

ADDRESS OF HONORABLE THOMAS H. LEATH IN PRESENTING  
THE PORTRAIT OF THE HONORABLE GEORGE WHITFIELD  
CONNOR, AN ASSOCIATE JUSTICE OF THE SUPREME  
COURT FROM 1924 TO 1938, TO THE SUPERIOR  
COURT OF WILSON COUNTY ON  
4 FEBRUARY 1952.

When a portrait of George Whitfield Connor was presented to the Supreme Court of North Carolina in 1940, his beloved widow in her extreme modesty decreed there should be no formal presentation. She was content for his life to speak for itself. In accepting the invitation of the Wilson County Bar to present another portrait, his two daughters have consented that we may now review his life and labors and appraise them. They have bestowed upon me, one of his devoted sons-in-law, the high privilege of drawing for you a word portrait of their father. It has been my almost invariable custom first to submit to the discerning eyes and sensitive ears of my wife my every writing or utterance. On this occasion I dare depart from custom because her own inherent modesty would have denied for me the opportunity to give full expression to my thoughts about our subject. Hence my remarks come to you unexpurgated. Any seeming lack of becoming modesty on my part you will no doubt forgive in view of my unbounded love and admiration for this man who was my preceptor, my ideal of a man and a judge.

“May this courthouse ever be in fact as well as in name a temple of justice, where all men may have redress for their wrongs, and protection of their rights, under the law, wisely and justly and mercifully administered.”

Thus spake George Whitfield Connor 26 years ago at the dedication of this beautiful temple of justice in which we have gathered today. I feel as though I stand on hallowed ground. There was something prophetic in the coming to Wilson in 1855 of David Connor and his wife, Mary Catherine Groves Connor. The establishment of his family in Wilson might be said to be “like a tree planted by the rivers of water that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; but whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.” He came to help build the first courthouse for the new

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County of Wilson, the building in which and the spot upon which his descendants were destined to play an important role:

1. His son, Henry Groves Connor, was to preside over the Court as a Superior Court Judge and to hold the last term of court as a Federal Judge before the old building was taken down in 1924 to give way to the present handsome structure.

2. His grandson, George Whitfield Connor, was to preside over the Superior Court in the old building and to return on 1 February 1926 as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court to deliver an address in the acceptance of the new building on behalf of the county at its dedication ceremonies.

3. His grandson, Henry Groves Connor, Jr., was to appear as counsel in litigation in both the old and the new building.

4. His great-grandson, Henry Groves Connor, III, was to appear as counsel in litigation in the new building and to uphold the gloriously high tradition of his illustrious forebears.

The subject of our tribute today was born on 24 October 1872 in the old Billie Simms' house on Greene Street in Wilson, North Carolina, the first born child of Henry Groves and Kate Whitfield Connor, when his father was barely 20 years of age. He began his formal education under Mrs. E. B. Adams at the school of the saintly Professor J. B. Brewer, who in his latter years became my esteemed Sunday School teacher in Rockingham. When the blue-back speller was concluded, he entered the school of Elder Sylvester Hassell, and completed his early education in the Wilson Graded School. He learned much from Miss Mag Hearne and Dr. Collier Cobb and received special coaching from his Episcopal Rector, Dr. Bronson of St. Timothy's. He is reported to have been a youth of serious purpose but not lacking affairs of the heart. It was in his early teens that he won the love of Bessie Hadley, which he retained and cherished forever after. He entered the University of North Carolina in 1888 at the tender age of 15 years. In spite of his youth, he immediately demonstrated his qualities of leadership and won many honors, such as presidency of historic Phi Society, the Representative's Medal as the prize award for his commencement oration, editorship of the Carolina Magazine, the debator's medal in the Phi Society, and he was one of the senior speakers. His college roommate, Bishop Howard E. Ronthaler, reports that the two of them were candidates for the Willie P. Mangum Medal; that after he mastered his own oration he lent a helping hand to George Connor who in turn defeated him for the coveted medal. Lastly, he was a member of the S. A. E. Fraternity. He was grad-

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uated *cum laude* in the Class of 1892. He was honored by the University in 1928 when it bestowed upon him the honorary degree of L. L. D. In 1929 he became a member of Vance Inn of the Phi Delta Phi legal Fraternity.

Like so many great lawyers and public leaders of his day, he began his career by entering the educational field. Forthwith upon his graduation and when he was only 19 years of age, he was elected principal of the Goldsboro Graded School, where he had as one of his pupils the late W. J. Brogden, who served with distinction with him as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court. Two years later he was made Superintendent of the Wilson Schools, which position he held for three and one-half years until he resigned to become a partner in the mercantile firm of Hadley-Harris & Company. His interest in education never wavered. He served 5 years as Chairman of the Wilson County Board of Education and at the time of his death he was on the Board of Trustees of St. Mary's College and St. Augustine's College in Raleigh. He was also a member of the Vestry of the Church of the Good Shepherd in Raleigh. In the meantime, in 1894, he married Bessie Hadley, which accomplishment he cherished to the end of his life as the greatest of all. How right he was because she was an inspiration and a blessing to him and to all who were privileged to know her.

