

Woody, Robert Hilliard ^[1]

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by Mattie U. Russell, 1996

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Robert Hilliard Woody, historian and teacher, was born in the Little Cataloochee Creek community of [Haywood County](#) ^[2], the son of Stephen and Margaret Leona Hannah Woody. His father, a diabetic, died when he was two years old. When he was five, his mother left him for a few years in Little Cataloochee with his uncle, Valentine Woody, and his wife Laura. With a fourth-grade education she entered Berea College to study nursing; certified as a registered nurse in 1914, she became in 1922 the first female anesthetist in Kentucky.

Woody attended grammar schools in Berea and Louisville and was graduated from high school in London, Ky., in 1923. That fall he entered Emory University, where during his junior year Professor Francis Butler Simkins invited him to collaborate in a study of South Carolina during [Reconstruction](#) ^[3]. After receiving a B.Ph. degree from Emory in 1927, he entered [Duke University](#) ^[4] where he obtained the degrees of M.A. in 1928 and Ph.D. in 1930, his dissertation being part of his collaborative effort with Simkins. Their work, published in 1932 as [South Carolina during Reconstruction](#) ^[5], had been awarded the John H. Dunning Prize in American History by the American Historical Association the year before. The book was hailed by historians as a major revisionist study, but Woody always maintained that he and Simkins had only tried to "tell the full story."

From 1929 until his retirement in June 1970, as a full professor, Woody taught history at Duke University. For the first seven years his subject was modern European history, but in 1932 he began to teach U.S. history as well. In 1938 he took over the graduate course of the late [William Kenneth Boyd](#) ^[6] entitled "Union, Confederacy, and Reconstruction." At various times he also taught graduate courses on American colonial history and the [Revolution](#) ^[7], the United States from 1850 to 1900, historiography of the South, the Old South, and a seminar in southern history.

Woody directed thirty-two doctoral dissertations and at least fifty-eight masters theses. He served on numerous graduate examining committees in the fields of U.S. history and American literature. He was coauthor of two books, edited another, published more than two dozen articles and over 220 book reviews, and presented papers at professional meetings. His edition of [William Preston Few : Papers and Addresses](#) ^[8], for which he wrote an extensive biographical memoir, appeared in 1951. [Christopher Gadsden and the American Revolution](#) ^[9] by E. Stanly Godbold, Jr., and Woody was published in 1982.

In 1937 he went on a part-time teaching schedule for eleven years in order to direct the [George Washington Flowers Memorial Collection of Southern Americana](#) ^[10] in the Duke University Library. He served on the board of editors of the *Journal of Southern History*, on the executive council of the Southern Historical Association, as president (1954–55) of the [Historical Society of North Carolina](#) ^[11], and on several North Carolina state committees and commissions. He was a member of Phi Beta Kappa and of all the major historical organizations.

As a teacher Woody's style was to talk rather than lecture. Without pretense and always courteous and respectful of individuality in people, he never tried to make the writing styles of his students conform to his own skillful craftsmanship. Their writing, though, had to be clear and concise as well as grammatical.

Woody never ceased to appreciate his mountain heritage. Many summers of his youth had been spent helping his "Uncle Tine" on his farm, and he portrayed him and other self-sufficient mountaineers in his "[Cataloochee Homecoming](#)" ^[12], published in the *South Atlantic Quarterly* in 1950. This bittersweet essay is about former residents of the communities of Big and Little Cataloochee creeks being forced off their lands during the creation of the [Great Smoky Mountains National Park](#) ^[13].

On 3 June 1929 Woody married Louise Wills (18 Aug. 1906–19 Mar. 1984), a musician and the daughter of a Methodist minister. They adopted two children, Dorothy Jean and Stephen Boyd. Due to failing health they moved in 1983 from Durham to San Diego, Cal., to live with their daughter. Woody died there, and his body was cremated.

References:

[Biographical file with photographs and personal papers of Robert H. Woody \(Duke University Archives, Durham\)](#) ^[14]

Duke University theses and dissertations.

"Robert Hilliard Woody: An Appreciation," in E. Stanly Godbold, Jr., A. V. Huff, Jr., and Mattie U. Russell, "Essays in Southern History in Honor of Robert H. Woody," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (Winter 1974). 3–9. ^[15]

Robert H. Woody, personal contact.

Additional Resources:

Historical Society of North Carolina, 1945-1995, no. 03983. The Southern Historical Collection. Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
http://www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/h/Historical_Society_of_North_Carolina.html ^[11] (accessed December 5, 2013).

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