

Thomas Jefferson Strait

Back in 1907, Thomas Jefferson Strait (1846-1924) was described in a biographical sketch as a physician and philanthropist. He was both those but today he is more likely to be remembered as a controversial congressman and as one who adopted a child who would become a famous artist.

T. J. Strait was born in Chester District's Lewisville community, son of Jacob Fox and Isabella (Wylie) Strait. At the age of 16 he joined the Confederate army and was severely wounded at Franklin, Tennessee. By war's end, he had risen to the rank of sergeant.

Returning to Lewisville, 19-year-old Tom Strait decided he needed more education and enrolled in a school in Mayesville, SC. He soon moved on to a Mississippi school called Cooper Institute. After his return to Chester county he farmed and taught school. For a while, he was principal of the Ebenezer Academy near Rock Hill.

Strait next decided to become a physician and enrolled in the Medical College of the State of South Carolina. In 1885 at the age of 35, he graduated with distinction.

In the medical community Dr. Strait was rated a skilled practitioner. Noted for his kindness, he treated many sick people who could not pay for his services. A wide range of people benefitted from the doctor's willingness to contribute to churches (he was an active member of the A. R. P. church), to schools (he never forgot the students he had taught when a young man) and to the poor (his generosity was legendary). Still, in spite of his charity, he was able to accumulate a very large acreage, most of it southwest of the Lancaster county town of Heath Springs in the Stoneboro area. He played a part in developing the granite quarry at Stoneboro

Dr. Strait's popularity led to his election in the South Carolina State Senate. He was labeled a "Tillmanite," that is, a follower of the controversial governor and later senator, Benjamin "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman. Tillman had wrested political power from the followers of Wade Hampton, who represented the old aristocracy. Tillman and Strait were much alike in their campaign style—rip-roaring orators who never hesitated to speak their minds.

Before Strait's term expired in the South Carolina Senate, he was nominated by the Democratic party to represent the fifth district in the U. S. Congress.

The fifth district at that time was made up of Chester, Chesterfield, Kershaw, Lancaster and York along with two townships each in Spartanburg and Union counties. He served 3 terms in Washington before he was defeated by David E. Finley of York.

Gov. Cole L. Blease appointed Strait to head the state hospital, a position for which Strait was not really qualified and only held one year, losing the office when Blease resigned in 1915. Strait returned to Lancaster and revived his medical practice.

In 1867 he had married Kate Lathrop of Louisville, Ky. who was described as "a lady of high literary and musical attainments."

The Straits had no children but took in a large number of homeless children (one account said 17 and noted that they became "worthy farmers, physicians, lawyers, artists and home-makers.")

Clara Barrett Strait was one of 4 children who were formally adopted. Clara was found in Mississippi where the Straits lived for several years. She studied art at Corcoran Art Gallery in Washington when her father was a Congressman and became a noted portrait painter. Dozens of politicians, and often their wives, sat for her. She also painted many of the Confederate generals.

Kate Lathrop Strait died in 1914. Dr. Strait married Ella Ruff of Lexington County in 1917, and fathered two sons—Thomas Jefferson Strait, Jr. who became an attorney and Jacob Fox Strait who became a surveyor.

Dr. Strait was in his 78th year when he died of a heart attack on April 22, 1924 in Lancaster. He was buried in Lancaster's Westside Cemetery.