All the while he felt the urge to prepare himself for the law because of the unequalled opportunity it offered for leadership and public service. He could but hear the "one clear call" of his legal ancestry. Thus he worked by day and studied law by night to provide a living for his family and to meet the demands of the jealous mistress of the law until his self-training enabled him to pass the bar examinations in 1899. He practiced his chosen profession alone until 1902 when he formed a partnership with his brother, Henry Groves Connor, better known as "Tobe" Connor, and practiced under the firm name of Connor & Connor until 1913. He soon attracted public attention by the ability which he evidenced in his chosen profession, by the fine citizenship he exemplified, and by the quality of his state-craft. He represented his native county in the legislature for three successive terms, 1909, 1911 and 1913, where from the beginning he assumed an influential position as a legislator. He was chairman of the education committee during his first term and of the judiciary committee during his second term. The crowning achievement of his legislative career came in his elevation to the speakership of the House in 1913. His administration of this important office was reported by the press as nothing short of brilliant. Perhaps the most noteworthy legislation of that term was the child labor act in which he became so interested that he left the speak-

er's chair during the debate to deliver a stirring speech which was so convincing that it helped bring about the adoption of this humane and progressive act.

So profound was the impression which he had made as a man, a lawyer, a legislator, such was his popularity, and so eminently was he fitted for judicial office that when the new second judicial district was created, Governor Locke Craig appointed him Superior Court Judge on 20 March 1913. Although his appointment seems to have been a forgone conclusion due to his pre-eminence, his supporters, nevertheless, saw to it that the Governor was made fully aware of his qualifications and the demand for his services, pointing out that by heredity, environment and training, it would be easy for him to take his place among the leaders of the field of jurisprudence. It is noteworthy that before he mounted the bench, he disposed of all of his business interests and invested in a farm, so that he could never be influenced in the administration of justice because of his personal business interests.

Thus another Connor had been launched upon a judicial career which was to bring added glory to an already famous name, new blessings to the legal profession and to the people as a whole. On the day of the appointment his father, then on the Federal Court, penned the following letter which was to be his guiding star unto eternity:

"My dear George, I will not attempt to tell you how much your appointment means to me and how deeply I feel in regard to it . . . That *you* are to fill the honorable position of a North Carolina Judge, a position which filled my highest aspiration, . . . is a crowning measure of happiness to me. Let me commend to you the words of one who by his precept and example has been an inspiration to me: 'to administer justice, to expound and apply the laws for the advancement of right and the suppression of wrong, is an ennobling and indeed a holy office, and the exercise of its function, while it raises my mind above the mists of earth, above cares and passions into a pure and serene atmosphere, always seemed to impart fresh vigor to my understanding and a better temper to my whole soul.' As this Judge who wrote these words to his child, not for publication, and illustrated their truth in his life, it was said without dissent that 'he was a great man and a good judge.' Among the essential qualities of a judge are open-mindedness — patience — firmness — courage — courtesy — these with *industry* and an abiding *love of justice* — will make of you a great and good judge."

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The records clearly indicate that George Whitfield Connor, as a Superior Court Judge, fully measured up to the standards set for him by his father. He soon won a reputation from the mountains to the sea as a great *nisi prius* jurist, having held court throughout the state. In words of R. C. Lawrence, an eminent lawyer and biographer of Lumberton,

“He possessed not only a deep knowledge of his science, but also in a superlative degree that first requisite in a great judge—judicial temperment—along with great personal charm and magnetism of manner; patience in dealing with mediocrity; and a passionate devotion to the cause of equity, for he had an intense desire to accord to every man his legal due . . . No man ever left the court of Connor, even when his cause had been decided against him, without the knowledge that he had been accorded a fair, patient and courteous trial by a great lawyer, even though he might not agree with the result.”

It has been stated by a contemporary that his charges to grand juries furnished the best evidence of the qualities of his statesmanship, the loftiness and breadth of his vision, the caliber of his citizenship. When it was known that he was to charge a grand jury, the people flocked in to hear him, and no man could leave his court room without feeling that he was a better citizen after hearing his charge. This is evidenced by a brief memorandum in an unidentified handwriting evidently handed to him in Superior Court: “Your charge was magnificent. The only one equal to it I ever heard was from your father years ago.”

