

North Carolina's leaders speak out on emigration

As you read...

Two quotations are presented here, one from a speech by the governor in 1816 and the other from a report of a committee of the legislature in 1833. Both say essentially the same thing, seventeen years apart — that North Carolina's poor systems of transportation limited its citizens' economic opportunity, held the state back, and contributed to the problem of out-migration. Although many of the state's leaders since the colonial era had recognized the need for "internal improvements" such as roads, canals, and better ports, the legislature would not take action on the issue until after 1836.

The Governor's message, 1816

William Miller served as North Carolina's governor from 1814 to 1817. He was a strong supporter of public education and "internal improvements" to North Carolina's transportation system. In 1816, in an address to the legislature, he spoke out on these issues, and warned of the dangers to the state if the government continued to ignore the needs of the people.

The State of North Carolina, though not so highly favored as some of her sister states, has yet many advantages, which if properly improved, would give her that stand in the union, to which her population and extent of territory so eminently entitle her¹.... Situated as she now is, a great part of her produce goes to swell the amount of the exports of the two adjoining States². To prevent this, State pride as well as interest should prompt us to use every exertion. Let her rivers be made navigable, and if practicable her outlets to the ocean opened, and ere long, we should have her agriculture improving, her commercial towns rising to importance, the value of her land increasing, and her people, instead of seeking new countries, contented to remain at home and cultivate the soil that gave them birth. Instead, then, of only contributing to the wealth and aggrandisement of others, we should be enabled to manage our own commercial concerns, and to free ourselves from a degrading species of dependence upon the citizens of other States.³

The “present languishing condition” of North Carolina, 1833

Seventeen years later, despite the efforts of some of the state’s leaders, nothing had been done to improve education and transportation in North Carolina. By the 1830s, almost as many people were leaving North Carolina as were being born there! In 1833, a legislative committee reported, again, that the state urgently needed public education and internal improvements, but it would be a few years more before real reform took place.

Upon comparing the present languishing condition of the agricultural resources of North Carolina with the improved and prosperous condition of even the most inconsiderable member of the Union, the picture portrays the contrast, characteristic of a community worn down by the hand of adversity, in colours too strong to be concealed. That in North Carolina, it is apparent the reward of labor has ceased to be a stimulus to industry and enterprise; that agriculture has ceased to yield to the land owner a compensation equivalent to the expense attending the transportation of his surplus produce to market⁴.... Hence our citizens are daily abandoning the places of their birth for situations in other States less healthy, and often not superior in fertility of soil; but which, by the improvement of those States, rendered so by the fostering aid of Legislative patronage, the facilities to wealth and the means of acquiring the necessaries of life, the profits of labor hold out stronger inducements to agricultural pursuits than is to be found in North Carolina. Nor does the evil stop here. The tide of emigration, which never ebbs, not only carries with it a great portion of the enterprise and prime of our youth, but much of the productive and most valuable description of the State’s wealth. These are facts of “ominous import,” which should admonish us to guard against the fatal issue with which they are pregnant. Can it be our interest so to shape our policy as to render our State the mere nursery for the Western and Southwestern States⁵? Surely not. We not only thereby lessen the political influence of the State in the councils of the General Government, but we evidently weaken the ties of patriotism of our citizens to the land of their nativity.⁶

On the web

North Carolina: The Rip Van Winkle State

<http://www.sog.unc.edu/programs/civiced/resources/docs/ripvanwinkle.pdf>

In this lesson from the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium, students will explore the various nicknames that North Carolina has been given throughout history, focusing on the nickname given to it during the early 1800s: the Rip Van Winkle state. Students will listen to the legend of Rip Van Winkle then discuss the story. Finally, students will learn about the lack of progression in North Carolina during the early 1800s, exploring the relationship between the legend and the perception of North Carolina as "The Rip Van Winkle State." This lesson will culminate with students creating their own picture book based on what they have learned about the "sleep of indifference" in 1800s North Carolina.

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Notes

1. In 1820, North Carolina still ranked fourth (behind Virginia, Pennsylvania, and New York). In 1816, when Governor Miller made this speech, North Carolina was the fourth largest state in the United States by area (after Virginia, Georgia, and New York). It also had the fourth highest population of any state (after Pennsylvania, New York, and Virginia). But North Carolina was poor, and so it had less influence in the national government and economy than many smaller states.
2. Virginia and South Carolina. As in the colonial period, North Carolina's farmers shipped their produce to Charleston or to the ports of southern Virginia for export.
3. Governor's Message, House Journal, 1816, quoted in Charles L. Coon, *The Beginnings of Public Education in North Carolina; A Documentary History, 1790–1840, Volume I* (see <http://www.learnnc.orghttp://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/coon976/coon976.html>) (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton, 1908), p. 112.
4. Farmers can no longer make a profit because it costs them more to transport their goods to market than what they will earn by selling them.
5. Many of the people who were leaving the state were young adults who moved to the South and Southwest to find new land and opportunities. Thus, North Carolina acted as a “nursery” raising children who would grow up and leave. (At this time, the southern United States reached only just west of the Mississippi, so the “Southwest” meant Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas.)
6. Charles L. Coon, *The Beginnings of Public Education in North Carolina; A Documentary History, 1790–1840, Volume II* (see <http://www.learnnc.orghttp://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/coon977/coon977.html>) (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton, 1908), pp. 632–633.