

## **Withers, William Alphonso** <sup>[1]</sup>

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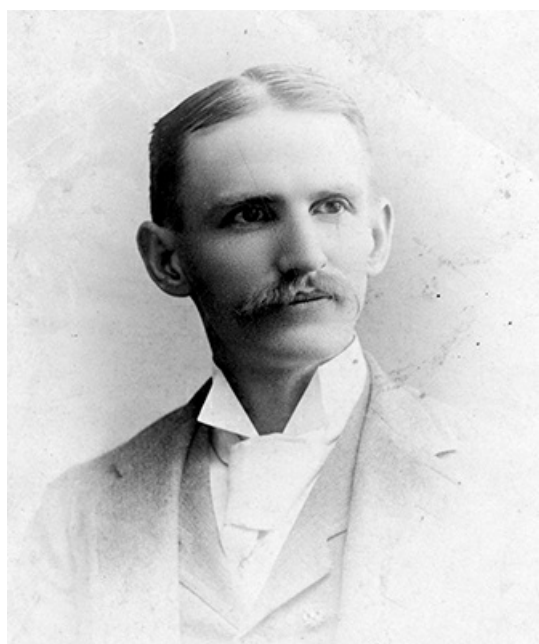


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## **Withers, William Alphonso**

by Maurice M. Burse, 1996

**31 May 1864–20 June 1924**



A photograph of William Alphonso Withers, circa 1880-1889. Image from North Carolina State University.

<sup>[2]</sup>William Alphonso Withers, agricultural chemist and founder of chemistry at [North Carolina State University](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, was born in Riverview, near Davidson, and reared on a farm there, the son of William Banks and Sarah L. Rutledge Withers. He was graduated from [Davidson College](#) <sup>[4]</sup> with a B.A. degree in 1883 and an M.A. in 1885. From 1888 to 1890 he was a Sage Fellow at Cornell University. Withers worked at the North Carolina State [Agriculture Experiment Station](#) <sup>[5]</sup> as assistant chemist (1884–88), chemist (1897–1921), and acting director (1897–99).

In 1889 he was named the first professor of chemistry at the College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts. There he spent his entire academic career, with a period as vice-president (1916–23) and one as director of the summer session (1917–23). In addition, he taught chemistry and physics at [Peace Institute](#) <sup>[6]</sup> (1890–93), served as state statistical agent for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (1885–1902 and 1905–15), and sat on the executive committee of the National Food and Drug Congress (1898). From 1889 to 1903 he was chairman of the committee on Pure Food Legislation of the Association of American Agricultural Colleges and Experiment Stations.

Withers is best remembered as the author of the North Carolina Pure Food Law (1899) and the codiscoverer, with C. F. E. Carruth, of gossypol, the toxic principle of [cottonseed](#) <sup>[7]</sup> (1915). He served as president of the American Association of Official Analytical Chemists (1909–10) and of the North Carolina Academy of Science (1917–18). Davidson College awarded him an Sc.D. degree in 1917, and, in recognition of his immense contribution to the college and to agriculture and health in the state, North Carolina State College named its [new chemistry building](#) <sup>[8]</sup> in his memory in 1938.

Not merely an academic researcher, Withers had intense civic interests. During World War I he was a member of the North Carolina Council of Defense and of the Wake County Food Administrative Board and served on the executive committee of the Raleigh Red Cross. He was an elder of the First Presbyterian Church and president of the Young Women's Christian Association; from 1919 to 1924 he sat on the executive committee of the Wake County Board of Education. At his death he was president of the Raleigh Chamber of Commerce.

On 11 June 1896 he married Elizabeth (Bessie) Witherspoon Daniel (1874–20 Aug. 1905), the daughter of Dr. and Mrs.

Eugene Daniel, then of Lewiston, W.Va.; her father had been minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Raleigh. They had two children, Susannah (1897–1903) and William Banks. Mrs. Withers contracted tuberculosis and spent the last years of her life in Saranac, N.Y., Lewiston, W.Va. and Brevard, N.C., where she died. On 29 July 1909 Withers married Jane (Jennie) Hinton Pescud (1874?–1962?); their children were Mary Laurens (Mrs. John T. Richardson) and William Alphonso, Jr., both of Raleigh, and John Pescud, of Elizabeth, N.J.

## References:

*Raleigh Morning Post*, 22 Aug. 1905.

*Raleigh News and Observer*, 21 June 1924.

*Who Was Who in America*, vol. 1 (1981).

William Alphonso Withers Papers (personal papers 178, University Archives, North Carolina State University,<sup>[9]</sup> and private papers 1477, North Carolina State Archives).

## Additional Resources:

"Withers Hall." Facilities Division, North Carolina State University. <https://www.ncsu.edu/facilities/buildings/withers.html> <sup>[8]</sup> (accessed November 13, 2013).

"William A. Withers '88-90." *Cornell Alumni News* 27, no. 20. (February 12, 1925). 251-252. [http://dspace.library.cornell.edu/bitstream/1813/26752/1/027\\_20.pdf](http://dspace.library.cornell.edu/bitstream/1813/26752/1/027_20.pdf) <sup>[10]</sup> (accessed November 13, 2013).

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## Authors:

[Bursey, Maurice M.](#) <sup>[15]</sup>

## Origin - location:

[Davidson](#) <sup>[16]</sup>

[Raleigh](#) <sup>[17]</sup>

[North Carolina State University](#) <sup>[18]</sup>

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[Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press.](#)<sup>[19]</sup>

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