

CHATHAM COUNTY, A HOTBED OF POPULISM

by Jim Wiggins, May 2011*

In 1877 a conservative Democratic Party began to undo what it perceived to be the damage done to North Carolina during Reconstruction. The party would remain the state's dominant political force until the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s—almost a century—*except* for the decade of the 1890s. For that brief period in history the Populist or People's Party gained significant power, and Chatham County was a leader in this movement. Historians have referred to the county as a “hotbed of Populism.”¹

During the 1890s Chatham produced populist leaders such as John W. Atwater, William F. “Buck” Strowd, Alfred M. Self, Alexander M. “Sandy” Wicker, James Everett Bryan, Rufus Boxter Lineberry, and Robert James Powell. These men fought to secure state legislation which, among other things, fixed the legal interest rate for crop loans, lowered railroad freight rates, opened up the election process and restructured local government, and increased spending on education. The Populists, in cooperation with the Republicans, supplanted the Democrats for this brief period. At the end of the decade, the Democrats waged a campaign that focused on white supremacy, regained control, and passed legislation that overturned much of the Populists' progressive legislation.

This paper will focus on the rise and fall of the Populist Party in Chatham County, and on the political debates within the county during the decade of the 1890s. This information is presented in the context of state politics, and will highlight Chatham County's leadership role in the Populist movement. The paper will extensively quote several Chatham newspapers of the time, and will identify dozens of Chatham citizens who participated, on one side or the other, in the politics of the day.

Farmers' Struggles Set the Stage

The Populism of the 1890s was a movement to increase representation of the interests of common people. In North Carolina, as well as in other parts of the country, the common people were rural, so it is not surprising that the rise of the Populist Party in North Carolina began with the formation of the Farmers' Alliance. Following Reconstruction, North Carolina's farmers (like farmers throughout the South) faced a significant decline in crop prices, had difficulty in obtaining credit because of the shortage of money following the Civil War, and were often ensnared in a crop-lien system. The crop-lien system involved a farmer's buying supplies (seed, fertilizer, food, etc.) from merchants on credit in exchange for a lien on the farmer's crop which the farmer would have to repay, with interest, when selling his crop at harvest time. The best way to repay the debt was to maximize the production of cash crops such as tobacco and cotton, but over-production of these crops contributed to lower crop prices which in turn made it difficult for farmers to pay off their lien-debts completely—leaving many farmers in a cycle of debt from which they could not escape.

In 1877 the state legislature, controlled by the Democrats, created the Department of Agriculture and appointed Leonidas Lafayette Polk from Anson County as the first state commissioner of agriculture. However, the Democrats had done little else to alleviate the problems of most farmers. Into the

breach stepped Polk with his newspaper the *Progressive Farmer* to organize the Farmers' Alliance of North Carolina in 1887. He editorialized

There is something radically wrong in our industrial system. There is a screw loose. The wheels have dropped out of balance....The railroads have never been so prosperous and yet agriculture languishes. The banks have never done a better and more profitable business, and yet agriculture languishes. Manufacturing enterprises never made more money or were in a more flourishing condition, and yet agriculture languishes. Salaries and fees were never more temptingly high and desirable, and yet agriculture languishes....We don't want a farmers' party, but we want the farmers of this country to take sufficient interest in politics to keep a strict eye on all the party does.²

Like traditional lodges, local Alliance clubs were secret societies with passwords and secret handshakes as well as provisions for expulsion of a member disclosing club secrets. Membership was restricted to white people age 16 or older (both men and women) who were farmers or almost any occupation but merchants and lawyers. [Although a black farmers' alliance existed in North Carolina, I can find no evidence of its presence in Chatham County.] While Polk and other early leaders of the Alliance were usually wealthy planters, the rank-and-file members were predominantly small landowning farmers, with few wealthy planters and few of the most impoverished farmers. Some of the most active members were not farmers, but instead were newspaper editors, teachers, or physicians. The Alliance served several functions. It disseminated information regarding innovative agricultural practices—a forerunner to the state's Agricultural Extension Services. The Alliance set up businesses to sell goods to farmers at discount prices. The Farmers' Alliance Co-operative Association in Siler City opened its doors in 1888. Buying seed and fertilizer in bulk allowed the stores to pass the reduced price on to farmers. Not all such efforts were successful. An Alliance shoe factory turned out 3,553 pairs of shoes during the winter at an average cost of \$1.38, but during the spring the demand decreased to such a degree that the factory was closed. Local Alliance clubs also strengthened support for their goals through social functions (regular meetings, picnics, etc.). By 1889, the Alliance had clubs in all North Carolina counties with 50 local clubs in Chatham County—ranked second in the state behind Wake County. The strong Alliance organization in Chatham was the first suggestion that Chatham County might have the ingredients needed to make it the “hotbed of Populism” that it would later become.

In 1887 the newly formed Chatham County Alliance chapter elected as its president John W. Atwater. Atwater was a 47-year-old farmer from Baldwin and Williams townships. About to enter college when the Civil War broke out, he enlisted in the Confederate army in Company D, First Regiment, North Carolina Volunteer Infantry, serving with General Robert E. Lee until the Appomattox surrender.

To achieve its political goals the Alliance needed the support of the state legislature, controlled at that time by Democrats. In 1887, it lobbied for a farm relief bill that would create a railroad commission having power to reduce railroad freight rates. These efforts failed in 1887 and again in 1889. In 1890 the Alliance sought more influence over the Democratic Party. At the state Alliance convention, a legislative committee was formed and assigned the task of formulating an agenda for the upcoming legislative session. The commission was chaired by Chathamite Robert James Powell who was 51 years old and an experienced politician. He was a farmer in Center Township, a graduate of the University of North Carolina, a Civil War veteran who had enlisted in Company E,

North Carolina 10th Infantry Regiment and been wounded in the battle of Gettysburg, and he later represented Chatham County as legislator in both the state House and Senate.

