

William Woods Holden and the North Carolina Peace Movement during the Civil War

By Dr. William C. Harris*

From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 40:1 (fall 2000).

Images may differ from those in the original article.

By the summer of 1863 the Civil War was taking a terrible toll on North Carolina troops in the field and the people at home. In the bloody three-day battle at Gettysburg in July 1863, the Confederate invasion of the North was defeated. After this battle, William Woods Holden, the editor of the Raleigh newspaper the *North Carolina Standard*, called for meetings to demand peace negotiations.

Holden, who had long been a controversial editor in the state, denied accusations that he sought to abandon the Confederate cause. Instead, he claimed that the South must negotiate an “honorable” peace soon in order to prevent ruin. The Northern people, Holden said, were anxious for peace. He felt that the North would be willing to accept Southern independence and the continuation of slavery. He was wrong if he really believed that President Abraham Lincoln would accept these terms.

The popular governor, Zebulon B. Vance, also knew that Lincoln would never agree to terms that did not include the restoration of the Union and the liberation of the slaves. Still, Holden’s call for peace rallies resulted in a bitter debate throughout North Carolina, the only state where this occurred. The issue divided North Carolinians to a greater extent than perhaps ever before or since.

Vance privately expressed the belief that Holden and the other leaders of the peace movement plotted treason (that is, rebuilding the Union). Holden and Vance had formerly been allies. Holden had helped Vance win election as governor in 1862 on the Conservative Party ticket to protect North Carolina’s rights. Catherine Anne Edmondston, a loyal Confederate in a planter family, characterized Holden as “that fly on the chariot wheel” who had brought “dishonor and treason” to his name. However, only a handful of the nearly one hundred peace rallies called for reunion with the North.

When tensions mounted during the late summer of 1863, and violence threatened, Vance secured Holden’s agreement to call off the peace rallies. Tension, however, remained high after Georgia troops, marching through Raleigh, sacked the *Standard* office and threatened Holden’s life. At Governor Vance’s insistence, President Jefferson Davis took steps to prevent more incidents of this kind. He ordered Confederate troops to bypass Raleigh in the future.

By early 1864 a brutal season of military battles and continued suffering on the North Carolina home front seemed certain. As a result, Holden renewed his peace efforts, but with a different tactic. He called for an elected state convention, consisting of well-known men, to protect the

state from all threats to its rights and, more importantly, to begin peace talks. Holden said that these negotiations with the Lincoln government would take place in conjunction with other Southern states if the Confederate government in Richmond failed to act for peace.

Holden also announced his candidacy for governor against Vance. Holden insisted that Vance had abandoned the Conservative Party. Governor Vance was angry with Holden and was now ready to attack him publicly. Vance wrote to Confederate senator William A. Graham of Orange County, "I will see the Conservative party blown into a thousand atoms and Holden and his understrappers in hell . . . before I will consent to a course which I think would bring dishonor and ruin upon both the State and Confederacy."

In becoming a candidate for governor, Holden did not count on the popularity of Vance or his own controversial reputation. Furthermore, when the governor's election took place in August 1864, the war had reached a stalemate, and war-weariness afflicted the North. Governor Vance and most North Carolinians, including the soldiers in Robert E. Lee's army, believed that if the Confederate armies continued to fight hard, Lincoln and the Republican Party would lose the 1864 United States presidential election. Then the victorious Democrats would agree to a cease-fire. Thus, Confederate independence would be achieved. As a result, Holden, running on the state convention platform, suffered a sound defeat in August.

Of course, Vance and his supporters were wrong about the outcome of the United States presidential election. Lincoln won a solid victory over the Democratic Party. Holden and his fellow North Carolinians now had to await the final defeat and surrender of the Confederate armies before peace would come. Then there would be no negotiations regarding terms as Holden had recommended earlier.

After the war, President Andrew Johnson, who succeeded Lincoln upon his assassination on April 15, 1865, recognized Holden's contribution to the cause of peace during the war. The president appointed Holden provisional governor of North Carolina. Later, when the Republican Party was organized in the state, Holden and many of his wartime followers joined it. In 1868 Holden was elected governor on a Republican platform dedicated to the protection of African American rights. Because of his support for black political equality and his efforts to suppress the Ku Klux Klan, Holden was impeached and removed from office in 1871. He was the first governor in United States history to suffer this fate.

**At the time of this article's publication, Dr. William C. Harris was a professor of history at North Carolina State University. His book, William Woods Holden: Firebrand of North Carolina Politics, won the Mayflower Cup for nonfiction.*