

## My Name is Samuel Wait

By Ed Christman

Performed at the Wake Forest Alumni Dinner, fall 1983

Mr. Presidents, Ladies and Gentlemen,

My name is Samuel Wait, and I have been given a special dispensation to be with you tonight celebrating our Sesquicentennial. It may be the only time in Wake Forest history that three presidents will be in the same room, and I count it a distinct honor to be here with Ralph Scales and Tom Hearn. You will allow me to call you Ralph and Tom? And you can call me... Dr Wait! We might be called the Wake Forest trinity – the Father [Wait nods to audience] – and the two of you may negotiate Son and Spirit.



In following the fortunes of Wake Forest, spirit describes much of what we celebrate tonight. Some of my friends up there have asked how the school got started in that sparsely populated, rural region called North Carolina. When I came as a fundraiser for Columbia College, born and bred a Yankee, I found people in Edenton, Greenville, and New Bern excited about the idea of missions and education. For example, in this old Wake Forest scrapbook, here's a picture of Thomas Meredith who wrote the constitution of the Convention which had as its purpose the establishment of such a school.

Another factor was that strange mishap which kept me in New Bern a month longer than planned. As I left town, the horses bolted and the wagon was destroyed. Within a few weeks, I had been extended a call to become minister of the Baptist Church in New Bern. There I was right in the middle of the effort to start a school to train ministers. And there seemed to be no one else to raise the money; thus, Sara and our four-year daughter Ann Eliza and I cross-crossed the state, living out of a jersey wagon. Mrs. Scales, Mrs. Hearn, can you imagine hearing your husbands preach 268 sermons in one year? Even if the sermons were all different!

And there was the opposition. Anti-missionary Baptists said we were meddling in the Lord's business in seeking to educate ministers. Such a school, they said, would be the greatest threat to the Kingdom of God since the Inquisition! But thank God the detractors lost in the crucial vote on the charter in the legislature. The president of the Senate, a Carolina man, cast the tie-breaking vote in favor of the charter. William Mosely was his name. You know, friends, Wake Forest folks up there berate Chapel Hill consistently, saying nothing good ever came from Carolina. I set them straight. Nothing good since William Mosely. Ah, here is a picture of brother Mosely whose portrait hung in Wingate Hall for years.

The year was 1834. We started our barnyard college in February with sixteen students. The school, called Wake Forest Institute, was designed to combine studying the classics with tilling the soil. You might say we were a cotton-pickin' bunch of preachers or a preaching bunch of cotton-pickers, depending on your viewpoint. Actually there were only four candidates for ministry that first year, and many of the seventy-two who registered had made no profession of faith, but all joined in the daily prayers of thanksgiving for the opportunity to grow "in wisdom and stature."

Calvin Jones had sold us his 625 acre farm for \$2,500 and then deducted from that amount his own contribution of \$500. College presidents like that kind of transaction. And here's a picture of that original house. I'm so pleased the people in the town of Wake Forest have tenderly cared for it and added so many artifacts of our history. I doubt that any of those cornshuck mattresses Sarah and I sewed have survived. No great loss.

But our losses in the farming business meant we needed to change direction, and we re-chartered Wake Forest into a college in 1838. I was back in the wagon visiting folks and trying to liquidate our debts. I wore out six brace of horses and as many pairs of trousers, and I nearly wore out Samuel Wait. Oh, yes, I nearly forgot. Tom, I want you to take note that, along with teaching, preaching, and fund raising, I waited on tables that first year.

Ralph, mine was an active retirement after '45 as preacher and school administrator until I returned to Wake Forest on the eve of the Civil War. We all hated to see the school close and were overjoyed when the students returned and our dream was renewed. We were painfully aware that many had been killed fighting for the Confederacy. Wingate had assumed the presidency and worked tirelessly to pay our debts, which included losses from our having invested endowment in Confederate bonds. But we did not default on these obligations, and it has been a mark of the school's integrity that our word has been our bond in money matters. We can all share pride in that distinction.

We can also be proud of the way President Taylor led us through the depressed times after the Civil War, when he traveled as far as New York looking for support. Fortunately he found Jabez Bostwick, a Baptist and a businessman,

who became one of our most generous benefactors. He gave us Standard Oil stock, and yes we get the quotations! Dr. Taylor was also a landscape architect who, assisted by his matchless "secretary of the interior" Tom Jefferies, laid out the permanent walks across the campus. Tom was more than any custodian; his disciplined skill is evidenced by the rock wall encircling the campus. The stands of different trees they planted made it possible to study botany without leaving the campus. Who could afford to go anywhere anyway?

