

THOMPSON SCHOOL

At Siler City, North Carolina: 1887-1897

By Wade Hadley

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Siler City, North Carolina  
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The Thompson School building as it appeared around 1924 after being abandoned. Located where Siler City Town Hall was built in 1939. This view is looking toward the northeast.

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Introduction

The Thompson School forms an important chapter in the early history of Siler City. It opened here the same year the town was incorporated. This was a privately owned boarding school which attracted around one hundred out-of-town students to each session. A considerable number were from other counties and a few were from other states. Students from approximately forty North Carolina counties were registered during the ten years of operation. The school's students were a dominant factor in the social life and economy of the village, which had a population of only 254 in 1890. The hundreds of students who returned to their respective points of origin after a sojourn here spread the good name of Siler City through the land as no other agent until recent times.

This school came to be considered one of the outstanding preparatory schools in North Carolina.

The body of this article is made up of excerpts from Thompson School material selected to show the nature and scope of that institute. The styles of expression and opinions presented by some of the original material are of interest in that they reflect the standards and character of Professor Thompson and his period.

The writer had the good fortune to examine a considerable volume of original Thompson School records. He has taken the opportunity to compile this account of the school in the interest of local history.

The successor to the Thompson School was the Siler City Institute. Some notes on it have been included following the main article.

## History of the School

Professor J. A. W. Thompson first founded the Oakdale School at Oakdale, in southwestern Alamance County, in 1880. It was moved to Siler City on January 12, 1887 and renamed Thompson School. Here it occupied a new two story building with fourteen rooms, constructed on a forty by seventy-two foot base. This structure was capped by an imposing observation tower and belfry. It stood where City Hall is now located. This was a coeducational and non-sectarian boarding school with Professor Thompson as owner and superintendent. He received his education at Bingham Military Academy in Mebane, N.C. His full name was James Alexander Wilson Thompson. Professor Thompson lived until 1928.

The catalogue defined the school as follows:

An English, Classical and Commercial School, with a course of instruction either preparatory or finishing for the practical business of life.

The faculty for the 1889-1890 scholastic year was as follows:

- J. A. W. Thompson, Superintendent  
English, Languages, and Literature
- Z. H. Dixon, A. B. (Special course Vanderbilt University)  
Science and Higher Mathematics
- M. D. McNeill (University of North Carolina)  
Latin and Greek
- Mrs. Mary Dixon (Earlham College, Indiana)  
Primary Classes.
- F. J. Phillips (Fairfield Seminar, New York)  
Principal of Commercial Department
- C. K. Wrenn, Assistant Teacher in Commercial Department
- Miss E. L. Merrill (Syracuse University, New York)  
Vocal and Instrumental Music and Harmony
- W. D. Campbell - Telegraphy
- J. W. Spencer - Commandant of Cadets



The courses of instruction were:

The College Preparatory Course (3 years)

The English Course (3 years)

The Commercial Course

Modern Languages - French and German

Music - Vocal and Instrumental

Drawing - Freehand, Architectural, Crayon

Telegraphy

Physical Training - Military Drill, Calisthenics, and  
Athletic Games.

There were two competing literary societies for the young men--  
The Prolific and The Erasmian. The Charlotte Bronte Literary Society  
existed for the young ladies of the school. The literary societies  
published a monthly magazine named "The Student." It included origi-  
nal articles, school news, notes from former students and adver-  
tisements of local, state, and national business concerns.

The school directory for the scholastic year ending May 23,  
1889 listed 162 students. Of this number, seventy were from the Siler  
City area and ninety-two were from outside the community. There was  
one student from Pennsylvania, five from South Carolina, and six from  
Virginia.

The commencement exercises were elaborate affairs of three  
days duration and the major social event within the community.  
Prominent visitors delivered the annual sermon and literary address.  
The literary societies indulged in joint contests for the debaters',  
the declaimers', and the orators' medals. Numerous recitations and  
musical numbers were presented by the students.

The following paragraphs concerning the advantages and the direction of the school have been taken directly from the catalogue for the scholastic year ending May 23, 1889.

Special Advantages:

The moral and religious influence is unsurpassed.

Few distractions from study. This is a small village and does not present many temptations to allure boys into evil doing.

No spiritous or vinous liquors are allowed to be sold within the incorporate limits.

Discipline:

The morals, manners and health of the students are carefully guarded as well as the intellectual improvement.

All pupils are required to render prompt and cheerful obedience to all requirements of the school, and to treat one another with kindness and courtesy at all times.

