

## **Poteat, William Louis** <sup>[1]</sup>

### **Poteat, William Louis**

by John R. Woodard, 1994; Revised by SLNC Government & Heritage Library, June 2023

**20 Oct. 1856–12 Mar. 1938**



A photograph of a portrait of William Louis Poteat, painted by Henry Rood, Jr. in 1935. Image from the Internet Archive.

<sup>[2]</sup>William Louis Poteat, educator, was born in Caswell County <sup>[3]</sup>, the son of James and Julia A. McNeill Poteat. He was taught by a tutor and then entered the village academy at Yanceyville. In 1877 he was graduated from Wake Forest College <sup>[4]</sup> with a B.A. degree, and in 1889 he received an M.A. degree from Wake Forest. Later he was awarded LL.D. degrees by Baylor, The University of North Carolina <sup>[5]</sup>, Brown, and Duke <sup>[6]</sup> and the Litt.D. degree by Mercer. In addition, Poteat went to the University of Berlin in 1888 and attended a course at the Marine Biological Laboratory, Woods Hole, Mass., in 1893.

A year after his graduation from Wake Forest, the trustees elected him as a tutor; and although he had begun to read law, his acceptance of this position determined his lifework. By 1881 he was an assistant professor of natural science and by 1883, a full professor of biology. Poteat introduced the laboratory method—as opposed to the recitation method—in the teaching of biology. He was the first person in the South to do this. Continuing to play a prominent role in the development of Wake Forest and Meredith <sup>[7]</sup> colleges, he was elected president of Wake Forest College in 1905 and served until 1927—longer than any other president in the history of the college.

Poteat was a pioneer in the acceptance of the Darwinian theory of evolution. When the evolution controversy <sup>[8]</sup> spread through the South in the early twenties, he became a focal point among Baptists and North Carolinians. He defended the teaching of evolution as the "divine method of creation" and believed that this perspective was in harmony with the fundamental tenets of the Baptists. Poteat helped to defeat the bill introduced in the state legislature in 1925 to prevent the teaching of Darwinism in North Carolina schools.



An engraving of William Louis Poteat. Image

from the North Carolina Museum of History. <sup>[9]</sup>Involved in many social movements and organizations, Poteat was a member of the North Carolina Conference for Social Service (president), Southern Baptist Education Association (president, three terms), North Carolina Anti-Saloon League (president), Council of Church Schools of the South (president), North Carolina Reconstruction Commission, North Carolina Academy of Sciences (president), and many other organizations. He was a popular lecturer on religion, science, temperance, and education. Besides his numerous contributions to the *Biblical Recorder*, scientific publications, and other periodicals, Poteat was the author of *Laboratory and Pulpit* <sup>[10]</sup> (1901), *The New Peace* <sup>[11]</sup> (1915), *Can a Man Be a Christian Today?* (1925), and *Stop Light* (1935).

Poteat married Emma James Purefoy of Wake Forest on 24 June 1881. Their children were Hubert McNeill <sup>[12]</sup>, Louie (Mrs. Wheeler Martin, Jr.), and Helen Purefoy Stallings Marshall.

Shortly after his eighty-first birthday, Poteat was stricken with paralysis. Within a short time he was able to regain partial use of his limbs, but he died quietly at his home in Wake Forest. His funeral was conducted in the Wake Forest Baptist Church and burial was in the cemetery at Wake Forest.

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William Louis Poteat Papers (Baptist Historical Collection, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, N.C. [portraits]), <sup>[13]</sup>

Lou Rogers, "Dr. William Louis Poteat," *We the People*, November 1946.

Gary E. Trawick and Paul B. Wyche, *One Hundred Years, One Hundred Men* (1971).

#### Additional Resources:

"William Louis Poteat (1856-1938)." The Evolution Controversy in North Carolina in the 1920s. North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <http://www2.lib.unc.edu/ncc/evolution/bio/poteat.html> <sup>[14]</sup> (accessed October 22, 2013).

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"William Louis Poteat." Photograph. *Annual of the North Carolina Baptist State Convention One-Hundred-Eight Annual Session Tabernacle Baptist Church Raleigh November 15-17, 1938*. [Rockingham, N.C.?]: The Convention. 1938. <https://archive.org/stream/annual105108193519381bapt#page/n743/mode/2up> <sup>[2]</sup> (accessed October 22, 2013).

"Engraving, Accession #: H.19XX.318.41 <sup>[9]</sup>." Engraving. 1900. North Carolina Museum of History. (accessed October 22, 2013).

#### Subjects:

Biographies <sup>[17]</sup>

#### Authors:

Woodard, John R., Jr. [18]

**Origin - location:**

Caswell County [19]

Wake Forest University [20]

**From:**

Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press. [21]

1 January 1994 | Woodard, John R., Jr.

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**Source URL:**<https://ncpedia.org/biography/poteat-william-louis?page=0>

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