The Election of 1890: The Alliance Finds a Voice

The election in the fall of 1890 resulted in an 1891 legislature whose 170 members included at least 100 who were not only Democrats but also Alliance members, one of whom was Chatham County's Senator John W. Atwater. Following the agenda proposed by Powell's commission, the legislature passed a farm relief bill that created a railroad commission with the power to supervise railroads, including fixing freight rates and examining railroad companies' tax-exempt status. (The latter eventually resulted in the railroads conceding to taxation in 1895.) The 1891 legislature also increased taxes for public schools. At that time the state had spent about 44 cents per capita annually on public schools, the southern states an average of 98 cents, and the country an average of \$2.05. Students spent 60 days in school in North Carolina, compared to an average of 101 days for students in the entire south and 135 for students in the country as a whole. One reason for the Alliance's support of school taxes might have been the hope of transforming the future electorate from illiterate farmers who didn't vote into informed farmers who would have more political power.

The legislature created a normal and industrial school for white women (UNC-G) and added a normal school for black women at Elizabeth City. The second Morrill Act of 1890 required that states receiving federal grants for agriculture must not discriminate against persons because of race or color. Rather than integrate the agricultural college in Raleigh, the legislature chose to create an agricultural and mechanical college for black men (NCA&T). Support for increased spending on higher education was tempered by the views held by some legislators who feared that state financial support of public colleges would hinder existing denominational colleges and others who felt that the University of North Carolina represented class privilege. The Alliance legislators' progressive reforms stopped short when they rejected bills that would provide children with free textbooks, regulate the employment of women and of children under the age of sixteen in factories, and tax income.

The Alliance also wanted to see the federal government use its funds to establish warehouses in which farmers could store their cash crops. A farmer could store his tobacco or cotton in such warehouses, receive a loan of 80 percent of the current market value, and repay the loan plus a small interest after waiting to sell the crop when its price was high. Democratic U. S. Senator Zebulon Vance had proposed the bill in early 1890, but then gave it only lukewarm support. Vance's failure to support the bill strongly was a sore point with Alliance members when it came time for the state legislature to select a U.S. senator for the next term. (U.S. senators were not selected by popular vote of citizens until passage of the 17th Amendment in 1913.) Nevertheless, Vance was returned to the U. S. Senate where the warehouse bill never got out of committee. The failure of the warehouse bill spurred the Alliance's efforts to gain more control of the state legislature.

The Populist Party is Organized

Thus a serious debate over the Alliance's forming a third political party evolved. One faction of the Alliance argued that farmers had voted the Democrat ticket for twenty-five years and obtained no relief. It was time to be more loyal to the Alliance than to the Democrats. Another faction wanted to

remain within the Democratic Party, reminding Alliance members that the Alliance had originally formed as a non-partisan organization. To separate itself from the Democratic Party and to form a third party could split the Democrats' power-base and allow the minority Republicans, who had support from many blacks, to gain control, thereby jeopardizing white rule in the state. Better to stay with the Democrats and try to dominate them. Did this sound like good news to the Democrats? To some it certainly didn't, and this led to a split in the Democratic Party between those who wanted to placate the Alliance and those who felt the party should ignore the Alliance. Of course the latter attitude just reinforced the position of those Alliance members wanting to form a third party.

In early 1892, Alliance leaders in North Carolina began to organize the Populist Party (also known as the People's Party). Polk supported the move and redesigned his *Progressive Farmer* as the state Populist organ. However, in June 1892, Polk died suddenly, leaving the state Alliance and the new Populist Party without a dominant leader. Marion Butler, who had been elected President of the state Farmers Alliance in 1891, assumed the leadership role along with his own newspaper *The Caucasian*. Butler, a UNC graduate whose aspirations of a career in law were interrupted by his father's death and the necessity of running the family farm, was only 25 when he became President of a local Alliance chapter, and 28 when he became President of the state Farmers Alliance. The focus of the new party was to attack Democrats and their policies, rather than a narrow focus on farm relief.

Local Populism clubs were organized at a rapid pace throughout North Carolina, followed shortly thereafter by state and local meetings of the Populist Party, including meetings in Chatham County. The meetings were ridiculed by some of the state's major newspapers including Raleigh's *News and Observer*. Populists were accused of advocating social equality between the races and supporting school desegregation. Another source of criticism was that the national Populist Party had nominated a former Union general—James B. Weaver—for president of the United States! In actuality most Populists were probably no less racist than Democrats or most white Republicans. The difference was that while the Democrats made race a major political issue, Populists tried to focus attention more on other issues. Nevertheless, the organization of the Populist Party did split the Alliance enough that it decreased its effectiveness as a farmers' organization.³

The Election of 1892: Chatham Populists Elected Although Democrats Maintain Control of State

In the 1892 fall election, the number of votes received by the Populist Party candidates was only half the number of Alliance members in the state. Was this due to the failure of the Populist Party candidates to focus members' attention away from race issues? Or was it the result of many Alliance members being interested only in local issues? Or did it simply reflect the number of Alliance members who were Democrats dedicated to their party? In any case, statewide, the Democrats won a sweeping victory. One of the exceptions was the former-Democrat, now-Populist candidate seeking to be returned to the state Senate—Chathamite John W. Atwater. Chatham County also was one of only eight counties with Populist pluralities in the races for the state House of Representatives. Its two winning Populist candidates were Alfred M. Self and Alexander W. "Sandy" Wicker. Self was a 56-year-old blacksmith from Hadley Township. Wicker was 45 years old and a teacher from Oakland Township. Voters in Chatham County also elected a full slate of Populists to county offices.

Chatham County was now leading the Populist movement. It was the only North Carolina county in which a majority of the voters (53%) supported the losing Populist candidate in the gubernatorial race. Although the county gave 62 percent of its votes to the losing Populist candidate for U. S. House of Representatives, the 4th congressional district of which Chatham was a part gave the candidate only 44 percent of its votes. The losing Populist was Chathamite William F. Strowd.

