

The Kirk-Holden War

Jason Tomberlin, "June 1870 — The 'Kirk-Holden War' (see <http://www.lib.unc.edu/ncc/ref/nchistory/jun2006/index.html>)," *This Month in North Carolina History*, June 2006.

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On June 6, 1870, Governor William Woods Holden, a Republican from Wake County, issued a five-hundred-dollar reward for the arrest or information leading to the capture of individuals involved in the deaths of John W. "Chicken" Stephens, Wyatt Outlaw, and several other North Carolinians. The proclamation, which also detailed various other acts of violence against African Americans and white Republicans, attributed the crimes to the Ku Klux Klan and was one of the many events leading to the "Kirk-Holden War."

Following its formation in the aftermath of the Civil War, the Klan quickly spread across the South. In North Carolina, the Klan was not a monolithic organization; rather, it was a loose conglomeration of secret societies, which used terror and vigilante tactics in an attempt to reverse Republican electoral success and maintain white supremacy. While Klan activity occurred throughout North Carolina, it was particularly active in the Piedmont counties of Alamance and Caswell. Governor Holden attempted to use local authorities to control the violence, but in many cases county and community leaders were members of the Klan or sympathetic to its activities.

As events began to spiral out of control, the North Carolina General Assembly passed the "Shoffner Act," introduced by Alamance County Republican senator T. M. Shoffner. The law enabled the governor to declare a county "to be in a state of insurrection, and to call into active service the militia of the state to such an extent as may become necessary to suppress such insurrection" if the local officials were incapable — or unwilling — to do so. Holden declared martial law in Alamance County on March 7, 1870, and in Caswell County on July 8.

Holden selected former Union colonel and cavalry leader George W. Kirk, who was born and raised in Greene County, Tennessee, to lead the state militia troops. Kirk's infamy and reputation as a Union "bushwhacker," whose Federal units terrorized Southern mountain communities, resonated deeply throughout the state. The newly constituted force of state militia, predominately consisting of men from eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina, arrived in Alamance and Caswell Counties in July and arrested over 100 individuals, mostly without incident. The prisoners were jailed in Caswell County,

while awaiting trial before a special military court. Holden and Kirk ignored writs of habeas corpus that were issued by a state judge, and the defendants and their supporters turned to the federal judiciary for assistance. Support for the governor's controversial measures faltered, and President Ulysses S. Grant warned Holden that the national government would no longer support his actions. The suspected Klan leaders and members were released in late August, and, in November, Alamance and Caswell Counties were declared to no longer be in a state of insurrection.

The events of the "Kirk-Holden War," as it came to be called by those opposed to Governor Holden's actions, and the subsequent electoral collapse of the state Republican Party in 1870 were substantial factors in the December 1870 impeachment and March 1871 conviction of Holden.

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