But there's more to school than studying trees, and we did leave the campus in the 1890s. I have had to learn about the games our students played... Here is a picture of a group of students in helmets and knickers with somber faces and an oblong ball. And here is a group in caps, knickers, and sticks with smiling faces. We certainly are proud of our championship teams in baseball, golf, football (one) and of the way our teams play, win or lose. Admittedly, we may depend too much on the story of David and Goliath.

But the pictures that really are the most interesting are those of men and women in short pants, no hats, and a round ball. Being able to make all the games and have center-court ACC tickets, I now understand the pick-and-roll, point-guard and power-forward concepts of basketball. Remember Bones McKinney, Wiggins, Murdock, and Hamrick? I recall Everett Case, the coach at NC State, saying he would refuse to play again in Gore Gym if we scheduled the game during religious emphasis week! But one has to keep things in perspective. There was this very tall player from Pennsylvania in the early sixties whose exploits led us to championships. One year someone hung his name on the front of the chapel so that it read Len's Chapel. I had that sign removed the next day.

We have buildings named for presidents, benefactors, athletes; and Tom -- Ralph has left you an opportunity. New Dorm is thirteen years old; maybe you can find someone for whom it can be named before it becomes a historical landmark like Lea Laboratory on the old campus. Would any of you like to volunteer?

One of the lasting landmarks is not a building but a person -- Dr. Billy. He invited students to peer into those microscopes and behold the creations of God, because he believed the Lord commanded us to study relentlessly his universe. Some were sincerely fearful of teaching the theory of evolution, but none should have feared Dr. Poteat's revolutionary faith in God and search for truth.

Oh, there have been people in every generation who have wanted to control the school, but folks like Dr. Poteat renewed our independent spirit to resist control from without so as to remain whole within. One of the events which contributed to the wholeness was the coming of women as students. Who knows? One of our coeds may become president of Wake Forest, or the Baptist State Convention, or the United States. All students can follow the leadership of Lois Johnson, the first Dean of Women, for God commands us to "dream dreams and

have visions."

Another person who was a landmark and who dreamed dreams was Harold Tribble. Here is a picture of that strong-willed president. Like the Biblical Moses, he led us to the promised land; unlike Moses, he needed no Aaron to speak for him. *Time* magazine said we were the only school that had walked 100 miles for a Camel.

Actually it was 110 miles, and we got far more than one cigarette from the Reynolds Foundation, the Baptists, other foundations and individuals, all in partnership envisioning a more excellent college, and now a university. Dr. Tribble was embroiled in many controversies and changes, including the desegregation of the school ahead of most other institutions. President Tribble had decided that the chapel should be located on the highest knoll on the land given by the Reynolds family, and I am so honored to have my name affixed to that chapel, with the beautiful music from the carillon, its brightly lit spire, the variety of events -- Artur Rubenstein, Marcel Marceau, Carter and Ford -- two presidents of the United States, political rallies, the home of the church started by students in 1835, and what's this? a performance by the "Stray Cats?" I might miss that one, but I never miss the Christmas Lovefeast..

Dr. Scales, I think it appropriate that you should have an office in the chapel tower as you resume your teaching career; "to start earning an honest living" is the way you put it to the faculty last Monday! Your visions of overseas education, the Ecumenical Institute involving Baptists with other religious groups, and your staunch defense of academic freedom are worthy achievements. You, sir, have been a peacemaker, a builder, and you have kept the alumni in touch. And I recall your initiative in Wake Forest's participating in the National Convocation of Prayer during the Vietnam War. The covenant relationships with North Carolina Baptists reflects a concern for mutual appreciation.

One thing presidents come to know. Not everyone fully appreciates his or her college education while it's happening. Some danced their way through Wake Forest while others have been admitted not much better able to spell than the one who wrote me years ago addressing the letter "Dear Dr. Weight." But as I look over Bill Starling's shoulder these days, I realize some applicants still can't spell. Amazing that we turn out so many graduates like you folks here tonight who bring honor to the school through the values and skills you share with others. A Wake Forest education makes a difference throughout the world.

I hear there will be another trek to old Wake Forest with a softball game. If you will call it an old-timers game, I can probably get another dispensation. I will be there; Taylor, Wingate, Poteat; the old "toe," Slick Sledd, Jasper Memory, Ed Wilson...

Dr Hearn, we are 150 and counting, counting on you to dream and work and tell

us how to join in shaping the future. There will be trials and tribulations, but God is with you. So are we and thousands more as we affirm dear old Wake Forest. Thine is a noble name, a noble name in word and deed.

Thank you.  
Dr. Samuel Wait

This performance noted the retirement of Wake Forest President James R. Scales, who had served since 1967, and the installation of Thomas K Hearn as his successor. Dr. Hearn served as Wake Forest president 1983-2005.

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