

Chatham's Mary Myrtle Siler North Carolina's First Female Sheriff

By Jennifer B. Gillis ~ September 2020



Photograph of Myrtle Siler that accompanied several articles about her appointment as Sheriff of Chatham County in 1920

Picture a Chatham County with few paved roads, when indoor plumbing was a novelty, household electricity a luxury, and automobiles a rarity. Those were the circumstances when Mary Myrtle Siler was sworn into office as the Sheriff of Chatham County in 1920. Imagine, then, the buzz caused by the appointment of the first female sheriff in North Carolina (and one of the first in the country). Newspapers from Greensboro to Oxford heralded the occasion.

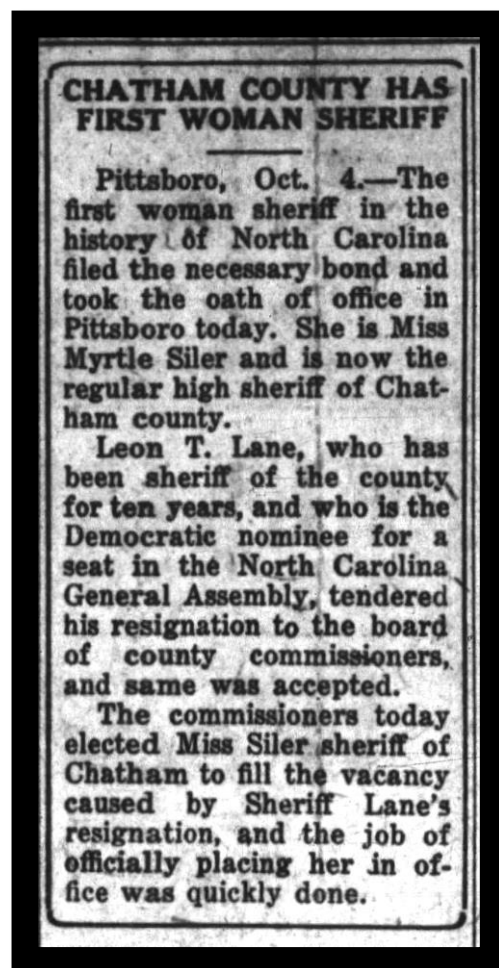
Myrtle was born in Matthews Township of Chatham County on June 20, 1887 to Susan Elizabeth Matthews (1846-1902) and Rezin Cicero Siler (1845-1911). The family lived on land close to Myrtle's paternal grandparents, Samuel and Sarah Siler. (Siler City was named for Myrtle's grandfather Samuel). Myrtle's childhood years were marked by sadness; she was one of eight siblings, all of whom had died by the time she was 24 years old, an unknown number from typhoid fever. Her mother passed away in 1902, when Myrtle was only about 15 years old, and she later became a kind of caretaker for her father until his death in 1911 at age 65.

Myrtle's maternal grandfather, "Captain" Billie Matthews, had been a local legend. Matthews was a Captain in the militia prior to the Civil War and some of Chatham's earliest Confederate recruits drilled on his property. His fondness for spirits got him into trouble outside and inside his home. In one epic card game, he gambled his house and would have lost it if his wife hadn't broken up the game and chased the card players into the night.

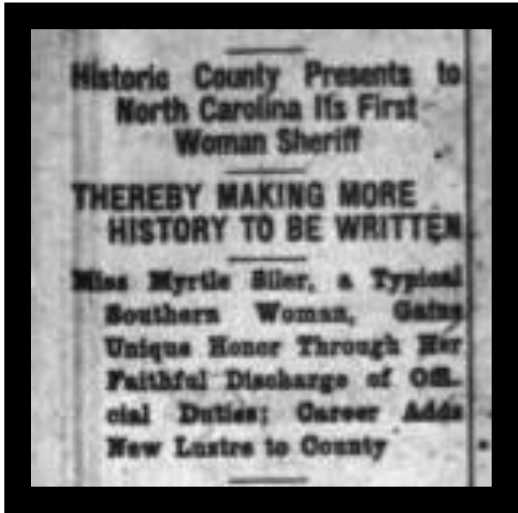
Myrtle attended a local primary school—the Siler City Institute--and later the State Normal at Greensboro (today the University of North Carolina at Greensboro). After her father's death she moved to Pittsboro and took a job as a clerk in the Sheriff's department.

