

# LIVES OF FRANKLIN PLATO ELLER AND JOHN CARLTON ELLER

By Jay B. Hubbell (1909)

The Book Itself is [available online here.](#)

This Review by J. Gerald Eller

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[Franklin6 Plato and John6 Carlton Eller (James5, Simeon4, John3, Peter2, Georgel Michael Eller)]

My interest in family history began when I first saw this book in 1946 in a used book store in Chapel Hill, N.C. I could not afford the book but I went back several times until I had read most of it. As a result, I began to wonder about the ethnic origin of the name of Eller and how my family related to these Ellers. At that time I knew no Ellers apart from my own family and relatives in Graham County, North Carolina. I remembered by mother saying we were Scotch-Irish. After a bit of checking I found that "Eller" was of German origin. When I asked my mother why she had said we were Scotch-Irish she replied, "Well, around here during World War I all German families became Scotch-Irish." Years went by before I again began to dabble in genealogy but I never forgot the tragic story told in the book of these two young Ellers whose record of performance at the University where I was studying was one to attempt to emulate.



This book deals with two sons of the James and Mary Ann Carlton Eller family of Wilkes and later of Ashe County, North Carolina. Other stories dealing with this family appear in this and [earlier Chronicles: see Vol. III, No. 1, pp. 1-6](#), Adolphus Hill Eller. Adolphus Hill Eller (*photo left*) was a brother to Plato and John C. Eller of this story and the one who arranged for the book to be written and published. Also see Vol. VI, No. 1, pp. 54-65, The [James Eller Family and the Bushwhackers of Wilkes County](#), N. C. - (This James Eller was the father of the Franklin Plato, John Carlton, and Adolphus Hill Eller of this book). James Eller of these stories was also the grandfather of Gertrude Eller Waddell of this issue. The preparation of the stories of this remarkable family follows two visits made to Ashe County in the last three months, the last in company with EFA Board Member, Dr. Byron Eller of California and Lynn Eller of

Atlanta; both are descendants of brothers of James Eller (Byron's Wilkes County ancestor was John Carlton Eller and Lynn's was Harvey Eller).

The book, sponsored by Adolphus Hill Eller, was written and published as a memorial to his two younger brothers. I believe it to be the first book published in the U.S. about an Eller, in this case two Ellers. Jay B. Hubbell, the author, was a grandson of James and Mary Ann Carlton Eller and a nephew of

the subjects of this book. He was the son of Ruth America Eller, fifth child of James Eller and Mary Ann Carleton, who married Reverend David S. Hubbell, a Baptist Minister of Smyth County, VA, 24 April 1884. Jay B. Hubbell was their first born who graduated from the University of Richmond in 1905 with an A. B. Degree; he received a Master of Arts degree from Harvard in 1908 and his Ph. D from Columbia University in 1922. He had a distinguished career as a teacher. He taught at Bethel College at Hopkinsville, Ky., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Wake Forest, Southern Methodist at Dallas, and after 1921 as professor of English and Director of Graduate Studies at Duke University. (from Hook: George Michael Eller and Descendants of His in America, 1957, p. 273.)

In the foreword the author states, "The purpose of this volume is not to glorify, but to commemorate, not to encourage unseemly family pride, but to preserve the memory of those who were noble and true. It has been more than seventeen years since the death of Plato Eller and more than thirteen years since that of his brother John; but they had not been forgotten; time has not dimmed the recollection of their lives in the minds of those who knew them..."

"It was long the purpose of their older brother (Adolphus Hill Eller) to prepare such a volume; but the cares of a busy life and the too poignant recollection of the last sad hours spent with them upon earth were too great to permit his undertaking the task..." When his brother Plato fell ill at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, Adolphus H. Eller was called and he procured the best of medical attention for his brother but to no avail. "He had helped his brother through college with encouragement, advice and money, and was looking forward to the day he should be associated with him in the practice of his profession (law). He had believed that with Plato's endowment of character and talent he would one day be a leader in the nation. He has since then repeatedly said that Plato was the most gifted member of the family. 'Johnnie, he said, 'had the culture, the brilliance, and the versatility of the family, but Plato had the intellect; he would have made a great man.'"