He did not fall short of the prophesy of F. D. Swindell in an article entitled “Who’s Who in Wilson” which appeared in the Wilson Daily Times of 16 May 1913:

“With an unusual amount of natural ability, a great father to pattern after, a splendid and charming wife to advise him and help him, a frank, witty and outspoken brother to give him speech direct, if necessary, and the good wishes of the entire community to urge him on, we can safely prophesy big things for Honorable George Whitfield Connor.”

Upon the death of Chief Justice Walter Clark and the elevation of William A. Hoke to the Chief Justiceship, there was practically unanimous demand that Judge Connor be named an Associate Justice. There was only one obstacle which caused concern to his friends, and that was of a purely political nature. The Connors had not supported Cameron Morrison in his successful primary campaign for the governorship. So outstanding were the qualifications of the man for this exalted position that Governor Morrison

rose completely above partisan politics and tendered the appointment to Judge Connor on 17 June 1924. Following the expiration of his term as Governor, Cameron Morrison on 22 January 1925, in reply to a letter he had received from Judge Connor on the 14th, wrote:

“Your letter alone would establish that I made no mistake in placing you on the Supreme Court bench. A man who can write as fine a letter as this is worthy of anything . . . I was proud to give you the honor . . . I hear only good things about you on the Supreme Court bench, and it may be gratifying to you to know that from almost every hand I am congratulated upon your appointment.”

Judge Connor served as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of North Carolina until his untimely death on 23 April 1938, leaving an unfinished opinion behind him. His opinions, pronounced by his associates to have been “always forceful and to the point” are to be found in 26 volumes of the North Carolina Reports, beginning with the 188th and ending with the 213th. Time does not permit comment upon his monumental opinions. Suffice it to use the legal maxim, *res ipsa loquitur*, the thing speaks for itself. The resolution adopted by the Supreme Court upon his death included among other tributes the following statement:

“The law of the state has been enriched by his labors, as both bench and bar will attest. He devoted himself wholeheartedly to the task of writing just judgments into the book of the law of a great people. His was a philosophy of constructive thinking ever in pursuit of the ideal. This gave him a well-poised mind. All of his powers were spent in hammering out a competent and solid piece of work, which he made first-rate and left it unadvertised. It will stand as his monument.”

Attorney General Seawell, who was soon to fill the vacancy on the court caused by his death made this succinct appraisal of him: “He held all that was best in the past, brightest in the present, and most hopeful for the future.”

Mr. R. C. Lawrence said of him in his article appearing in the State Magazine of 10 July 1943:

“He brought to his court the learning of a Blackstone, the dignity of a Mansfield, the character of a Hale . . . His opinions (are) clothed in language noted for its classic clarity . . . No judge has ever enjoyed the confidence, respect and admiration of the public, and of the bench and bar to a greater extent than did Judge Connor. He lived a life which approached

the scriptures: 'What doth the Lord require of thee but that thou deal justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God.'

The parallel between the achievements of father and son, Judges Henry Groves Connor and George Whitfield Connor, is so striking that it should not go unnoticed. Neither attended law school except to teach therein during summer months at Chapel Hill. Each represented Wilson County in the legislature for three terms. Each served as Speaker of the House of Representatives. The father served as President of Branch Banking Company while his son served at one time as Vice-President and counsel of that institution, having declined to be elected President in 1913. Each served upon both the Superior Court and the Supreme Court of North Carolina. Judge Henry Groves Connor alone served upon the Federal bench. In the aggregate of the 54 years served upon the bench, neither of them ever cited a single person for contempt of court. Each of them ever inspired reverence and respect, never contempt.

The marriage of George Whitfield Connor and Bessie Hadley Connor was blessed with four children:

John Hadley Connor, who died in infancy.

Henry Groves Connor, who met accidental death at the age of about 10 years.

Mary Hadley Connor Leath, the wife of the speaker.

Elizabeth Connor Harrelson, the wife of Colonel J. W. Harrelson, Chancellor of North Carolina State College.

Mrs. Connor survived her distinguished husband but went on to her reward on 9 January 1947.

The public came to know Judge Connor in the legislative halls and in the court rooms. It was my rare opportunity to know him more intimately in the privacy of his home, where he was even more preeminent as a charming host and conversationalist, a devoted husband and father. It was here that I learned of his unquenchable thirst for knowledge even to the end, and of his conviction that education was a never-ending process. He loved to delve into the classics, religion, history and biographies of great men, as well as into all fields of jurisprudence. He possessed the uncanny faculty of lifting others to his own lofty plane and of keeping them there throughout the visit, at the end of which each person left with a sense of stimulation and elevation not only in his mind but also in his heart and soul. Although he was a man of great dignity, he possessed a keen sense of humor. His friendship was truly warm. I cherish every hour spent with him in his home.

