreams of pursuing graduate studies in mathematics at the University of Virginia and at Cambridge University had to be deferred as he assumed the management of the family estate, operating it with the labor of formerly enslaved people, who had chosen to remain as "tenants" following their emancipation, and with such day laborers as he could hire for the work. His sense of duty to a widowed mother—together with an unexpected joy derived from his success at the enterprise—found Mills resolved to devote his time and energy to maintaining the family farm.

In January 1867, however, he yielded to the invitation of President [Washington Manly Wingate](#) ^[5] to return to [Wake Forest](#) ^[2] to teach mathematics. Here he remained for the next forty years, serving as adjunct professor (1867–71) and professor of mathematics (1871–1907), bursar of the college (1876–1907), and agent for the Board of Education (1876–80). The latter, a college-based agency of the Baptist State Convention, was charged with the task of working to "assist promising and indigent young ministers seeking to prepare themselves for the more efficient preaching of the gospel." As a result of ill health, Mills retired from the classroom in June 1907.

As a teacher, Mills was comprehensive and exacting. The young men who sat in his classes soon discovered that whether or not they learned was largely their responsibility. He believed that a teacher should not have to coax a student to study. Nonetheless, the records of many former students—especially those who pursued higher branches of mathematics at universities—attest both to the thoroughness of the work accomplished in his classroom and to his ability to inspire students to do their best.

It was as bursar, however, that Mills probably made his most important contribution to Wake Forest. He is said to have been well ahead of his time in his knowledge of accounting principles and in the skills of business management. His thrift, his prompt payment of bills, and his determination to hold expenditures within the limits of the institution's sources of revenue increased its financial credit. Such practices also won the confidence of the individuals who were able to provide equipment and funding for the college. Knowledge of the value of common stocks and other securities—together with his study of fluctuations in the market—made him a trusted adviser to the board of trustees. Reportedly, his judgment regarding investments proved to be remarkably sound.

Mills married Anna Lewis, of Tarboro, on 14 Jan. 1869. They had five children: Kate (m. Claude Kitchin), Luther Rice, Jr., John Garland, Lucy (m. John Alexander Wray), and Anna. Mills was buried in the town cemetery at Wake Forest. A portrait hangs in the reading room of the Ethel Taylor Crittenden Collection in Baptist History, [Wake Forest University](#) ^[2].

References:

Luther Rice Mills, "Forty Years in the Wilderness," *Bulletin of Wake Forest College*, October 1907, January 1908.

George Washington Paschal, *History of Wake Forest College*, vols. 1–3 (1935–43).

Wake Forest Student, "Mills Memorial" vol. (November 1920).

Additional Resources:

Luther Rice Mills Reminiscences, undated (collection no. 00512-z). The Southern Historical Collection. Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

http://www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/m/Mills,Luther_Rice.html ^[6] (accessed July 31, 2014).

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