

Wilson, Alexander ^[1]

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by J. Isaac Copeland, 1996

1 Feb. 1799–22 July 1867

Alexander Wilson, educator and Presbyterian clergyman, was born in Newforge, near Belfast, Ireland. He was the son of Alexander Wilson, Sr., a descendant of one of the Scottish families that had settled in Northern Ireland in the seventeenth century. The scant record of Wilson's early life suggests that his father had been moderately prosperous until he incurred financial losses as a result of standing security for friends. The son apparently received a good education and is reported in at least one account to have been awarded a diploma in medicine. Also, there are statements to the effect that his parents had been anxious for him to prepare for the ministry.

Wilson emigrated to the United States as a young man, arriving on 4 July 1818. He probably disembarked at Baltimore, as it is known that he was in the city from July until October of that year before going to [Raleigh](#) ^[2]. Once located there he found ready employment as a teacher in the [Raleigh Academy](#) ^[3], headed by the Reverend Dr. [William McPheeters](#) ^[4]. In 1821 Wilson moved to [Granville County](#) ^[5] to become principal of Williamsborough Academy, where he remained for fifteen or sixteen years as a teacher and minister. By 1837 he had moved to [Greensboro](#) ^[6] and was principal of the Classics Department of [Caldwell Institute](#) ^[7]; when the school was moved to Hillsborough in 1845, he continued his association until its closing in 1850.

When the decision was made to leave Hillsborough, Wilson purchased a tract of land in [Alamance County](#) ^[8] known as Burnt Shop, located near the present community of Swepsonville and the town of Mebane. The name Burnt Shop was changed to Melville, and three structures were built on the property—a home for the family, a three-room school building, and a small dormitory. The school was opened in July 1851, and Wilson was its principal for the last sixteen years of his life.

While teaching at Williamsborough Academy Wilson began to conduct prayer meetings, and the people who attended urged him to become a minister. With this encouragement he made the request of Orange Presbytery that he be taken under its care and at the presbytery's meeting in Milton in 1826 was accepted as a candidate for the ministry. In 1830 he was licensed by Orange Presbytery when it convened at Hawfields Church in [Alamance County](#) ^[8]. Wilson's first and only pastoral charge was the Spring Garden Church, located in [Granville County](#) ^[5], where he preached for four years. This record of his entrance into the ministry is unusual in view of the Presbyterians' insistence on theological training for their clergymen.

On his death at age sixty-eight, his funeral service was conducted at Hawfields Church with interment in the adjacent cemetery. He was survived by his wife, Mary Willis Wilson, who was also a native of Ireland and who had come to the United States to marry him. The couple was married in Baltimore on 9 July 1821.

The will of Alexander Wilson, signed on 11 June 1867, includes the names of five children—Alexander, Alice E. (Mrs. Edwin Heartt), Robert W., John B., and James W. From bits of information that can be pieced together, we know that Alexander and Robert Wilson were associated with their father in the operation of the school and can conclude that the school was continued after the elder Wilson's death. The manuscript copy of the 1860 census for Alamance County lists Alexander Wilson, Jr., as a teacher; he lived until 1880, as his will was probated on 5 July of that year.

A marker on North Carolina Highway 54, near Swepsonville, takes note of Alexander Wilson and his school, and only a few yards away stands a modern public school that bears his name.

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Archibald Henderson, "Wilson School Famous throughout the South," *Greensboro Daily News*, 29 Apr. 1928 (portrait).

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Josephine Scott, "The Wilson School," *State Normal Magazine* (Greensboro) 8 (1904).^[10]

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Additional Resources:

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Hill. http://www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/h/Heartt_and_Wilson_Family.html^[11] (accessed February 19, 2014).

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