Moral and Religious Instruction:

All students are required to attend the morning religious exercises, which consist of Bible reading, recitation of scripture text, singing and prayer. The utmost care is taken to develop every manly characteristic, and to maintain a high moral tone in the school.

Boarding Arrangements:

Students who board in the village do not have to walk more than a quarter of a mile at the farthest. The price of board is \$7.50 to \$8.00 per month, including furnished room, washing, fuel, lights, etc.

### Literary Societies:

The Prolific and The Erasmian--properly organized and well sustained. The great advantages the Societies afford are clearly observed every time their members declaim before the school. Convene every Friday night.

The young ladies of the school have organized a music and Literary Society, naming it in honor of the celebrated Charlotte Bronte.

The Literary Societies publish a monthly magazine--"The Student."

### Medals:

The following prizes will be given at the close of the spring term.

A gold medal for the best original speech.

A gold medal for the best original essay.

A gold medal for the best original declamation.

In the special class of penmanship, a fine gold pen is offered for the best improvement.

### The Uniform:

A neat and attractive uniform of fine grey cloth is prescribed. Price \$17.00 for coat, trousers and cap. \$20.00 with vest.

The uniform is both neat and dressy, inspiring those disposed to be a little careless in regard to their dress to a higher degree of self-respect and gentlemanly appearance, and at the same time suppressing a degree of extravagance in those who would otherwise take a special delight in trying to excel their fellow students in style of dress.



### Remarks and General Regulations:

A janitor is employed to keep the rooms of the school building swept daily, and everything in order; to procure wood, build fires, keep a supply of water in the entry etc., in order that no student may have anything in the way of manual labor to do, but that he may have a fair chance to behave himself, study and learn.

Every student should be provided with a Bible, umbrella and overshoes.

An extravagant expenditure of money will not be countenanced, however much the student may have at command.

We expect nothing less than prompt obedience and precise conformity to instructions. No one who willfully disobeys or endeavors to wield an evil influence among his fellow-students is permitted to remain in school.

### Change in Management:

In the spring of 1897 Professor Thompson turned the management of the school over to James L. Griffin. The following year he sold the school land and building. The name was then changed to Siler City Institute by the new owners.

### Careers of Former Students:

Thompson School students made a good record as a group in later life. Approximately twenty-one became ministers, fifteen attorneys, thirteen physicians and three dentists.

In the field of public service, four were elected to the State Senate, eight to the House, and fifteen to county offices. Several became prominent in the field of education. They included:

Dr. R. M. Andrews, President of North Carolina College  
Dr. D. F. Nicholson, Faculty N.C. College for Women  
Prof. W. S. Snipes, School Superintendent  
Dr. W. T. Whitsett, Educator, historian, and poet.

A former member of the Thompson School faculty was Dr. J. A. Campbell. He became president of Buies Creek Academy in Harnett County. Later the name was changed to Campbell College.

At least two men from the Thompson School faculty became permanent residents of Siler City.

C. K. Wrenn, after teaching in the Commercial Department, was a partner in Wrenn Brothers Company (General Merchandise) and served as manager for many years.

W. S. Durham came to Siler City to occupy the position of Commandant of Cadets at Thompson School. Later he established a business dealing in poultry, eggs, and rabbits, which prospered for many years. Locally he was addressed as Captain Durham down through the years.

#### Students' Reunion:

The first reunion of Thompson School students was held at Siler City November 14-15, 1930. There were 128 former students who registered at this reunion. Many of them had not been back here for 30 to 40 years. A special edition of The Chatham News on November 13, 1930 was dedicated to the Thompson School students. All accounts indicated that this reunion was a big success and greatly enjoyed by the participants.

## The Thompson School Bell

Professor Thompson placed a bell of excellent quality and of exceptionally good tone in the tower of his school at Siler City. It bears the date 1887, the year the school was opened. It also includes the following--McShane Bell Foundary, Henry McShane and Company, Baltimore, Maryland TRADEMARK. This bell remained in service at its original location as long as the building was in use. It was later placed atop the Paul Braxton School building. It remained there until 1977. It was then moved to the headquarters of the county schools in Pittsboro.

It is hoped that this bell will be safely preserved and identified with its history.



Bell from the Thompson School. Dated 1887, the year the school opened at Siler City and the year the town was incorporated. Made by McShane Foundry, Baltimore, Maryland.



## Siler City Institute

Professor Thompson withdrew from active participation in his school in the spring of 1897 and James L. Griffin took over as principal.

The following year Mr. Griffin bought a half interest in the school building and grounds from Professor Thompson. A group of local citizens bought the other half. They were Messers. D. G. Fox, F. M. Hadley, J. F. Lambe, C. K. Wrenn, and R. F. Wrenn. This group then leased its half to Walter B. Owen. The name of the school was then changed to Siler City Institute.

