



David Bancroft Johnson (1856-1928) Winthrop's First President (1886-1928)

David Bancroft Johnson (1856-1928), founder and first president of Winthrop University (1886-1928), is recognized today as one of South Carolina's great educators. The buildings on the 40 odd acre tract of land that is Winthrop University are monuments to Johnson's ambition and realized dreams.

D. B. Johnson was born in 1856 in the dormitory of La Grange Female College in Tennessee, where his father was president and founder.

At the age of nine while living in Memphis, D. B. Johnson was crossing some railroad tracks on his way home from school when he was run down by "a hand car loaded with rock." The boy's arm was crushed, forcing his doctors to amputate the limb. This did not deter Johnson, who, years later as Winthrop's president, became known as an exceptional tennis player.

At fifteen, Johnson enrolled into East Tennessee University in Knoxville (which became The University of Tennessee in 1879). Working his way through college, Johnson became valedictorian of his graduating class and received his bachelor's degree with "first honors" in 1877. After graduating, Johnson became principal of the Boy's High School in Knoxville in 1877, but returned to the University of Tennessee in 1879 to earn a Master of Arts Degree.

After briefly working as a professor at the university he accepted the position of principal of the schools at Abbeville, SC. In 1882, Johnson left Abbeville and became the superintendent of schools in New Bern, NC. He held this position for just a year and in 1883 Johnson was appointed Superintendent of the Columbia City Schools in SC.

It was here that Johnson got the idea for a teacher training institution. The chronic shortage of teachers was causing the young administrator to cancel some classes and to teach others himself.

Johnson began to look for ways to fund a school which could supply him with teachers. Using his own money, he made a trip to Boston to talk to Robert C. Winthrop, chairman of the Peabody Board, a philanthropic organization involved in upgrading Southern education.

Johnson managed to convince Winthrop to appropriate \$1500 of the Peabody money to start the school. In fact, Johnson was so convincing that Winthrop gave \$50 out of his own pocket.

While in Boston, Johnson was told of Mary Hall Leonard, a noted teacher in the curriculum of teachers' colleges of the day. Johnson knew that she was the type of teacher he needed for his school. Rejected once, Johnson finally managed to talk Leonard into coming to Columbia to head the proposed teacher training school.

Johnson had money and a teacher, but no building. He secured the chapel of the Columbia Theological Seminary, a small brick building which at one time was a stable. It was here that President Woodrow Wilson confessed and accepted Christ in 1873.

On November 15, 1886, Winthrop Training School opened. It had nineteen students and one teacher. The school was named in honor of its benefactor, Robert C. Winthrop.

From the beginning, the school was an immediate success. By 1895, when the University moved to Rock Hill, SC, Winthrop was a firmly established educational institution, performing a vital role by providing the state with much needed teachers.

Winthrop's president became a familiar figure at the state legislator's budget meetings, waging a constant battle for more funds. From 1900 to 1928, Winthrop experienced a tremendous expansion and building program, becoming one of the largest women's colleges in the country.

As Winthrop moved toward the 1930s, its president moved more slowly. D. B. Johnson lived for Winthrop. His work consumed all his energy and took a tremendous toll on his health.

On December 26, 1928, Johnson closed his eyes on the vision that became a reality. He is buried in the chapel that served Winthrop's first class of students and now serves as his final resting place on the campus of Winthrop University.