I shall never forget the occasions when two of his brothers, Mr. Tobe Connor, a brilliant lawyer, and Dr. R. D. W. Connor, a peerless historian and author, and the first United States Archivist, would visit him and I had the opportunity to hear them discuss matters of history, government, public affairs, and their visions of things to come. As an adjunct to the Connor family I marveled at what I heard and each time reached the inescapable conclusion that I was in the presence of three of the greatest brains and most outstanding men of our day, men whose devotion to public service knew no end, men who thought and acted as true scholars and statesmen. The record of these three noble sons as well as that of their father is writ large in the legal, legislative, judicial and educational history of North Carolina in the first half of this century.

However much I would like to present my own appraisal of this man, I am hesitant to do so because my intimacy with him and my knowledge of his inner-self might lead me to seeming extravagance in his praise; to understate my estimate would fail to do him justice. In view of these circumstances it is perhaps best to leave the appraisal to the pen of a renowned reporter, the late Tom Bost, as his editorial appeared in the Greensboro News on 24 April 1938:

“LOOKED, ACTED AND WAS A JUDGE”

“North Carolinians had a habit of saying that Lee S. Overman looked like a senator, that Judge Henry G. Connor and William A. Hoke looked like judges, and that Bishop Joseph Blount Cheshire looked like a bishop.

“That meant that whether Senator Overman ever reached the senate or not, people thought he should go there; that no matter what Henry G. Connor and William A. Hoke chose to do, they should have been judges; that Joseph Blount Cheshire put on the very apostolicity which belonged to a bishop.

“In Raleigh Saturday morning George Whitfield Connor, associate justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court died. Nobody ever saw him on class at the University of North Carolina, in the general assembly as freshman member or speaker, in the courthouse as attorney, or on the superior court bench as judge, who did not think he should climax his life with a long tenure of the Supreme Court bench. No man ever looked at him anywhere without associating him with the highest judicial traditions.

“Law always appeared to have more sense when he interpreted it; always looked more the servant and less the master of men; and judges always were less terrifying when Mr.



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Justice Connor got in action. He never asked any attorney appearing for a client in the high court a question which did not have meaning. No litigant ever got the opinion that he interrogated for any other purpose than to seek the light of the law. And there never was a juster man on the bench of the realm.

“And there never was a period in North Carolina history which would have denied him Supreme Court membership on any ground other than seniority. He might have had to stand aside in the era of his own father, the day that produced Clark, Connor, Hoke, Walker and Brown. But he would have been considered for the vacancy caused by the retirement of any man among them, by any governor who regarded the Supreme Court above the control of spoilsmen. Judge Connor happened not to have supported Governor Cameron Morrison for governor in the 1920 primary, but Mr. Morrison named him to his high bench at the first opportunity which timed with geography. And Mr. Morrison believed right energetically in promoting his friends. There was no way to wipe Connor out. He belonged to the bench.

“He suspected months ago that he would not live long, but he had a profound philosophy that death generally happens at the right time. He never could quite harmonize that thesis with the tragic death of his only son 30 years ago. He never recovered from that devastating blow, but in his heart he knew it made him a better judge. He had religious faith enough to know that his Maker suffers no losses.

“Off and on the bench during the present spring term, following a facial paralysis, he was at work this week and against the councils of doctors, chief and associate justices, he sought assignment of opinions. He was denied that joy and there will be some unfinished decisions which he would have made. Good people say there is a Great Judge elsewhere than on this planet. If there is, when Judge George Connor’s “case” is presented to that Majestic Jurist, the judgment will be

‘NO ERROR.’”

As I reflect upon his character, his love of his fellowman, his noble bearing, and his achievements, I am reminded of the admonition of the grandmother of Edward Bok as he departed his native country to establish his home in America, “Make you the world a bit better or more beautiful because you have lived in it.” It is my humble opinion that Judge Connor did just this as his mind, his heart and his soul dwelt among the loftiest peaks while his feet were solidly planted upon the earth, he marched side by

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side with his fellowman, leading him ever onward to a better and nobler life.

The mortal remains of George Whitfield Connor have rested in his native Wilson soil for nearly fourteen years among the people who made it possible for him to serve his country and state. Through the skill of a charming artist, Miss Irene Price, of Winston-Salem, his benign countenance and something of his immortal being have been recreated and placed upon canvas so that we may feel that he is with us yet. It is my fervent prayer as he looks from his honored position on the wall of his beloved county courthouse and shoulder to shoulder with some of his esteemed associates, he will inspire us all to finer and nobler deeds. As young lawyers gaze upon his kindly, sympathetic, understanding, intelligent face, it is hoped that they will find encouragement for the tasks which lie ahead, and that they, too, through knowledge of his exemplary life, will attain true distinction in service to their fellowmen and to the Supreme Judge who rules on high.

Your honor, it is my distinct privilege, on behalf of his daughters, to present to this Court and to the people of Wilson County the portrait of Justice George Whitfield Connor.