

James William Abert Wright (1834-1894)

Major J. W. A. Wright, the author of the National Grange's "Declaration of Purposes," was born in Columbus, Mississippi on July 28, 1834 to a Presbyterian missionary father and a mother whose father and brother served as the Chief of Topographical Engineers of the U.S. Army. Left fatherless at a young age, he learned the use of tools and dignity of labor as an apprentice in a cabinet shop, the importance of education and the craft of writing as a scribe in the office of the local Chancery Clerk, and the integrity of spirit and strength of will from his mother's force of character.

The determined efforts of Wright's mother, along with his own youthful earnings, enabled him to attend Princeton University, where he was Valedictorian of the Class of 1857 and awarded an A.M degree in 1860. Wright possessed the skills of an educator, scientist, journalist, and craftsman along with an insatiable curiosity as an observer of natural phenomena. After graduation, he taught school in Alabama at Greene Springs School, founded by Prof. Henry Tutwiler and known as the "Rugby of the South" for its rigorous offering of college preparatory coursework. He provided instruction in Classical languages, French, rhetoric, and higher mathematics, while pursuing his own advanced studies in natural history, botany, geology and geography.



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Author of the Grange Declaration of Purpose*

The Civil War soon interrupted his teaching ambitions, and in 1862, after a year of conflict, his loyalties to friends and community ultimately compelled him to enlist in the fight. He rose to the rank of Major of Infantry, and participated in some of the most significant campaigns of the War until he was severely wounded and taken prisoner at the Battle of Missionary Ridge. Wright spent time in Northern prison camps before making a daring escape from a prisoner train and returning to the South. He participated in battles in the vicinity of Mobile, AL in the final days of the War. He was finally paroled in May 1865, and returned to teaching at the Greene Springs School. However, like so many others from both the North and South in the post-War years, he sought fresh opportunity by relocating to California in 1868. He began farming land in Stanislaus and Fresno counties, and became actively engaged in efforts to develop the state's natural resources and advance the productivity of agricultural practices.

His voluminous journalistic efforts focused on these same subjects, and his articles as a contributing correspondent to a variety of California newspapers earned him a high profile as a leader in the state's rapidly growing agriculture community.

He organized and was elected Master of the Turlock Grange in Stanislaus County in July 1873 and was instrumental in the organization of the California State Grange that same month, serving as the first State Master and afterwards as State Grange Lecturer, a role that allowed him to continue exercising his talent and training as a teacher on behalf of the Grange and his fellow farmers. In his years as worthy Master and Lecturer, Wright organized more than forty California Granges and traveled extensively throughout the state and nation to advocate for Grange interests.

The work for which Major Wright is most celebrated is his authorship of the National Grange's "Declaration of Purposes" which was adopted by unanimous vote at the seventh annual session in February 1874. This document, widely admired from its inception as an articulate and inspiring testament to the essential objectives of the Grange movement, embodies inclusive principles of unity, liberty, truth, tolerance, and charity as a way to (in Wright's words) "...inspire and unite most effectively and lastingly the farmers of every state." The "Declaration of Purposes" has endured the test of time, and still serves as the unifying, philosophical foundation for the Patrons of Husbandry.

Major Wright subsequently served as the National Grange's international commissioner, traveling throughout Europe to assess farm cooperatives and promote the Grange as a model for collective action on behalf of farmers. In the mid-1880s he returned to Alabama to teach and eventually assumed the presidency of the state's leading teacher training institute for women, the Alabama Normal School (now the University of West Alabama.) In his final year he was the principal of the Talledega Military Academy and was studying for the ministry. Even so, Wright maintained membership in the Temescal Grange in California and continued to write and speak on behalf of Grange interests.

In addressing the National Grange at the twenty-fourth annual session in 1890, Major Wright revealed that his most earnest desire in drafting the Declaration of Purposes was to embody inclusive principles of unity, liberty, truth, tolerance, and charity as a way to "...inspire and unite most effectively and lastingly the farmers of every state." After he died in 1894, the twenty-eighth annual session of the National Grange unanimously adopted a resolution that the Grange had "...lost a fearless champion, the country a noble citizen...."