

Pierson, William Whatley ^[1]

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by Charles B. Robson, 1994

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William Whatley Pierson, scholar, university professor, and administrator, was born in Brundige, Ala., the eldest son of Dr. William Whatley, a surgeon, and Minto Anglin Pierson. After preliminary education with tutors and in local private and public schools, he attended the State Normal School in Troy (Ph.B., 1908), the [University of Alabama](#) ^[2] (A.B., 1910; A.M., 1911), and [Columbia University](#) ^[3] (A.M., 1912; Ph.D., 1916). Travel and study abroad included research in Peru, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Portugal, Spain, and France as a Kenan Traveling Professor and, as an associate of the Carnegie Institute of Washington and the Carnegie Foundation of New York, respectively, in Venezuela in 1928 and 1940. Pierson earned doctoral degrees *honoris causa* from [Boston University](#) ^[4] (1943), [Washington and Lee University](#) ^[5] (1949), and the [University of North Carolina at Greensboro](#) ^[6] (1963), fittingly the first honorary degree conferred by that institution under its new title.

Pierson's principal teaching was at [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[7], where he was successively instructor, assistant professor, and professor of history and government (1915–35); professor of political science (1936–57) and head of that department (1936–42); and Kenan professor (1957–63). In his capacity as administrator, he was first of all dean of the Graduate School at Chapel Hill (1930–57). He also served in the university system as acting chancellor of the Woman's College in Greensboro (1956–57, 1960) and acting director of the Board of Higher Education (1960). Furthermore, he guided in the formation of a graduate curriculum at the North Carolina College (later [North Carolina Central University](#) ^[8]) in [Durham](#) ^[9] and prevailed upon the state legislature to establish a graduate school there in 1939, serving as its first dean and later its co-dean. From 1954 to 1964 he was a key member of its board of trustees.



Image of Dean William Whatley Pierson, from Yackety Yack 1942, [p.27], published 1942 by Chapel Hill, Publications Board of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Photo is presented on Internet Archive. ^[10]

Beyond North Carolina's borders Pierson was active in numerous regional and national agencies concerned with postbachelareate education. His most important role was in the pivotal Association of American Universities, where he served on the Committee on Classification (1933–48) and was executive secretary (1943–48). Regionally, he was a two-term president of the Conference of Deans of Southern Graduate Schools, member of the Executive Council and the Committee on Instruction in Higher Education of the Southern Association of Colleges and Universities (1945–52), vice-president (1951–52) and president (1953) of the Southern University Conference, and chairman of the Administrative Committee of the Southern Fellowships Fund (throughout its existence, 1954–63). As part of his work in these agencies he wrote many reports and synoptic recommendations that are preserved in their several journals or proceedings. Typical of these is "Organization of a Graduate School within the University," *Journal of the Proceedings and Addresses of the 37th Conference, Association of American Universities* (1933).

As a scholar, Pierson pursued constitutional history and political theory in the United States and in Hispanic America. His chief book-length publications are *Texas v. White: A Study in Legal History* ^[11] (1916); *American Ideals* ^[12], edited jointly with Norman Foerster (1917); *Hispanic-American History: A Syllabus* ^[13] (4 eds., 1921–27); and *Governments of Latin-America* ^[14], with Federico G. Gil (1957). Among his articles in learned journals are "The Sovereign State of North

Carolina: 1787–1789," *Proceedings of the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association* (1916); "The Joint Committee on the Conduct of the Civil War" ^[15], " *American Historical Review* ^[16] (1917); "Is There a Republican Form of Government?," *North Carolina Law Review* (1923); "The Political Influence of an Inter-Oceanic Canal," *Hispanic-American Historical Review* (1926); "Scientific and Interpretive History" ^[17], " *North Carolina Historical Review* ^[18] (1926); "Institutional History of the Cuban Intendencia," *James Sprunt Historical Studies* (1926–27); "Foreign Influences on Venezuelan Political Thought," *Hispanic-American Historical Review* (1935); "Pathology of Democracy in Latin America," *American Political Science Review* (1950); and "Which Is Superior—The Supreme Court or the Constitution,?" *Congressional Record* (1956).

Pierson also was an associate editor of the *Hispanic-American Historical Review* (1920–26, 1928–34); editor of the Inter-American Historical Series of The *University of North Carolina Press* ^[19]; a member or corresponding member of Sigma Alpha Epsilon, Phi Beta Kappa, the Chapel Hill Rotary Club (president, 1949–50), the Hispanic Society of America, and the Academie Nacional de la Historia de Venezuela.

In religion Pierson was a Methodist. He was married twice: to Henrietta Elizabeth Brase in New York in 1916 (divorced in 1942) and to Mary Bynum Holmes in *Mount Olive* ^[20], N.C., in 1945. At the time of his retirement in 1963, he moved to Mount Olive and, upon his death three years later, was buried in Maplewood Cemetery. He was survived by Mary Bynum Holmes Pierson and no children.

Pierson's career spanned a period of explosive growth in the number of institutions of higher learning in the nation and especially in the southern region. His leadership contributed greatly to the achievement of orderly growth rather than a chaotic proliferation of programs leading to master's and doctoral degrees. In this way a firm foundation was laid for the South to attain a standard of excellence in postbachelaraureate education previously aspired to only by a few universities in the North and the East.

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Biographies [28]

Educators [29]

Authors:

Robson, Charles B. [30]

Origin - location:

Durham County [31]

Durham [32]

North Carolina Central University [33]

Guilford County [34]

Greensboro [35]

University of North Carolina at Greensboro [36]

Orange County [37]

Chapel Hill [38]

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill [39]

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1 January 1994 | Robson, Charles B.

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