

Odell, William Robert ^[1]

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by Michael Hill
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March 3, 1855 - March 25, 1938



A 1932 portrait of William Robert Odell by E. S. Hergesheimer. Imag from Duke University.

^[2]William R. Odell, textile manufacturer and state senator, was born in Randolph County ^[3] on March 3, 1855, the son of John M. ^[4] and Rebecca Kirkman Odell. While he was a small child, Odell's family moved to Cabarrus County ^[5]. His father founded several cotton mills in Durham, Greensboro, and Concord. As a teenager, Odell attended Concord High School before studying at Trinity College from 1871 to 1875.

After graduation, Odell returned to Concord, where he began manufacturing cotton alongside his father in 1877. J. M. Odell Manufacturing Company became the South's largest plaid mill by 1888. W. R. Odell also helped organized and operate Cannon Manufacturing Company ^[6], Magnolia Mills, and Kerr Bag Manufacturing in Concord.

Odell continued to work in the cotton and textile business throughout his life, but civic pursuits drew him to run for state senate in 1905. A lifelong Democrat ^[7], he represented Cabarrus and Mecklenburg ^[8] counties from 1905 until the death of his wife Elizabeth in 1907, and was instrumental in passing laws that extended the pensions of Confederate veterans and extended the public school system in North Carolina.

Education became a priority in Odell's civic-minded pursuits. In 1913 he was appointed school superintendent for Cabarrus County, and also served on the board of trustees for Trinity College ^[9] and Duke University ^[10]. W. R. Odell Elementary School in Concord is named after him, as are several scholarships offered by religious groups in Cabarrus and Mecklenburg counties.

References:

William S. Powell, ed., *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, IV, 386-387—sketch of John M. Odell ^[4] by Tom E. Terrill

Gary Richard Freeze, "Master Mill Man : John Milton Odell and Industrial Development in Concord, North Carolina, 1877-1907" (M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1980)



A 1905 engraving of William Robert

Samuel Ashe, ed., *Biographical History of North Carolina*, II [11], 325-327 Odell. Image from Archive.org. [12]

National Cyclopedia of American Biography, XXIX

Who was Who, I, 911

W. R. Odell Elementary School website: <https://www.cabarrus.k12.nc.us/Domain/8439> [13]

Additional Resources:

"William Robert Odell '73: Alumnus - Trustee - Patron." *The Alumni Register of Duke University* 14, no. 10 (October 1928). 350-352. <https://archive.org/details/alumniregisterof14duke/page/n355/mode/2up?view=theater> [14] (accessed May 8, 2013).

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"W. R. Odell." N.C. Highway Historical Marker L-50, N.C. Office of Archives & History. <http://www.ncmarkers.com/Markers.aspx?MarkerId=L-50> [16] (accessed May 8, 2013).

Image Credits:

Hergesheimer, E. S. "Portrait of William Robert Odell." 1932. University Archives and the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library. Duke University. <http://hdl.handle.net/10161/1471> [2] (accessed May 9, 2013).

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