

Stewart, George Marshall ^[1]

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by Percival Perry, 1994

3 Oct. 1855–6 Nov. 1930

George Marshall Stewart, farmer, merchant, mill owner, banker, real estate developer, and a founder of Wingate College ^[2] and of the town of Wingate, was born in New Salem Township Union County ^[3], the son of Coleman and Jane Ross Stewart. His paternal and maternal ancestors were early settlers in the county, and his father served for four years in the Confederate ^[4] army. With only limited formal education, the young man became a farmer but soon began to buy and sell real estate and developed an acumen for business.

In 1890 he moved to Ames Turnout and purchased a tract of land near the railroad from the Reverend A. C. Davis. Eager to develop a community, he urged his brother-in-law, William M. Perry ^[5], who possessed mechanical skills, to join with him in establishing milling and mercantile enterprises. Perry, who wished to provide educational opportunities for his nine children, originally had planned to move to Marshville, where an academy already existed, but he agreed to become Stewart's partner provided that they would build a school in the community. In 1895 the Union Baptist Association was searching for a site on which to construct a school. The association considered three sites but selected the one that was more centrally located, was situated near the railroad, and had two other advantages: Stewart offered to give ten acres of land with a spring on it, and Perry volunteered to saw the lumber for the school at his mill, without charge, from logs provided by people in the community. The school opened in the fall of 1896 and was named Wingate in honor of a former president of Wake Forest College ^[6]. A town grew up around the school, as Stewart perhaps had envisioned, and in 1901 it was incorporated and its name was changed from Ames to Wingate.

Stewart and Perry operated a corn and flour mill, a lumber mill, a cotton gin, and a general merchandise store. In 1909, with others, they founded the State Bank of Wingate, which despite its limited resources survived the economic crash of 1929.

Stewart remained a staunch supporter of the Wingate school, contributing money as well as land. In 1898 he sold the institution an additional twenty-six acres for \$208, and in 1918 he was instrumental in providing a new women's dormitory, which bears his name. He served on the board of trustees for many years and was chairman of the board at the time of his death.

A developer by nature and talent, Stewart owned stock in a bank in Mount Croghan, S.C., and in cotton mills in Monroe, as well as property in Lee County ^[7]. In 1924, sensing greater opportunity in the burgeoning city of Charlotte ^[8], he sold most of his interests in Wingate and Union County ^[3] and bought land for development on the outskirts of Charlotte. He died at his home in Charlotte after a brief illness and was buried in the Wingate cemetery.

In 1876 he married Mary Ellen Perry, the daughter of Jeremiah and Elizabeth Griffin Perry and the sister of his business partner, William Marion Perry. From 1896 to 1924 Stewart and Perry lived across from each other on Elm Street, which they had laid out when the school was built at the opposite end of the street. Stewart and his wife had no children but adopted Perry's youngest daughter, Martha, in 1888 after the death of her mother. Stewart was a member of Meadow Branch Baptist Church and a Democrat ^[9].

References:

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From:

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