Hubbel says, "perhaps it is best that the work (of writing the book) should be brought to completion by one who, although a near relative of the deceased, is a native of another State, and hence never knew them. He (the author) has undertaken the study of their lives in much the same manner in which he would undertake a study of any man whom he had never known."

#### MR. AND MRS. JAMES ELLER BELIEVED IN EDUCATION

"on October 24, 1849, James Eller, of German and Scotch descent, was married to Mary Ann Carlton, of English descent. They lived at New Hope, Wilkes County, North Carolina, until October, 1865, when he sold his farm and moved with his family across the Blue Ridge mountains into the adjoining county of Ashe..."

The new home was situated at Berlin (now Bina), near the junction of Horse Creek with the North Fork of New River in the extreme northwestern corner of the State ... at Berlin were born the two subjects of this sketch, Franklin Plato and John Carlton Eller. They were the youngest of Mr. Eller's seven children who reached maturity, six boys and one girl. The greatest desire of Mr. Eller and his wife, in striking contrast with the parental ambitions of most of their neighbors, was to see their children all well-educated. In the 'hard times' which followed the war this was an undertaking of the greatest

difficulty...It was almost impossible for the average young man to obtain either the money or preparation necessary to enter a school of high standing. 'This was especially true of the mountain section in which Mr. Eller lived. His own health was very poor. [Eds. yet he lived to age 99] His home was forty five miles from the nearest railroad; and it was only with the greatest difficulty that farm products could be hauled over the rough mountain roads to market.

"Others would have given up; it was not so with him and his devoted wife. By his own efforts, aided by the assistance of an intelligent father (Simeon Eller), he had in a measure made amends for the lack of a systematic education in himself, and this enabled him to direct his children in their studies at home. Being an intelligent and discriminating reader himself, he encouraged them to read not many books, but good books and to read carefully and thoughtfully.

"His only daughter, Ruth (since married to D.S. Hubbel, a Baptist Minister of Virginia and mother of the author of this book) was sent for a year to a boarding school and then to a woman's college in Bristol (TN) ... All of the boys went off to school, most of them to Moravian Falls Academy, near Wilkesboro; but since it was impossible for all of them to go to college, three, Augustus, Sidney and Cicero, voluntarily relinquished their desires for a University education and turned their attention to business and practical affairs that others might have the opportunities which could not be given to all.

"In 1881 Adolphus Hill Eller, after a course at the Moravian Falls Academy, entered the University of North Carolina... He graduated in 1885, making, in spite of adverse circumstances, a creditable record, not only as a student, but as a speaker and writer as well. After his graduation he studied law and began a successful career in the practice of his profession in Winston-Salem." A picture of Adolphus Hill Eller appeared on the cover of The Eller Chronicles, Vol.III 1 followed by a story in the same issue pp. 1-6.

#### EARLY YEARS IN ASHE COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA

"'Plato' and '6' as they were known at home, from their earliest years were bent on following their brother's footsteps in the pursuit of an education. Even as children they did not place the usual exaggerated estimate upon the possession of toys and money, but spent their pocket change for books and gave their spare moments to reading and speaking. Gradually they accumulated a very neat and select little library, still preserved with tender care by their parents, consisting chiefly of historical writings, orations, poetry, and fiction. 'Me numerous notes and scrapbooks which they left show the remarkable industry and intelligence with which they worked. John was an omnivorous reader, devouring eagerly every book he could find. Plato, on the other hand, from the first, cared nothing for mere learning or for the lighter kinds of literature, and confined his reading chiefly to writing that stimulated thought. Nearly all his books are therefore works of history, political economy, and philosophy. We find a copy of Guizot's 'History of Civilization,' with his name inside, dated 1886.



"In 1887 Plato entered the Moravian Falls Academy. He at once joined the Philomatic Literary Society and participated eagerly in all its transactions... He was recognized as an able debater; and the logic and fire of his debates there would do credit to many a more experienced speaker ... His one ambition was to be able, by force of intellect, power of personality, and nobility of character, to master men for the advancement of truth and righteousness.

"Like his older brother, John Carlton Eller received his preparatory training at Moravian Falls Academy. In the local paper describing the Commencement he is mentioned as one of the six speakers who debated the question of Foreign Immigration. The correspondent adds: 'The boys did very well, Mr. Eller deserving special mention for his concise and well expressed arguments.'"

