

Thompson, David Matthew ^[1]

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by Homer M. Keever, 1996

5 June 1844–26 June 1926

David Matthew Thompson, educator, better known as D. Matt Thompson, was born near Long's Mill in [Randolph County](#) ^[2], the son of Samuel and Elizabeth Moser Thompson. He attended the county's public schools and then a private school until the [Civil War](#) ^[3] intervened. During the war he served first in the [Third North Carolina Regiment](#) ^[4], an infantry unit, and later in the Nineteenth North Carolina Regiment, a cavalry detachment. He was wounded on the third day at Gettysburg and later in a cavalry engagement at Deep Bottom. Attaining the rank of sergeant, he was slated for a commission but did not receive it because of the unsettled state of affairs just before Appomattox.

As soon as possible after the war Thompson continued his education with the aim of becoming a teacher. He went to Sylvan Academy, near Snow Hill in [Alamance County](#) ^[5], and then to Cook County Normal, in Chicago, under the direction of Colonel Francis Parker.

He taught at Sylvan before founding [Aurora Academy](#) ^[6], in Alamance, where he taught until elected principal of Sylvan, which by then was Sylvan High School. In 1872 he became principal of Rock Spring Seminary at Denver, [Lincoln County](#) ^[7], and in the next twelve years built it into one of the more successful schools of the era. In 1884 he assumed the principalship of Piedmont Academy, Lincolnton, a position he held until 1890, when he went to Gainesville, Fla., to become superintendent of the graded schools there. He had been chairman of the new board of education in Lincoln County until he left for Florida.

In 1891 the citizens of [Statesville](#) ^[8] voted to establish a graded school system, and D. Matt Thompson, already thinking of leaving Florida because of his wife's health, was recalled to his native state to head the newly created system. For nearly thirty years his name was synonymous with educational development in the [Iredell County](#) ^[9] seat. On 20 Nov. 1920 he was hit by an automobile while crossing a Statesville street, and soon afterwards his sons, acting as his attorneys, made arrangements for him to resign his post; he died six years later in the state hospital at Morganton.

His long service in the same position was at the time something of a record in school work. When he went to Statesville in 1891 there were only 497 white pupils and 172 "colored" pupils, with a brick building in the process of construction on Mulberry Street and an old schoolhouse for the blacks on Green Street. By 1920 a second elementary school for whites had been built on Davie Avenue and a new one for blacks on Garfield Street, to be known as Morningside. After 1907 the white schools were expanded to include high school work and before 1920 there were eleven grades. When he was struck down, a new high school was being built on West Front Street; it later became D. Matt Thompson Junior High School.

Those who knew D. Matt Thompson recalled him best as a strict disciplinarian, one of the large number of such schoolmen engendered by the Civil War expedience. They were impressed by the drums he used as the pupils lined up to march in and out of the building in military fashion.

Thompson lived before the days of civic clubs in Statesville, but he was very active in such organizations as the North Carolina Teachers Association, at one time heading the superintendent's division. A Methodist, he was for thirty years a steward in Broad Street Methodist Church and for fifteen years secretary of the Western North Carolina Conference Board of Missions. On 2 Aug. 1872, before moving to Lincoln County, he married Lizzie [Mary Elizabeth] Rice of Randolph County. They had three sons: Holland, professor of history in the [City College of New York](#) ^[10]; Walter Holland, superintendent of the Children's Home in [Winston-Salem](#) ^[11]; and Dorman, Statesville attorney and representative in the [General Assembly](#) ^[12] for Iredell County. D. Matt Thompson was buried in Oakwood Cemetery, Statesville.

References:

Statesville *Landmark*, 1891–1920, especially his obituary, 2 July 1926.

Additional Resources:

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Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press.^[24]

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