Strowd was a 59-year-old farmer raised in Orange County who, after his wife (the sister of Atwater) was given a farm by her father, moved across the county line into north Chatham. At the beginning of the Civil War he was mustered into state service with the Orange Light Infantry which became Company D of the First Regiment of North Carolina Volunteers. As enlistment in the regiment was only for six months, the regiment was dissolved after that time. Many of the men reenlisted in another regiment; but whether Strowd was among them is unclear. In 1875 he had been chosen as one of Chatham County's two delegates to the state constitutional convention called to undo some of the perceived wrongs done to the state during Reconstruction, particularly those dealing with agricultural issues. At least some of his efforts were rewarded when the state Department of Agriculture was established in 1877.

The *News and Observer* responded to the Populist losses, "We rejoice that the Third Party has been wiped off the face of the earth in this State. Well done for our people! Well done that our people have repudiated in such thunder tones the fellows who have sought to lead them astray to false doctrine and appeals to their cupidity."⁴

The Populist newspaper *Caucasian* fired back with a statement by J. E. Spence of Haywood, Chatham County, which read:

[The] Democratic machine had undoubtedly maintained its power by its control of the county and State offices. This control has not been secured by the voice of the people, but by force and fraud sometimes, and often contrary to the wishes of the majority at the ballot box... It is time for patriots to arouse. Men who love our free institutions and place patriotism above the love of office are needed. He who would restore the control of government to the voice of the free men will richly deserve the gratitude of all good citizens.⁵

Even though the Populists had won a sweeping victory in Chatham County as Spence noted, the county commissioners (appointed by justices of the peace who were in turn appointed by the state legislature) were all Democrats, and as a result the Democratic Party machine controlled the election and levied taxes on the citizens. The Populists promised extensive reforms of election law if they gained power.

The Democrats in the state legislature passed a bill that repealed the charter of the state Alliance charging that the Alliance was funding the Populist campaign and that people donating money to the non-partisan Alliance were not aware of the fact. This probably changed the minds of some Alliance members who had argued that the Alliance's goals could best be achieved through the Democratic Party.

The Populists began to do two things between the 1892 and 1894 elections. First, they began a grass roots effort to increase local support for the party, but not modeled after earlier Alliance efforts. All

local Populist clubs were to be open to the public, with no secret passwords or handshakes. Clubs could be as small as five members; they would have officers and meet regularly to discuss political issues and party policy, supplementing these activities with party speakers, pamphlets, and newspapers stating the party's position on issues. Second, because the party could not defeat the Democrats alone, its leaders began secret meetings with Republican Party representatives because both parties had similar views on fair elections, home rule for the counties, and increased spending on education.

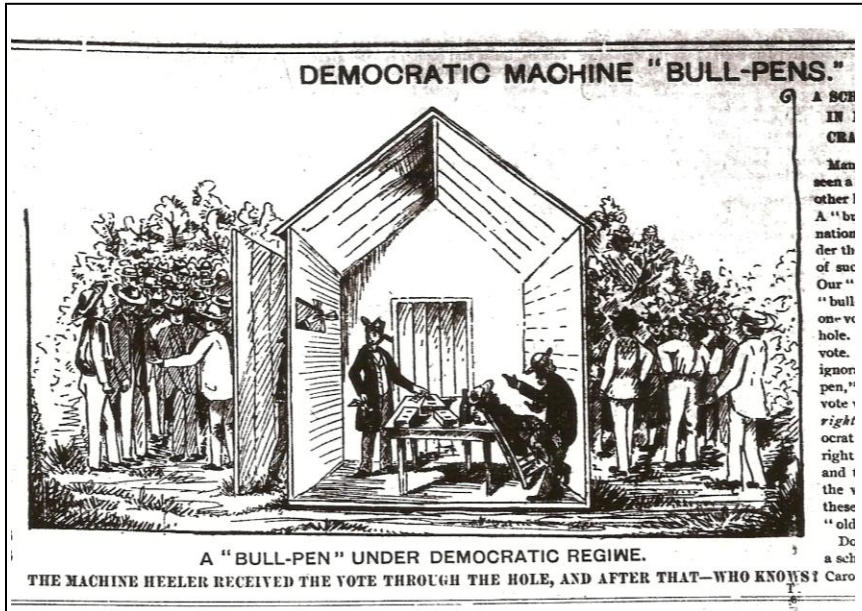
The resulting coalition did not achieve the level of "fusion," although this term was often used to describe the political movement of the 1890s. The term "fusion" implies a political merger, and this was not the case. Rather, there were varying degrees of cooperation. Sometimes the two parties would agree on a candidate or slate. Other times one party would list its candidates for a partial slate of officers which then would be filled out by the other party's candidates. When the parties disagreed, say over nominating an African-American, they just put forward their separate slates. [For the role of blacks in the Populist-Republican coalition, see Edmonds.]

The Election of 1894: The Tables Turn; Populists Dominate; Election Laws Reformed

In the 1894 fall election it was the Populist Party's turn to sweep the state—with varying levels of Republican cooperation. This time Chatham County's William Stowd won a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. In the state General Assembly of 170 members, the Populists won 66 seats and the Republicans 53 seats. Chatham County voters returned two Populist candidates—Self and Wicker—to the state House of Representatives. One of the first things the state legislature did was to restore the charter of the Farmers' Alliance. It made the state leader of the Populist Party—Marion Butler—a United States senator. It raised taxes on railroads and businesses. It appointed a Populist to a position on the Railroad Commission. The legislature raised property and poll taxes to pay for increased spending on schools at all levels. This time the legislature also addressed an issue of great importance to the poorer farmers—the high interest rates within the crop-lien system—by passing a bill fixing the legal interest rate at six percent.

