

Wilson, Alexander Erwin ^[1]

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Wilson, Alexander Erwin

by R. A. Shiels, 1996

11 Dec. 1803–13 Oct. 1841

See also: [Wilson, John Makemie](#) ^[2]

Alexander Erwin Wilson, missionary and physician, was born in [Mecklenburg County](#) ^[3], the son of the Reverend [John Makemie](#) ^[2] and Mary Erwin Wilson. He attended Rocky River Academy in [Cabarrus County](#) ^[4] and was graduated from [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[5] in the class of 1822. After teaching in Morganton Academy [Burke County](#) ^[6], he attended the Medical College (now University) of South Carolina in Charleston from 1826 to 1828, when he received an M.D. degree. Thereafter he practiced as a physician in Rocky River. From 1832 to 1834 he studied at Union Theological Seminary, then located in Hampden-Sydney, Va. In September 1834, thoroughly trained in both medicine and theology, he was ordained by the Concord Presbytery of the Synod of North Carolina.

In January 1834 the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions accepted him as a missionary who would also be able to care for the health of colleagues. Together with five other [Presbyterian](#) ^[7] missionaries, Wilson arrived in Cape Town, Cape Colony, in February 1835 to start a new mission in southern Africa. He worked first at Mosega, modern Zendingsspost, Transvaal (1836–37), then near modern Empangeni, Natal (1837–38). Armed conflicts between white settlers and blacks led to the destruction of these two mission stations as well as of other missions in southern Africa. Discouraged by the racial warfare, Wilson left southern Africa in June 1838 and returned to the United States.

Uncertain when circumstances in southern Africa might improve sufficiently for missionaries to be able to return to Natal and Zululand, Wilson volunteered for service in the western African mission of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. In October 1839 he arrived at Cape Palmas in modern Maryland County, Liberia. Working as both physician and missionary, he helped to establish more firmly a mission that had been started there in 1834. After only two years in western Africa, Wilson died at Cape Palmas from dysentery. Colleagues wrote of his fervor, his meekness, and his holiness.

On 10 Nov. 1834, in Richmond, Va., he married Mary Jane Smithy (13 Nov. 1813–18 Sept. 1836). After her death he married, on 14 July 1839 in New York City, Mary Hardcastle (21 June 1815–31 Jan. 1849). By his first wife he had one child, Martha Smithy Wilson (15 Jan. 1836–1 Feb. 1906). Copies of paintings of Wilson and his first wife owned by her descendants are in the Africana Museum, Johannesburg, South Africa.

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Authors:

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