

# Republican rule

Raleigh *Daily Standard*, April 16, 1869.

## As you read...

### A PERIOD OF REFORM

After voters ratified the state's new constitution (page ) in April 1868, William W. Holden was again elected governor. Republicans also won majorities in both houses of the General Assembly. The new constitution had enfranchised (given the vote to) African Americans, who nearly all voted Republican — the Republicans were, after all, the party that had liberated them from slavery — and the presence of the U.S. Army enforced black suffrage. The opposition — now calling itself the Conservative Party because it wanted a return to the Old South, but without slavery — immediately began working to undermine Republican rule.

The Republican majority tried to make government more active in the lives of citizens, extending the ideas of antebellum Whigs. They built railroads and turnpike roads, rebuilt public schools (separate schools for each race) and a state prison, and passed laws giving relief to debtors. To pay for this they spent nearly \$18 million, an amount of money far beyond anything spent by the state before the war. All that spending, of course, meant heavy taxes, which Conservatives resented. (Yes, the *Republicans* were the “tax and spend” party in 1868.)

The state also took on debt, lending money to men who promised to build railroads. Not surprisingly, some of these men were friends of Republican leaders, and some of the railroads were never built. Some of this borrowing was also unconstitutional, and Conservatives pounced on this evidence of Republican corruption. Conservatives succeeded in painting Republican rule as a period of wild spending, fraud, and corruption, and in 1870, they regained control of the state legislature.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

This editorial, published at the close of the 1868-69 legislative session, lists Republican accomplishments and praises the work of the legislature.

1. What does the writer see as the legislature's biggest accomplishments?
2. Why does he think that these laws were important?
3. What did the legislature do that the writer doesn't support as enthusiastically, or that he feels he needs to apologize for?
4. What kind of future do you think this writer wanted for North Carolina? How can you tell?
5. What *facts* does the writer use to make his argument? What opinions does he state? Is it always clear which are which?
6. Compare this to the Conservative response. Which editorial makes the more convincing argument? Why?

The Legislature has adjourned and its labors are before the people. The captions of the laws show how onerous were the duties of that body, and how well they were performed.

In the front rank of its good works was the passage of a liberal homestead law<sup>1</sup>, which will hereafter be a lasting monument to its fame, and a tower of strength to the people.

The amendments to the Code of Civil Procedure<sup>2</sup> are numerous and dictated by experience.

The school law<sup>3</sup> is not in all respects perfect, but it is the commencement of a republican system of free education which will send the light of knowledge streaming through the minds of all the children of the old North State.

Besides the leading acts, numerous railroad charters were granted, which, by a judicious system in the collection of revenue, will open the remotest parts of our grand commonwealth to the intercourse and markets of the world.

The revenue law is as good as could be devised. Owing to the numerous restrictions of the Constitution, imposed for the benefit of the people, it was difficult to frame a new system of taxation which would answer in all particulars to the preconceived opinions of men; but we believe that as the law now stands, sufficient revenue will be raised to defray both the ordinary and extraordinary expenses of the Public Treasury.

The public charities of the State were remodeled on the liberal basis provided for in the Constitution, and sufficient means appropriated to support them for the ensuing fiscal year. In the same manner the University has been placed upon a stable foundation.

The commercial interests of the State were not neglected, while the numerous acts of incorporation for cities and associations<sup>4</sup> show a reviving spirit in all ranks of society.

A general law was passed conferring the requisite corporate powers upon townships, and these corporations will soon be called upon to organize and govern themselves.

Relief was granted numerous officials and persons whom the calamities of the past had reduced to the necessity of applying to the Legislature for aid.

Altogether, we think the General Assembly did well. Day by day its good works, which live after it, will become more apparent and more appreciated. Its revilers will be hushed by the hum of wheels that its laws have called into motion, and the entire people will yet applaud its liberality and independence. In our opinion the Legislature needs no elaborate defence. A fair statement of what it has done is sufficient for the present while the future will entirely vindicate the annual session of 1868-'9.

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## Notes

1. This law was a “homestead exemption” that protected people’s homes and farms from being seized as payment for debts. This is a standard legal protection today — in bankruptcy proceedings, the debtor is usually allowed to keep his or her home. In 1868, though, protecting debtors from creditors was either quite progressive or dangerously radical, depending which

side you were on. It had not been long since people unable to pay debts had been thrown in prison!

2. The Code of Civil Procedure consists of all of the state's civil laws. *Civil* law concerns civil suits, lawsuits brought by one person against another, which are tried in civil court by a different set of procedures than governs criminal courts.

The changes Republicans made to civil law focused especially on protecting debtors in lawsuits brought against them by their creditors (the people who lent them money). North Carolina's economy depended on credit and borrowed money, just as ours does today. Then, though, there were few banks; the poor borrowed money from their wealthier neighbors. If a poor man was unable to repay his loan, his creditor could have nearly all of his property seized, have him imprisoned, or demand that he work for him for a period of time. Debt thus became a way that wealthy slaveholders could control poor whites, and many poor whites were prevented from ever owning land by ongoing cycles of debt.

Republicans had, for example, passed a "relief ordinance" (law) allowing debtors to pay off one-tenth of their debts each year. By making it easier for poor debtors to get back on their feet, Republicans were trying to provide more economic opportunity for all North Carolinians, but they angered wealthy creditors who saw the new laws as interfering with business contracts and their right to collect on legitimate debts.

3. The new law established separate schools for black and white students.
4. To *incorporate* a town or city is to give it the power to govern itself — to make laws, collect taxes, and so on. Republicans tended to support business interests, which meant supporting the growth of towns and cities.

The "associations" mentioned were either business corporations or groups doing charity work (which we'd call "nonprofits" today).