It is likely that Populists of all income levels could support legislation to reform election laws and local government. In 1877, the Democrats had taken over the political process when the legislature passed a bill that ended the direct election of most county and local officials, replacing direct election with appointment by justices of the peace who in turn were appointed by the Democratic-Party-controlled legislature, effectively keeping local government out of the hands of Republicans and their black supporters. In 1879, the selection of justices of the peace was transferred to county commissioners (mostly Democrats) who themselves had been appointed by the legislature (mostly Democrats). Justices of the peace (mostly Democrats) would, in turn, nominate registrars (mostly Democrats) to monitor local elections. The clerk of court, also appointed by the county commissioners, had the power to establish places of voting. The voter could not place his vote in the ballot box, but instead had to hand his ballot to an appointed judge who placed it in the box. This indirect voting process was lampooned in a cartoon depicting a "bull-pen" published in the *Chatham Citizen*, a Pittsboro Populist newspaper in publication from 1894-1899. Its editor, Rufus Boxter Lineberry, was forty years old, born in Albright Township, and a graduate of Wake Forest College where he was editor of the student newspaper.

The 1895 legislature established new election laws. There would be an accessible voting place for every 350 eligible voters. Each voter still had to submit his ballot to a judge, but now each polling place would have one registrar and one judge from each of the three political parties. Votes were counted in the presence of the officials of the three political



parties. The ballots were produced in three different colors to facilitate the ease of voting by illiterate voters. Fines were placed on individuals who bought votes or who tried to intimidate voters.

New laws restructuring local government were also created. Justices of the peace were to be elected at the township level every two years. Three county commissioners were also to be elected. However, fear of blacks having too much power in majority-black districts led the legislators to create a law that

permitted voters to petition for two additional commissioners to be appointed by the district's superior court judge "because the business of the county would be improperly managed if such appointments were not made." The petition would have to be supported by 200 voters, at least 100 of whom must be freeholders; and the two additional commissioners could not belong to the party of a majority of the commissioners.

The Race Issue Is Highlighted

Even the legislation passed by the Populist-Republican-controlled legislature aimed at seeing that blacks did not wield political power did nothing to lessen the Democrats' using fear of black power and appeals to white supremacy as a major part of their platform. When William H. Crews of Granville County, one of five black representatives in the state legislature, proposed that the legislature cut short its deliberations in honor of Frederick Douglas who had died, it drew the following response from Henry Armand London, editor of the *Chatham Record* in the March 7, 1895 issue:

The decent white people of North Carolina, whether populists or democrats, indignantly denounce our legislators who voted to adjourn in respect to the memory of Fred Douglass [sic]. They are justly incensed that such a distinguished and unusual honor should have been conferred on a runaway slave—on an accomplice and confederate of old John Brown—and on a defiant miscegenationist. And yet this action—this disgraceful and shameful action—is the natural result—is the climax—of the efforts made by the populists to control the colored vote!

The Populist newspaper, *The Caucasian*, responded: "For a quarter of a century the South has had its scarecrow... 'Hush go to sleep, the nigger will get you.' If new leaders with new ideas and clearer

vision have sought to lead their people forward, they have been stopped by fake prophets shouting ‘nigger! nigger!’ —If intelligent men have pleaded for an increase in schools and more education as essential to progress of any kind, they have been silenced by the terrible scare-crow of ‘nigger!’”⁶

Going into the 1896 election the Populists were split by a debate that focused less on policy and more on strategy. Some wanted to continue their cooperation with the Republicans because it had been successful in the last election and in the subsequent legislation passed by the state legislature. Others argued that if Populists failed to cooperate with Republicans, this might result in Republican victories and lead to more black political power reminiscent of Reconstruction. Still others wanted the party to go it alone out of principle, arguing that a party which cannot distinguish itself from other parties cannot justify its existence.

The state Republicans, on the other hand, felt that only continued cooperation with the Populists would secure the progressive reforms passed in the state legislature. They nominated one-half of their state ticket and invited the Populists to fill out the remainder. To illustrate the power-broker position of the Populists, the Democrats also briefly debated whether to try to seek the Populists’ cooperation. By the time the election rolled around most of the counties had formed a Populist-Republican coalition. So had the state-level parties, with the Republicans agreeing to support the Populist congressional candidates in five of the nine congressional districts and in many state offices.

But, once again, Chatham County was different. At their county convention, Populists nominated candidates for some state and local offices and left other offices for Republican nominees. At their ensuing county convention, Republicans nominated an entire slate of Republican candidates. Populists were surprised, but soon recovered to nominate an entire slate of their own.

The Election of 1896: Populist Success—Democrats Fight Back

In the 1896 election, both the Populists and the Republicans fared better than the Democrats. The Populists won 64 seats in the North Carolina Legislature (two less than the 1894 election outcome), the Republicans 72 seats, and the Democrats 40 seats. Because no party had a majority, coalitions were a necessity, as had been expected. Statewide, Populists increased their U. S. House representatives to five. From Chatham County, William Strowd was returned to the U. S. House of Representatives, while John Atwater was returned to the state Senate. Chathamite James Everett Bryan was newly elected to the state House. Bryan was 50-year-old farmer from Cape Fear Township. The Populist Party had nominated a second candidate for the state House—Daniel Tally, a 43-year-old carpenter from Gulf Township, but he lost to a Republican candidate—Lossing L. Wrenn who later was Vice-President of the Chatham Bank (1902), President of Siler City Milling Company (1910), and Mayor of Siler City (1913). Otherwise, the Populists also won most of the county offices—sheriff (J. J. Jenkins), register of deeds (J. T. Paschal), and three county commissioners (W. O. Farrell, John R. Bright, and William A. Lineberry).

