

# WILLIAM HAMILTON ELLER - 1842 - 1922

6) William H. 5) Harvey 4) Simeon 3) John 2) Peter 1) George Michael Eller

by Lynn Eller

*This biographical sketch originally appeared in the August 1990 "Eller Chronicles"*

William Hamilton Eller was born 29 October 1842 in Wilkes County, N.C. He was the oldest child of Harvey and Caroline Vannoy ELLER whose home was 6 miles northwest of North Wilkesboro, near Purlears, at the base of Monument Mountain. This is very near New Hope Baptist Church which William's grandfather, Simeon, helped to found in 1830.



At the age of 10, in 1852, his parents decided to leave Wilkes County for a new life and new opportunities in the state of Iowa, a budding frontier at that time. William's uncle, David ELLER, was living there and obviously his father, Harvey, was encouraged to make the move. In the fall of 1852, the family was loaded into a covered wagon for the three months long trek to Jefferson County, Iowa. In the family making this arduous trip were six other children: Barnett Cleveland age 8, Virginia age 7, (the mother of James W. Hook, author of *GEORGE MICHAEL ELLER AND DESCENDANTS OF HIS IN AMERICA*), Nancy age 5, Mary Octavo age 4, James Anderson age 2 and Jesse Franklin age 7 months' The rigors of such a trip were many and are chronicled in James Hook's book, pages 188-196. It is an astounding story of determination and of extreme hardship.

Jefferson County, Iowa was one of the first to be interested in the education of pioneer children. The Fairfield Female Seminary was organized in 1848 and as Fairfield University in 1854. William worked hard at home under the tutelage of his father, Harvey, who recognized his son's unusual abilities. He placed William under the care of Rev. Andrew AXLINE who was operating a small academy in Fairfield. In 1860 Rev. AXLINE became the head of the struggling University which young William entered. He was a precocious lad, and by great devotion to his studies laid the foundation for his later careers as a lawyer, a Baptist minister, editor and teacher. Also, here William became fluent in Greek and Hebrew and throughout his adult life he carried a Bible which was in Greek.

In 1862 at age 20 William entered the military service of the Union Army in Co. D., 19th Iowa Infantry. Later he served to the end of the war as 1st Sergeant in Co. I of the 45th Iowa Infantry. William's uncle, David ELLER, served with the Confederate Army and was wounded at Drewry's Bluff, Va. He was removed to Richmond where he died 13 September 1862. Another uncle, Thomas Jefferson ELLER, was a private in the 1st N.C. regiment of the Confederate Army and was killed at the Battle of Chancellorsville, Va. early on the morning of 2 May 1863. He is buried where he fell. Uncle David's body

was returned to Wilkes County and buried at the New Hope Baptist Church cemetery near Purlears, N.C.

William's great uncle, Jesse Franklin ELLER, youngest son of Simeon ELLER, served as First Lieut. in the Confederate Army and assisted in organizing the 53rd N.C. Regiment, CSA. He later became Captain and was severely wounded on the second day of the Battle of the Wilderness in northeast Virginia, 9 May 1864. He continued to serve actively and continuously with his company in the Army of Northern Virginia commanded by General Robert E. Lee, until the end of the war. He was with his company at Appomattox when Lee surrendered to General Grant. This is one of many accounts of ELLERS who served both in the Union and the Confederate Armies.

Having returned from military service, William married Harriet (Hattie) A. TRACY on 10 November 1866 in Bloomfield, Iowa. She was the daughter of Dr. Jonathan TRACY of Ohio who emigrated to Wapello County, Iowa in 1852, the same year William arrived from North Carolina. Children born to this union were 1) Ida, 2) Annie, and 4) William Cary, all of whom died very young. 3) Julia A. lived to age 25. She and her husband, Joseph S. MOORE, had two daughters, Pauline MOORE, who died at age 8, and Elenor MOORE, b. 4 August 1893, d. 26 March 1952. Two other daughters were 5) Caroline (Carrie) ELLER, b. 28 September 1877, d. 12 August 1934, and 6) Elisabeth (Bessie) ELLER, b. 30 January 1880, d. 29 June 1933

One year after his marriage, William entered the Crozier Theological Seminary at Chester, Pa. Three years later he was awarded the Doctor of Divinity degree in the first graduating class, 1870, having completed four years of study in three! His first parish was in Ohio (1870-1873) and his second in Beatrice, Nebraska (1873-1875). During this latter pastorate he studied law and was admitted to the Nebraska Bar in 1876 whereupon he settled in Blair, Nebraska. In Blair he had the dual role of practicing law and serving as pastor of the Baptist Church. During this time he also founded the BLAIR COURIER and wrote a great deal of history of Washington County, Nebraska. He was a member of the Masonic Lodge in Blair.