#### PLATO ELLER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA

"In August, 1889, Plato entered the Freshman Class of the University of North Carolina. Here, as at the Academy, he never allowed outside interests or the demands of class work to swerve him from the one purpose of his life. At first he gave most of his time to his text-books, and for the first year his grades were, in spite of a comparatively hurried preparation, very creditable indeed. But he never cared a straw for high grades or for mere learning as such... In the class work which he found directly useful for his purpose he did well; his grades in English and History are uniformly excellent. In some others he was content with merely passing; he was concentrating his thought and attention on things that were, to him, of much greater importance."

Plato followed the tradition of that day at the University, students from the western part of the state joined the Dialectic Society and easterners joined the Philanthropic Society.



"As a thinker, he was, so one of his acquaintances, now a prominent lawyer in one of the first cities of the State, says of him, 'Plato was the peer of any man in the University.' and he was so regarded by both faculty and students. Whenever he arose to speak on any topic, he had the undivided attention of all ... the confidence which the students and faculty placed in him was remarkable ... he obtained unsought almost every honor in the power of his class and society to give. He was twice representative of the Dialectic Society in an inter-society debate; he was the president of the Society; he was elected

the first editor of the University Magazine from his Society for 1892-93; he was elected first representative of his society for the inter-society oratorical content at the Commencement of 1892; and he was for three years President of his class ... an honor which he still held at his death. Besides these he was the winner of the Best Debater's Medal in the Di Society in his Sophomore year ... that his head was not turned by these honors and that he never lost his simplicity of manner and sympathetic interest in those less fortunate, we have the unanimous testimony of his college friends to show...

"The subject of the oration which Plato prepared for the oratorical contest at the close of his Junior year was 'Institutions the Result of Growth.' His choice of the subject was the result of an investigation undertaken for Professor H. H. (Horace) Williams ... the oration, though completed and printed in pamphlet form, was never to be delivered... Late in May he was seized ... his brother A.H. Eller was summoned ... he was suffering from an attack of typhoid fever.

Commencement was held but Plato, ill in bed, could not attend and deliver his oration. "President Winston in explaining the absence of the first speaker on the program, said that Plato Eller was the 'best speaker in the University.'" Because Plato could not speak the contest was won "by a member of the Philanthropic Society and a good friend of Plato ... the victor of the contest took the beautiful trophy to the bedside of his friend and in words that show at once the high opinion of Plato as a speaker and the unselfishness of his character said, 'Here, Eller, this is yours; you would have won if you could have spoken that speech.' ...Plato Eller died in his room in the Old South Building, on Wednesday, June 15, 1892 in the twenty-third year of his age ... his brother Adolphus H. Eller, accompanied by a classmate, removed the body to his father's home in Ashe County.

From shocked classmates, friends and University professors and administrators, including President Winston, letters poured into the home of James Eller in Ashe County and into the home of Adolphus H. Eller in Winston-Salem. Newspapers in several cities carried editorials and tributes to the young Plato from the hills of Ashe County. These are reprinted in the book and some are reproduced at the end of this review.

#### JOHN CARLTON ELLER

"In August 1892, after the death of his brother in June, John entered the Freshman Class of the University of North Carolina. This class was an unusually large and brilliant one; it numbered at this time one hundred and fifteen members, and it furnished more men to the Alpha Theta Phi Society than any other class up to '98, if not later. On January 19, 1893, John was elected president of his class, an honor which, like his brother Plato, he was to hold each succeeding year of his stay at the University...

"Unlike Plato, John was ambitious to distinguish himself as a student; and from the first he won recognition as one of the best students of his class. On his report sent home at the end of the second term President Winston writes: 'Mr. Eller has made steady and very honorable progress. His record is exemplary in all respects' ... The following transcript of his college career ... gives some conception of his versatility and popularity: 'Eller, John Carlton, Berlin, N.C. - 22 years; 165 pounds;



5 feet, 10 inches; course Ph.B; law; president of class 4 years; representative of Di Society Commencement 1894; representative of Di Society inter-society debate 1895; Debater's Medal Di Society 1895; Essayist's Medal Di Society 1895; Editor of the Tar Heel in 1895-96; sub ball manager Commencement 1895; undergraduate member of advisory board of athletics 1896; undergraduate honors in Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, and Senior years; president of Alpha Theta Phi; Philosophical Club; Shakespeare Club; Historical Society; Di."