Despite the success of the Populist-Republican coalition in 1896, the Populists continued to splinter at both the state and county level. At the state level the debate about whether or not to continue cooperating with the Republicans continued. One side argued that cooperation with the Republicans could lead to more black power. The other side responded that white supremacy was safe even under

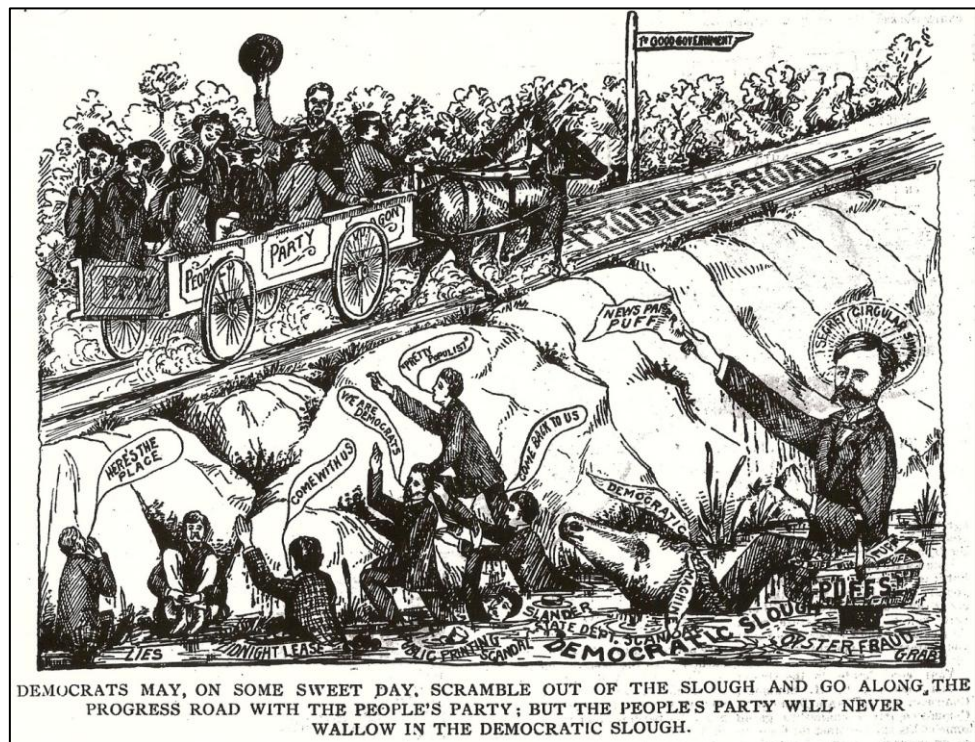
cooperation because blacks were in the minority, and even if blacks were not a minority, white power would be maintained because of whites' superior intelligence. Other debates focused on who the state Senate should elect as the U. S. senator from North Carolina, and who to appoint to the Railroad Commission. The National Alliance Conference advocated *direct* election of U.S. senators. Other Populists wanted to get beyond these disputes and instead focus on the Populist agenda promised in the campaign, such as to increase educational spending, reform county government, and reverse the "monopolistic" ninety-nine year lease of the North Carolina Railroad that had been given to the Southern Railroad Company. A bill annulling the lease failed to pass in the state legislature.

Some Populists even gave thought to cooperation with the Democrats. A counterargument came from the *Chatham Citizen*, which favored cooperation with the Republicans. On April 17, 1898, the *Citizen's* editor, Lineberry wrote, "There is no common ground on which the Populists and Democrats can unite in North Carolina. They do not agree on one solitary State issue... [The proposal] springs from the avarice, the itching palms, and the love of office, of the politicians in our party."

Democrats settled the issue when they refused to cooperate with the Populists. Instead, Democrats decided to base their campaign on two issues. The first was to seek the support of an emerging industrial elite by denouncing the Populist-Republican coalition's efforts to increase taxes on big business and to increase regulation of railroads. The second issue, on which they campaigned most, was the race issue. Democrats appealed to prejudice using slogans involving the protection of white women and black rule in the eastern section of the state. The *News and Observer*, for example, regularly published reports of alleged "Negro atrocities," most notably of attempted rapes of white women by black men, and of black men supporting black women who broke social traditions in their relationships with white women. Democrats, arguing that the Populist-Republican coalition had increased the number of blacks in local offices, targeted illiterate whites with cartoons depicting supporters of the coalition as fools and blacks as sexually deviant. The state, they said, must be saved from black rule and white womanhood protected!

Populists claimed the high ground in this cartoon published in the October 26, 1898, in the *Chatham Citizen*.

In actuality the differences between Populists and the



Democrats on black issues, particularly the black rule issue, were minor. So instead of addressing the race issue directly, the Populists tried to paint the Democrats as hypocrites who favored limited black rule when it benefitted their political interests. For example, the October 26, 1898 issue of the *Chatham Citizen* led with the headline, “‘White Man’s Party’ Democracy Shown Up; It Elects Negroes to Office by Hundreds, Then Squalls ‘Nigger Domination.’” That issue continued:

The “issue” of the present State campaign was MADE and FORCED by the Democratic machine. It was *made* for the purpose of attempting to side-track and obscure the *true economic issues* in which the people are vitally interested, and which the Democratic machine despises because said issues are virile and mean good government for the people instead of “jobs” and “grabs” for a few Democratic bosses; and the same issue was FORCED because the Democratic machine owns and controls the Democratic press, which is a disgrace to the State and people, and ordered that press to howl “Nigger.”

...Under the Democratic regime it was common for that machine to appoint numerous negroes as poll-holders at election times, and to appoint the most ignorant and most easily purchasable negroes that could be found, despite the protest of people who demanded intelligent election officers.

...Legislature appointed and elected a large number of negroes as magistrates in many of the Eastern counties of the State in 1876-1877. It is true that this course was opposed by nine members of the legislature, who entered a protest against it. But the fact remains that the Legislature, being Democratic, made the appointments and thus established a course of procedure which the Democratic machine and press now think it a winning policy to denounce.

....This kind of “nigger” somersaulting makes every sensible voter in the State ridicule and laugh at the machine and futher [*sic*], it shows that the machine tricksters, in addition to being the most outrageous liars and vicious slanderers that can be found, WORST AND MOST HOPELESS POLITICAL FOOLS on earth.

In Chatham County arguments about road and school taxes were also debated. The *Chatham Citizen* of September 14, 1898 noted:

Are taxes any higher? Let’s see. The levy for 1898 is the same as for 1893, yet we have increased the school tax 2 cents and levied five cents for roads. In other words, for the same money, we are giving the tax-payers seven cents more for their schools and roads than they received under Democratic rule.

