

**From Knoxville to Chapel Hill to Greece and Back:
Eben Alexander, Professor of Greek**

Eben Alexander (1851-1910) was Professor of Greek at the University of Tennessee and later at the University of North Carolina, as well as the American ambassador to Greece at the time of the revival of the Olympic Games in 1896. In this paper, I will outline his career, consider in detail several events of his life of particular interest to members of the Southern Section, and make a few comments on his contribution to the study of the Classics in the South, and especially at Knoxville and Chapel Hill.

Born and raised in Knoxville, Alexander attended the University of Tennessee and then Yale. After graduating from Yale in 1873, he served first as tutor and then as Professor of Greek and Latin at the University of Tennessee from 1873 until 1886. In the latter year, he moved to Chapel Hill as Professor of Greek. Letters preserved in the manuscripts department of Wilson Library in Chapel Hill tell us something of his application for the position in Chapel Hill, and of a fascinating journey he made in the following summer (July 1887) from his hometown (Knoxville) to Chapel Hill: he tells us his route (which took him through Asheville), and he gives us a vivid picture of travel on horseback through what was then largely unsettled territory. In Chapel Hill, Alexander was instrumental in establishing the first real university library, and he served as its first librarian.

In 1893, Alexander was appointed “Envoy Extraordinary, Minister Plenipotentiary, and Consul General to Greece, Roumania, and Servia” by President Grover Cleveland. He and his family spent the period from 1893 to summer 1897 in Europe, and Alexander was thus the American representative to Greece at the time of the revival of the Olympic Games. We know from an article in *Harper’s Weekly* that he was the first person to make a cash contribution in support of the Games, and we can trace his interest in the Games through his correspondence. Even more informative, however, is a long letter from his wife, Marion, to her sister describing the swirl of social activities—receptions, dinners, parties—during the period of the games (April 1896).

In 1897, Alexander returned to Chapel Hill and resumed his teaching. He introduced modern Greek to the curriculum, and from 1900 on he served as the first Dean of the Faculty. One of his students (Bernard Boyd) later joined the faculty at Chapel Hill, and Alexander played an important role in bringing to the University Louis Round Wilson, who founded the Library School and created the first true research library in Chapel Hill. Alexander does not seem to have published scholarly articles, but he gave many talks on pedagogical topics and on the relevance and power of classical studies. Many of these talks were published in full or summary form and sound remarkably modern, as we will see.

In 1909, Alexander was suffering from poor health. He took a leave of absence, in March of 1910 returned to his home town (where he still had family), and there died. Although he was always a Knoxvillean at heart, Alexander had a powerful impact on the Classics at Chapel Hill and might rightfully be considered the founder of the modern Department and program in Classics there.