William's younger brother, Israel Curtis ELLER, joined him in the law practice, having been admitted to the Nebraska Bar in 1883. Curtis was born one year after the family of Harvey and Carolina arrived in Iowa. He was number eight of a remarkable 14 children in all. In their law practice, they often worked with William Jennings BRYAN, who at the time was a young attorney in Lincoln, Nebraska. William Hamilton ELLER was twice honored by being chosen Justice of the Supreme Court.

"Judge" ELLER was an implacable enemy of intoxicating liquors. This was probably ingrained by his parents very young in life. His parents objected strongly to the use of liquor. For this reason and their adversity to the slave issue in the South, they removed their family from North Carolina in 1852. In 1890 William joined others in taking over the rights of ownership of the Keeley Institute in the state of North Carolina. This was a national organization established for the care and treatment of alcoholism and drug addiction. The institute was very active in William's city of Blair and throughout Nebraska. He obviously was attracted to the work of the institute while living in Blair and this interest took Judge ELLER back to

North Carolina. He was the only member of that generation and family to return to his native state. In 1896 he sold his interests in the institute and reentered the Baptist Ministry in the Greensboro area, continuing in this field until his death in 1922.

In the fall of 1894 William joined the fellowship of the West Washington Baptist Church (now the First Baptist Church of Greensboro, N.C.). He immediately became active by teaching a Sunday School class of college students. However his yearning was to start new churches and he soon became one of the prime movers in the growth of the Piedmont Baptist Association. This organization was initiated to bring together individual churches into one solid association. Up until that time, all of these churches were part of the sprawling Sandy Creek Association. In 1896 William was named the Associational Missionary and permanent Clerk of the Piedmont Association. His term of service as Clerk and Treasurer lasted 24 years. Also in 1896 he was named to the Associational Committee on Admission of New Churches. The following year he was elected a member of the Associational Executive Board. Records indicate that William was instrumental in starting eleven churches.

William was one of six members of the West Washington Street Church who in 1897 became charter members of the new Cherry Street Baptist Church, now known as the Eller Memorial Baptist Church, Greensboro. The minutes of the organization are in his own handwriting. He served as the Clerk of the Presbytery and then as Clerk of the Church. Other church organizing efforts ensued and in 1903 he was given another title, that of "Beloved Organizer". In his first year at the Cherry Street Church, the members voted to call him as pastor. He did not accept the call. His first love and motivation were establishment of new churches which ultimately included Revolution (now Northside), Magnolia Street, Pomona (now Clifton Road), Hamtown, Bessemer, Florida Street and others.

The Cherry Street Baptist Church was operated under that name from its inception in 1897. At a church conference in 1901, a new building was authorized and constructed on Walnut Street near the north end of what is today the 1200 block of that street. This building was added to and remodeled from time to time to care for the needs of the congregation. A special conference was called on July 24, 1923, for the purpose of changing the name of the church to "The Eller Memorial Baptist Church" in honor of Rev. W. H. ELLER. A new building on the corner of Walnut and Fourth Streets was completed in 1925. The total cost of the building was approximately \$35,000. Cone Mills of Greensboro gave \$24,000 of this amount for the project. It is interesting to note that the donor, Herman Cone, and owner of the Cone Mills was of the Jewish faith. He had emigrated from Germany for reasons of religious freedom. The 1901 structure was then torn down and the new structure was dedicated in 1925 to the memory of WILLIAM HAMILTON ELLER.

Judge ELLER, as he continued to be known, died in December 1922 at the home of his daughter, Caroline (Carrie) Eller Welch at Greensboro, N.C. The Eller Memorial Baptist Church was named in his honor and for appreciation of the man who had done more to win Guilford County and Greensboro to Christ than any other person.