In September, the Populists held their 4th congressional district convention. Chatham’s delegates to that convention are listed in the box at right.

CHATHAM COUNTY DELEGATES TO THE POPULIST CONVENTION OF THE FOURTH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT [*Chatham Citizen*, August 24, 1898]

Delegates-at-Large: J. E. Spence and J. M. Riggsbee.
Albright: W. A. Duncan and W. J. Thompson.
Hadley: R. R. Smith and J. R. Jones.
Darks’s: C. N. Justice.
Strowd’s: F. N. Gattis and J. G. Fearrington.
Cole’s Mills: J. W. Atwater, W. C. Pearson and B. M. Pearson.
Council’s Shop: J. F. Williams and B. R. Hargrove.
New Hope: W. D. Mathews and J. A. Goodwin.
Haw River: W. G. Bland and Moses Clark.
Centre: J. J. Jenkins, Jos. Eubanks and J. W. White.
Pittsboro: R. B. Lineberry.
Hickory Mt.: J. C. Tysor and B. E. Webster.
Rives Chapel: J. J. Johnson and T. R. Greene.
Rossen: J. T. Paschal, J. P. Dark, and W. W. Edwards.
Siler City: Walter Tally.
Bear Creek: J. R. Gilbert and N. W. Dixon.
Welch: R. H. Dixon.
Gulf: O. D. Palmer, D. W. Tally and S. P. Moore.
Asbury: W. H. Burns, J. R., Bright and John W. Goldston.
Goldston’s Mill: A. W. Wicker and R. F. Johnson.
Lockville: J. D. Moore, J. E. Bryan and J. W. Taylor.
Buckhorne: E. C. Cox.

State Senator Atwater became the center of attention when he walked out of the Populists’ congressional convention over opposition to the re-nomination of his brother-in-law, William Strowd, to the U. S. Congress. A few days later, he and others walked out of the Populist county convention over their opposition to continuing cooperation with the Republicans. Atwater and others who opposed continuing cooperation with the Republicans were called “bolters.” Essentially, the Chatham Populist party split into two factions. Accounts indicate that the bolters represented about one-third of the total Populists in the county. In the September 21, 1898 issue of the *Chatham Citizen*, forty-three bolters signed their names to a letter explaining their reasons for bolting. The list at right includes those names, plus four others whose names later appeared on the Populist bolter slate of candidates for the 1898 county election. Those Populists supporting continuing cooperation met with Republicans and agreed on a coalition ticket.

These events resulted in two Populist tickets for the fall elections—one for cooperation and another for independence. Atwater led the independent faction in a bid for the U. S. congress.

1898 CHATHAM COUNTY POPULIST ELECTION SLATES		
OFFICE	POPULIST-REPUBLICAN	POPULIST BOLTERS
US Senator	J. J. Jenkins	John W. Atwater
NC Senator	Republican: J. A. Goodwin	
NC Representative	Republican: L. L. Wren	W. E. Goldston
NC Representative	Republican: R. A. Giles	J. A. Duncan
Clerk of Court	R. H. Dixon	J. E. Spence
Sheriff	J. J. Johnson	W. C. Pearson
Register of Deeds	John T. Paschal	W.O. Williams
Surveyor	Republican: T. Gardner	C. Farrand
Coroner	Dr. A. H. Lutterloh	Dr. R. Gattis
County Commissioner	J. R. Bright	A. D. Burnett
County Commissioner	Republican: W. O. Farrell	J. H. Jones
The third county commissioner position was won by L. B. Bynum, a Democrat.		

The Election of 1898: Democrats Win Big—But Not in Chatham

In the November 1898 election, Democrats lost only four U. S. congressional seats, one of which was won by Chathamite John Atwater—the seat previously held by his brother-in-law. Scores of local elections were won by Democrats. Chatham County once again showed its strong Populist sentiments. In Chatham, Republicans won the three state legislature seats, while the Populists won all the county seats with the exception of two seats won by Republican coalition partners and one seat won by a Democrat.

At the state level, the Democrats won big, receiving 134 seats in the legislature. The Populist representation dropped from over 64 seats in 1896 to just 6 seats in 1898.

CHATHAM COUNTY POPULIST BOLTERS

- B.R. Hargrove
- W. E. Goldston
- J. A. Duncan
- J. E. Spence
- W. C. Pearson
- W. O. Williams
- C. Farrand
- Dr. R. Gattis
- A. D. Burnett
- J. H. Jones
- W. B. Wilkie
- J. W. Atwater
- J. G. Fearington
- J. W. Whittington
- J. D. Yates
- J. E. Lloyd
- A. W. Byrd
- J. L. Andres
- J. D. Castleberry
- J. B. Atwater
- H. M. Lewter
- T. B. Fearington
- J. F. Council
- R. U. Lewter
- A. Stone
- J. M. Hancock
- A. M. Yates
- J. H. Jones
- A. L. Blake
- W. M. Williams
- W. A. Mann
- A. P. Rudd
- C. O. Riggsbee
- L. E. Gattis
- E. W. Jenkins
- E. C. Bennett
- A. Bowden
- J. F. Andrews
- W. S. Andrews
- J. H. Norwood
- Jeter Haithcock
- C. A. Snipes
- Wm. Pendergrass
- Jefferson Ivey
- A. Eubanks
- Frank Baldwin
- M. T. Wilkie
- W. F. Snipes

[Source: *Chatham Citizen*,
September 21 and 28,
1898]

Just a day after the election, apparently in response to the Democrats' regaining control of the state legislature, Wilmington exploded. The events were reported in the November 16, 1898 issue of the *Chatham Citizen*:

RACE RIOT IN WILMINGTON

On Wednesday, the day after the election, there was a mass meeting of white citizens of Wilmington, attended by nearly 1,000. They adopted a series of seven resolutions, declaring in positive terms that Wilmington will never again submit to be dominated by negroes or by white men who use the negro to help them into power. The seventh resolution demanded that the *Daily Record* must be suppressed and its negro editor, Manley, must leave the locality.