As a member of one of Chatham County's oldest families, Myrtle enjoyed a busy social life. Newspaper accounts of the day detail her presence at picnics and soirees, as well as travels—including a trip by car to Raleigh, where she heard a speech by William Jennings Bryan and saw the film *Birth of a Nation*. She was active in her church, sang in the choir, and participated in the local chapter of the Red Cross during World War I. A strong, independent woman, she was a teetotaler and a proponent of women's suffrage.

She had been a clerk in the Sheriff's office for nearly 10 years when her cousin, Leon T. Lane, resigned in order to run for a different public office. The all-male board of county commissioners unanimously elected Myrtle Siler to serve out the remaining months of Lane's term as sheriff and she was sworn in on October 4, 1920. There were 13 part-time deputies in Chatham County at that time, one for each township. Their duties would have



Brief notice from the 5 Oct 1920 News and Observer, which published a detailed article about the historic appointment in the Sunday edition on 10 October.



Headlines from 10 Oct 1920 Raleigh News and Observer article

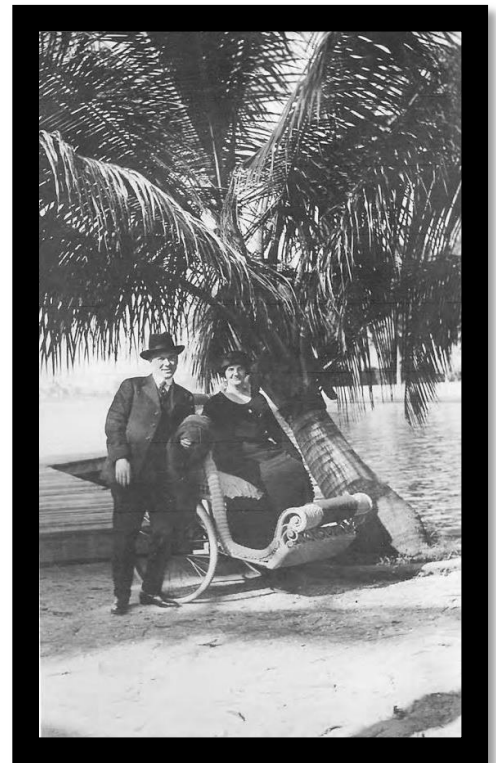
included serving warrants and reporting any suspected illegal activity. As “high sheriff,” Myrtle did not carry a weapon.

In July of 1919, a new superintendent of schools had come to work in the courthouse. William Reid Thompson (1885-1939) hailed from Baldwin Township, in Chatham, and was a veteran of World War I. He was reported to be very attractive and as an eligible bachelor was the object of a good bit of gossip. He and Myrtle were soon engaged and were married on December 22, 1920, at Pittsboro Baptist Church. She was 33 years old. According to family lore, she did not include the pledge to obey her husband in her wedding vow out of concern that her husband might direct her to do something that God might not approve of.

Myrtle left the Sheriff’s department after her marriage and worked in her husband’s office as a clerk. The couple purchased land on Hillsboro Street in Pittsboro and built a home next door to what is now known as the Wade Barber house. After their first child was stillborn, she and William had two children, William Reid Thompson and Nancy Sue Thompson Parks. Following her husband’s death in 1939 Myrtle welcomed schoolteachers to their home as boarders.

Her grandchildren remember Myrtle as being a loving and patient grandmother, someone who would play games and watch television with them but did not approve of playing cards on Sundays. And, finally, they note that she was possessed of a quality that those of us living in 2020 can relate to: frequent and thorough handwashing—remnants no doubt of her early experience with typhoid fever and the flu pandemic of 1918.

Myrtle lived to be 97 years old and is buried beside her husband William at Love’s Creek Baptist Church in Chatham County.



William Reid Thompson and wife Myrtle Siler Thompson on their honeymoon in Florida, December 1920.

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