The Institute offered courses of instruction from kindergarten up to entrance into college. In addition there were Schools of Art, Music and a Commercial Department.

The young men maintained The Athenian Literary Society and the young ladies The Victorian Literary Society. The athletic program featured a strong baseball team.

The rates of tuition per term ranged from \$5.00 in the Primary Department to \$17.50 in the Academic or Preparatory Departments. Art or Music was \$13.75. Courses in the Commercial Department (six months) were \$30.00.

The Annual Address at the Commencement exercises on May 28, 1901 was delivered by Professor Collier Cobb of the State University at Chapel Hill. The title of his address was "The Education We Need."

Enrollment figures for the first three years were as follows:

<u>Term</u>	<u>Number of Students</u>
1898 - 1899	96
1899 - 1900	136
1900 - 1901	161



The faculty for the 1900-1901 scholastic year was as follows:

James L. Griffin, Principal (Wake Forest College):  
Latin, Mathematics, Sciences

Walter B. Owen, Secretary (University of North Carolina):  
English, History, French

N. E. Cox (National Pen Art and Business College, Delaware,  
Ohio): Bookkeeping, Penmanship, Shorthand, Typewriting

Miss Louise Quakenbush (Littleton Female College):  
Primary Department

Miss Jessie Cheek (Claremont College):  
Art

Miss Minnie Willis (Greensboro Female College):  
Vocal and Instrumental Music

The Siler City Institute was relatively short lived. The  
building and equipment later became a part of the public school system.

# PROGRAMME

OF THE

## THIRD ANNUAL COMMENCEMENT

—OF—

## SILER CITY INSTITUTE,

TUESDAY, MAY 28TH, 1901, 10 O'CLOCK A. M.

OPENING SONG.

PRAYER.

SONG, . . . . . The Old North State.  
 SALUTATORY, . . . . . FRED W. HADLEY.

DECLAMATIONS:

The Negro and The South, . . . . . FRANK R. WRENN.  
 Man! Thou Pendulum 'Twixt a Smile and Tear, . . . . . K. A. BUCKNER.  
 The Meaning of the four Centuries, . . . . . R. J. MOORE.  
 A Duet—Polo—Leon Dinkgreve, . . . . . By Misses PATTERSON and SMITH.  
 Fanaticism, . . . . . WILLIAM JESSE SILER.  
 Chivalry and Traditions of the South, . . . . . J. J. HACKNEY, JR.  
 A Trio—March from Tannhauser—R. Wagner,  
 . . . . . By Misses ANNIE and ALICE MANN, and LUDIE DARK.  
 Silent Voices, . . . . . J. GEO. HANNAH, JR.  
 Mental Monuments—Fossils of the Past, . . . . . F. D. WHITEHEAD.  
 My Country—My Mother!! My God!! . . . . . ERNEST P. NORWOOD.  
 A Song, . . . . . Away, Away, Our Morning, Freshly Breaking.

RECITATIONS:

Paradise and the Peri, . . . . . Miss FANNIE BRAY.  
 My Sin, . . . . . Miss SUE PARKS.  
 A Soldier Boy's Love, or the Ills of Jealousy, . . . . . Miss BERTA JORDAN.

NOON.

ART EXHIBIT.

1.30 P. M.

Flower Basket Drill, . . . . . By Twenty Girls

ANNUAL ADDRESS:

"The Education We Need", . . . . . By Prof. COLLIER COBB, Chair of Geology,  
 . . . . . University of North Carolina.

A Trio—Fantasia on Scotch Airs—C. Czerny.  
 . . . . . By Misses PATTERSON, LAMBE and McADAMS.

ORATIONS:

Our Friend, The Machine, . . . . . H. GRADY DORSETTE  
 The Nineteenth Century to the Twentieth Century, . . . . . THOMAS VERNON RIGGSBEE.  
 The Menace of the Twentieth Century, . . . . . T. H. SILER.

A Song—Yo, Ho! Gallant Sailors.

The Prosperity in the Far West, . . . . . S. R. EDWARDS.

Valedictory, . . . . . D. DEAN WRENN.

ANNOUNCEMENTS.

Social and Art Exhibit 9.30 P. M.

Fall Term Opens Tuesday, August Thirteenth, Nineteen  
 Hundred and One.



## Acknowledgements

Most of the material on which this article is based was from the collection of the late Judge Walter D. Siler, a Thompson School student. These records were made available to the writer through the courtesy of Miss Helen B. Siler.