The negroes were notified that unless their demands were complied with by eight o'clock Thursday morning, the *Record's* office and outfit would be demolished and Manley forcibly ejected. The negroes did not comply and the white people at 8:30 Thursday morning demolished the *Record* printing outfit and burned the house.

Negroes were aroused by this conduct and exaggerated reports of it and gathered in mobs. They were ordered to disperse but did not do so. A conflict ensued. The white people claimed that the negroes fired first. As a result of this and subsequent encounters 11 negroes have been killed, 12 wounded—10 mortally wounded, and some 3 or 4 white men wounded but will recover.

By their resolutions and acts carrying into effect the same, the mayor and chief of police were forced to resign. Hon. A. M. Waddell was elected mayor in place of Wright [who] resigned.

The Election of 1900: Blacks Disfranchised; Populist Progress Reversed

With Democrats back in control of the state legislature, they proposed to eliminate black rule by exacting an amendment requiring any applicant for voting registration to pay a poll tax and to be able to read and write any section of the Constitution. To avoid disfranchising illiterate whites, the amendment exempted any person who was entitled to vote on or before January 1, 1867, and also any lineal descendent of such persons, provided they register before December 1, 1908. The amendment was to be submitted to North Carolina voters on August 2, 1900. Populist leaders didn't quite know how to respond to the proposed amendment. They feared that the exemption part of the amendment might be declared unconstitutional—leaving the remaining part of the amendment which would disfranchise illiterate whites. As a result, the leaders failed to take a stand on the amendment in order to avoid making it a party issue. Instead they made the amendment a matter for "individual choice."

In addition to the proposed amendment, the Democrat-Party-controlled legislature repealed 153 of the laws passed between 1895 and 1897 by the Populist-Republican coalition. They eliminated the Railroad Commission and passed a law requiring that blacks be limited to "separate but equal accommodation" in railroad cars and steamboats.

The 1900 election of Chatham County and state officials was held on August 2, and the election of federal officials on November 6. Included on the August 2 ballot was the proposed state amendment attempting to reduce the black vote.

The amendment easily won approval in the state, even in black majority counties (60% of voters approving). Henry Armand London's *Chatham Record* confidently announced—on the day of the election—the results.

VICTORY! WHITE SUPREMACY!! 50,000 MAJORITY. OVERWHELMING MAJORITY!
AMENDMENT ADOPTED!!

The true white men of North Carolina have arisen in their might and majesty, and in thundering tones have declared that henceforth, now and forever, white men, and none but white men, shall govern our good old State.

....How many persons will it disfranchise? The number of negroes disfranchised is estimated at about 75,000. But while the amendment itself may not disfranchise a larger number of negroes, yet it is possible that many more negroes will not care to vote and lose all interest in politics.

....And what will be its effect on the disfranchised negroes? They will be as fully protected in all their rights as heretofore, and, we believe, they will be satisfied and contented. They certainly can be in no worse condition, for what good has their voting done them? They surely have no cause for alarm or uneasiness.

London's pronouncement did *not* represent the results in Chatham County, however. Again, Chatham County proved to be more strongly Populist than other counties (and than the Democrats anticipated). The amendment failed to win a majority vote in Chatham County, with only 40% of voters supporting. The Populist-Republican coalition lost all of the state races and the county register of deeds race while winning county sheriff and the three county commissioners offices. Yes, the Populists were losing their stronghold, but Chatham County held on to its Populist sentiments longer than most. One of the Democratic Party winners was the editor of the *Chatham Record*, Henry London, who became a member of the state Senate. The election results as reported in the August 9, 1900 *Record* are shown below.

OFFICIAL VOTE OF CHATHAM COUNTY.		HELD AUG. 2, 1900.																				
AT THE ELECTION		For Governor		Amend-ment.		For Senator.		For Representatives.				For Sheriff.		For Register.		For Commissioners.						
PRECINCTS.		Avcock.	Adams.	For.	Against.	London.	Goodwin.	Hayes.	McIver.	Giles.	Willitt.	Miliken.	Johnson.	Brooks.	Lineberry.	Womble.	Johnson.	Merritt.	Taylor.	Kanoy.	Jones.	
		Albright	62	93	64	93	66	93	66	65	93	93	64	96	66	92	64	69	63	95	90	96
Baldwin	122	57	128	63	153	41	156	156	40	41	150	46	151	44	151	151	153	46	45	46		
Bear Creek	202	196	198	200	200	196	201	198	197	198	202	194	208	193	206	206	206	195	195	195		
Buckhorie.	124	35	122	45	118	15	118	118	16	16	119	18	119	18	119	119	119	18	18	18		
Lockville	86	143	87	146	91	144	88	88	147	147	87	148	88	142	96	86	86	151	142	144		
Centre.	142	248	187	246	144	207	146	142	206	206	145	219	144	221	146	147	146	221	221	217		
Hadley	101	112	95	118	101	115	102	102	115	115	103	116	107	110	105	115	104	113	113	108		
Hickory Mt.	182	223	175	227	182	216	184	182	214	215	173	228	205	199	179	179	178	224	223	225		
Gulf	93	158	89	160	89	157	88	89	158	157	88	165	90	161	90	89	90	164	164	163		
Richmond	116	104	111	107	117	100	116	117	100	100	115	103	118	103	119	118	116	103	104	103		
Matthews	249	124	240	135	251	110	251	252	110	111	244	117	247	111	250	249	249	111	113	112		
Asbury	84	162	78	164	84	169	88	84	167	158	83	164	83	146	84	86	87	159	160	162		
Goldston's Mill	43	79	43	78	44	79	44	43	79	79	43	79	43	77	47	44	43	79	77	78		
New Hope	115	102	112	130	115	99	117	116	97	96	115	88	115	88	115	115	115	88	88	88		
Rock Rest	34	58	29	64	33	62	33	33	62	62	40	54	36	59	36	36	36	59	59	59		
Williams					53	23	49	45	26	28												
Total	1755	1834	1708	1976	1841	1816	1847	1830	1817	1822	1771	1835	1826	1764	1809	1809	1791	1826	1812	1814		

The August 2 election in the county was not without controversy. The August 9, 1900 issue of the *Chatham Record* reported on a “Riot at Ferrington’s:”

We so much regret that the only disturbance anywhere in the State at the election last week occurred in this good old county. Yes, the riot at Ferrington’s precinct (in Williams township), was the only breach of peace that occurred anywhere in North Carolina. Everywhere else the election passed off remarkably quietly and peaceably, and it is a shame that Chatham should bear the disgrace of creating the only disturbance in the State.

