

GOVERNOR WILLIAM WALTON KITCHIN, n.d., 1909-1913

Arrangement: By record series, then chronological

Reprocessed by: James Mark Valsame

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William Walton Kitchin (October 9, 1866 – November 9, 1924), lawyer, congressman, and governor of North Carolina, was born in rural Halifax County near Scotland Neck, the son of William Hodge and Maria Figus Arrington Kitchin. His father was a captain in the Twelfth Regiment of the North Carolina Infantry in the Civil War. Young Kitchin received his early education in local schools, including the Vine Hill Academy in Halifax County, after which he entered Wake Forest College and was graduated in 1884, at age eighteen, with the B. A. degree.

After leaving Wake Forest he taught for a session at Vine Hill Academy, then spent one year (1885-86) as editor of the Democrat in Scotland Neck. In 1887 he studied law at the University of North Carolina under Professor John Manning, having already read law with his father for more than a year. He passed the North Carolina bar examination in the same year. Late in 1887, Kitchin went to Texas, but there is no record of his activity there; he returned to North Carolina and settled in Roxboro in 1888 to practice law. Two years later, as chairman of the Democratic executive committee of Person County, he began his political career.

Kitchin is credited with having led Person County back into “the Democratic fold” after years of Republican dominance. He was an unsuccessful candidate in the state senate in 1894, but in 1896 won his party’s nomination for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives from the Fifth Congressional District. Thomas Settle, a Republican, was the incumbent. Kitchin was the only Democrat elected from North Carolina that year. Reelected for six terms, he served from 1896 to 1908.

Those who have appraised Kitchin’s performance on Capitol Hill find little to write about. He was a member of the Committee on Naval Affairs and of the Congressional Campaign Committee for the Democratic party. One of his best known speeches in Congress was in defense of the Suffrage Amendment at a time when white supremacy and suffrage were pertinent issues in his state.

In any case, Congressman Kitchin retained the respect of his party. When the Democratic convention met in Charlotte in 1908, he won the gubernatorial nomination – but only after sixty-one rounds of balloting. His opponents were Locke Craig, later elected governor, and Ashley Horne. All three candidates were popular political leaders in North Carolina. Kitchin won the election in November over the Republican nominee, J. Elwood Cox, and took office on January 12, 1909.

If his years in Congress were lackluster, his tenure as governor was highly successful. It was a time of tremendous increases in expenditures for public education, public health service to the feeble-minded, and expansion of swampland affected by significant drainage laws. In addition, those years saw great expansion of railroads and general improvement in the stability of the state’s banking institutions.

During his last year as governor, Kitchin's was one of four names mentioned in the state's first regular popular election to the U.S. Senate: Charles Brantley Aycock (d. 1912), who was mentioned early; Chief Justice Walter Clark of the North Carolina Supreme Court, a jurist of great wisdom and poise; Furnifold M. Simmons, the incumbent U. S. senator who had in his term scored a distinctive record of Washington; and Kitchin, who had served a dozen years in Congress and over three years as a progressive governor. The North Carolina press reported it as a vigorous campaign. Although there was some doubt as to the ultimate winner, Senator Simmons emerged victor with a clear majority over Clark and Kitchin.

After completing his term Governor Kitchin practiced law in Raleigh, where he formed a partnership with James S. Manning that lasted for six years. In 1919 he suffered a stroke and retired to his home in Scotland Neck.

On December 22, 1892 Kitchin married Musette Satterfield, of Roxboro, the daughter of William Clement Satterfield. They had five children: Sue Arrington, Annie-maria, Elizabeth Musette, Clement, and William Walton, Jr.

Kitchin was an active member of the Baptist churches where he lived, as well as a member of three fraternal orders: Ancient, Free, and Accepted Masons; Improved Order of Odd Fellows; and Knights of Pythias. He died in Scotland Neck; after funeral services in the Baptist church there, he was buried in the local cemetery. A portrait of him, presented by R. O. Everett of Durham, hangs in the Person County Courthouse, and there is another portrait in the capitol in Raleigh.

Source: Green, C. Sylvester, "William Walton Kitchin," Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, Volume 3, H-K, William S. Powell, ed., Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988, pp. 376-377.

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