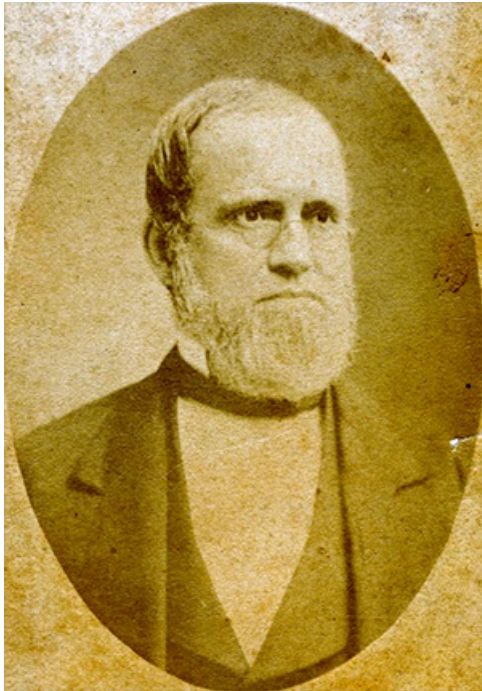


Phillips, Charles ^[1]

Phillips, Charles

by Katherine F. Martin, 1994; Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, June 2023

20 July 1822–10 May 1889



Photograph of professor Charles Phillips.
Image from the North Carolina Collection
Photographic Archives, University of North
Carolina at Chapel Hill.

^[2]Charles Phillips, professor of engineering and mathematics and Presbyterian minister, was born in Harlem, N.Y., the oldest of three children of James ^[3] and Julia Middagh Vermeule Phillips. His father operated a successful school for boys in Harlem; his mother was a member of a Dutch family long established in New Jersey. There is some evidence that James and his brother Samuel Field Phillips ^[4], sons of a Church of England ^[5] rector, changed their surname from Postlethwaite to Phillips when they emigrated from England to New York in 1818.

Charles Phillips moved with his family to Chapel Hill in 1826, when his father was appointed to the chair of mathematics and natural philosophy at The University of North Carolina ^[6]. He received his A.B. degree from the university, where he was a member of the Dialectic Society in 1841, sharing first honors in his class with his younger brother Samuel Field. A wide range of interests complicated his decision about a choice of professions. Phillips first read medicine for a time with Chapel Hill physician William Jones. Deciding on a career in the ministry, he entered Princeton Theological Seminary in the summer of 1843. Problems with his health and subsequent pressure from family and friends led to a decision to postpone his religious training, and in July 1844 Phillips accepted a call from President David L. Swain ^[7] to return to The University of North Carolina as his father's assistant. In that year he also received his M.A. degree from the university. Phillips held a position as tutor of mathematics, with a specialization in applied math, until 1853, when he was elected to the newly established chair of civil engineering. He spent the summer and fall of that year in study at Harvard College and assumed his post in January 1854. In 1860 he was named professor of mathematics. For many years Phillips served as secretary of the faculty, assisted in the preparation of the annual catalogue, and wrote newspaper articles about university affairs. He was also author of a textbook entitled *A Manual of Plane and Spherical Trigonometry; With Some of Its Applications* ^[8] (1857).

Even after he was well established in a successful teaching career, Phillips's commitment to the ministry remained vital. In December 1857 he was licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Orange and on 14 Apr. 1866 he was ordained at Orange County ^[9]'s New Hope Church, which had long been under the pastoral charge of his father. From 1857 to 1868 he served as stated supply for the Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church. Phillips also contributed his time as teacher and superintendent of the church Sunday school ^[10] and, with his wife, inaugurated an African-American Sunday school. At the commencement of 1868, his contributions to his church and community were recognized when he was awarded a doctor of divinity degree by The University of North Carolina.

With the reorganization of the university by the state's Reconstruction ^[11] government in 1868, Phillips was dismissed from the faculty. In February 1869 he found a position as professor of mathematics at Davidson College ^[12]. Together with other clerical members of the faculty, he was also designated stated supply by the congregation of the Davidson College church. When in 1875 The University of North Carolina reopened (due in large part to the determined efforts of his sister Cornelia Ann Phillips Spencer ^[13]), Phillips was invited to return as professor of mathematics. During the first year of his second association with the university, he served as chairman of the faculty. Also in 1876 he received an LL.D. degree from Davidson College. In 1879 the rheumatic gout that had plagued him for many years forced his retirement from the faculty. He then became professor emeritus of mathematics, the first individual to have that title bestowed upon him by the trustees.

Phillips married the former Laura Caroline Battle, youngest child of Edgecombe County ^[14] businessman Joel Battle ^[15] and Mary (Pretty Polly) Johnson and sister of judge and professor of law William Horn Battle ^[16]. Their union in December 1847 marked the first time a college tutor had married; this infraction of the rules was, however, tolerated and the ban on such marriages was subsequently dropped. The couple had eight children: Julia Vermeule, Charles, Mary, James Tifton, William Battle ^[17], Alexander, Lucy, and Susie.

Charles Phillips had a disability for the eleven years preceding his death, Phillips left Chapel Hill in the company of his wife and youngest daughter on 29 Apr. 1889 to live with his sons William and Alexander in Birmingham, Ala. He died en route at the Columbia, S.C., home of his daughter Mary (Mrs. John S.) Verner and was interred in the family plot in Chapel Hill. On his death the family home was sold to the Presbyterian church and became its manse. A portrait of Phillips is at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill ^[6].

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University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill ^[32]

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