The registrar and poll holders at Ferrington’s have certified that the Democratic majorities there would have been from 60 to 100 if the counting had not been interrupted and stopped. These majorities would have elected the entire Democratic county ticket. It is said that among the ringleaders in this riot were two Fusion [Populist] officers, whose sworn duty it was to keep the peace. . . . These rioters will be indicted at the next term of Chatham Superior Court, and this disgraceful disturbance will then be fully investigated according to the law. We hear that one of the Fusion leaders in this riot said that he wished he had also forcibly stopped the counting of the ballots in Baldwin township, where the Democrats got over 100 majority.

The same issue of the *Record* said farewell to the Populists, editorializing:

The pie-eating Fusionists [Populists] of Chatham die hard. They have had absolute control of the county for so long a time—eight years—that they began to think that they had an inalienable birthright to it. Therefore, they are dismayed and indignant at the rude shock to their feelings administered on last Thursday. Their threats and curses, however, are childish and are too much like the poutings of a small boy who has been soundly spanked.

In addition to celebrating the decline of the Populist Party, the *Record* also wrote an obituary for the Chatham County Farmers Alliance, noting in the August 9 edition:

When the Farmer’s Alliance was first organized, hundreds of our best citizens joined it, but nearly all abandoned it when it was captured and controlled by the Fusion leaders. For some time it has been a mere political machine here in Chatham and has been used as such by the courthouse ring. No better proof of this is needed than to see the names of its officers, elected last month, which we copied from the last issue of the *Progressive Farmer* as follows:

President, J. J. Jenkins; Vice-President, R. N. Johnson; Secretary-Treasurer, R. B. Lineberry; Chaplin, L. R. Dixon; Lecturer, J. E. Spence; Steward, A. M. Self; Doorkeeper, J. F. Cook; Assistant doorkeeper, G. T. Hart. Executive committee: J. T. Paschal, R. H. Dixon, and J. J. Johnson.

The October 18 *Record* continued:

Last Thursday, the 11th, was the day for the quarterly meeting for the county alliance, but if any meeting was held, nobody outside of the courthouse seemed to know it, although the bell was rung for the meeting. It is said that two of the county officers with three others were the only persons present.

And yet, only a few years ago at every meeting of the county alliance a large crowd of Chatham’s best citizens always attended. This was before the alliance had been captured by the Fusion leaders and used as a political machine. Now, since it can no longer be used as a ladder for climbing into office, those who once were such zealous alliancemen (or pretended to be) have cast it aside as a sucked lemon and such is life!

Following the 1900 election, the Democrats continued their task of overturning the coalition's legislative accomplishments. County-level offices were again made by appointment by the legislature rather than election by voters. On the other hand, the Democrats did not entirely reverse the coalition's efforts for they, too, promoted increased spending on education. The Democrats' motives for this were probably different—focused on the need for more educated workers required by the developing industrial-commercial sector rather than the need for more innovative farmers required by the agricultural sector.

Populists continued their political losses through the 1902 elections, and after that the Populist Party was gone. The Party had lost any hope of playing a role in the politics of North Carolina. It had no unequivocal responses to the race issue framed by the Democrats or their violent tactics. It had no promise of becoming a majority party. And prospects for forming coalitions as a large minority party seemed slim. It appeared at the time that there would always be an uphill battle to persuade North Carolina voters that economic issues outweighed the race issue. But farm leaders would try again in the 1910s and 20s by turning to a “nonpartisan” North Carolina Farmers’ Union. Yet, for a brief time in North Carolina history, Chatham County was a “hotbed of populism.”

What Happened to Some of the Early Chatham County Populists?

John W. Atwater (1840-1910) resumed agricultural pursuits; was a Sunday school superintendent of the Mt. Pleasant Church of Chatham County; died at age 70 and was interred in Mt. Pleasant Church cemetery.

Robert James Powell (1839-1893) died at age 54 and is buried in St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church in Pittsboro.

Alfred M. Self (1836-1914) became a Chatham County farmer; died at 78 and is buried in the Sapling Ridge Church cemetery.

Alexander W. “Sandy” Wicker (1845-1923) became a Chatham County farmer as well as estimator of timber; died at 78 and is buried in Turner's Chapel Church cemetery in Sanford, NC.

William F. “Buck” Strowd (1832-1911) returned to farming in Baldwin Township in Chatham County; died at 79 and is buried in Chapel Hill cemetery.

James Everett Bryan (1848-1934) became a landlord, census taker, and farmer in Chatham County; died at 86 and is buried in the Haw River Presbyterian cemetery in Haywood.

Daniel Tally (1852-1930) became a farmer and sometimes-carpenter in Chatham County; died in Greensboro, NC at 78 and is buried in Bethany Baptist Church cemetery in Gulf.

Rufus Boxter Lineberry (1859-1934) became a census taker and Baptist Minister in Center Township; died at 75 and is buried in Pittsboro Baptist cemetery.

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Endnotes:

¹ Beeby, p. 52.

² Quoted in Steelman, pp. 8-9 and 25.

³ Lefler-Newsome, p. 547-548.

⁴ Beeby, p. 56.

⁵ Beeby, p. 63.

⁶ Beeby, p. 112.

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