Following his graduation from the University in the spring of 1896, John returned home to Ashe County where on the fourth of July 1896, like his brother Plato, he died of typhoid. "He was laid to rest beside his brother in the little family burying ground that crowns the hill of old Phoenix Mountain, overlooking their childhood home and the beautiful river beside it."

Again, shocked classmates, friends and news editors across the state, sent numerous letters and wrote editorials to the family of James Eller. Some of these appear below:

#### TRIBUTES TO FRANKLIN PLATO ELLER

An upper classman who knew him well said seven years after his death: "He was the soul of honor and a man of much power and ability; he would certainly have been a useful citizen had God spared him. I always thought that he would make a great mark in the State; the faculty and entire student body thought so too; and everyone respected him." Another friend, now one of the ablest lawyers in the State, said recently to the writer that Plato Eller had the finest mind for grasping, applying, and vitalizing abstract truths that he had ever seen. He would have made, he thinks with many others, a great statesman or constitutional lawyer." This opinion was shared by the twelve professors, classmates and friends whose letters and tributes fill 13 pages of the book; included was the following letter;

To: A.H. Eller from the President of the University of North Carolina, 24 June 1892.

... Your brother had won my esteem and affection. I had watched him closely, and I regarded him as the most promising man in the University. He was not the best scholar nor the best student; but in all the strong and admirable qualities of manhood which are essential to true greatness and to lasting success, he was as highly gifted as any young man I ever knew.

.... Geo. T. Winston

#### TRIBUTES TO JOHN CARLTON ELLER

Tar Heel, student newspaper, UNC Chapel Hill, September 19, 1896: John Carlton Eller: "A man of unusual ability, easily the leader of his class, he was admired by all and dearly beloved by his intimate friends ... he was our friend and we loved him.

President of the University of North Carolina to A. H. Eller, July 30, 1896:

... The death of your noble brother grieves and distresses me beyond words. I can scarcely realize it. There was no one of my pupils for whom I felt more affectionate admiration, or whose future seemed so full of promise. There must be need of him in the other world, for surely so strong and noble and beautiful a life would not have been so quickly terminated here ... Geo. T. Winston.

The book contains 31 separate letters and tributes to John C. Eller, some from the most prominent people within the state of North Carolina.

#### WRITINGS AND SPEECHES OF FRANKLIN PLATO ELLER

- Institutions the Result of Growth
- Our Retiring President
- The Dialectic Society
- Debate on the Electoral College
- Debate on Home Rule for the Irish
- Debate on the Eastern Question
- A Brief Review of Scholasticism

#### WRITINGS AND SPEECHES OF JOHN CARLTON ELLER

- Man's Inhumanity to Man
- What is Morality - a Thesis
- A Plea for American Commerce
- Debate on Rigid Party Organization
- Debate on Dangers of Centralization
- The Origin and Rise of Government- A Thesis
- The College Fraternity
- Articles from the "White and Blue"
- Poems: Melancholia, The Doubters
- The Modern Chivalry: an Essay
- Class Farewell

The diversity of subjects alone reveal much about the range of interests of these young men. To read the articles is to realize that the glowing tributes paid these two scholars were not empty rhetoric. The intellectual power displayed by both in their writings, debates and speeches were quite phenomenal and elevated both to the highest levels of respect and esteem among their classmates and professors. Oratorical skill, in their day, was essential for success in public life and many professions, especially the law and religion. Debating was the chief intramural and intercollegiate competitive activity; both were masters of that art so essential for success in the professions of that day. Their remarkable qualities of leadership, scholarship and character, flowered from the seeds planted early in their minds by enlightened parents and the love and support of their brothers and sisters.

While the book records the double tragedies experienced by the James Eller family within the space of four years, it is not without positive lessons for us today. The two lads enjoyed the good fortune of remarkable parents, strong in their convictions and dedication to education and Christian principles. An older brother, with his own remarkable success, kindled their ambition to follow in his footsteps to the University. Older brothers and sisters, agreed to remain home and work because all could not go to school. While their promising careers were terminated so abruptly, Plato and Johnnie Eller still serve as role-models for young Ellers of these modern days.