

David Settle Reid: Champion for “The Common People”

By Lindley S. Butler *

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David Settle Reid burst onto the North Carolina political scene in 1848 as the Democratic Party’s “forlorn hope,” or last resort, candidate for governor. As that party’s nominee, he challenged the Whig Party—which had dominated all parts of state government since 1836—when popular elections began. Repeated defeats at the polls led the Democratic leadership to nominate former congressman Reid, who reluctantly accepted on the condition that the key campaign issue would be free manhood suffrage.

Free manhood suffrage would remove the last property-owning requirement on the voters of North Carolina and allow white men to vote directly for all state officials. Since the changes in the state constitution approved in 1835, any taxpaying white man had been able to vote for members of the house of commons and for governor. But only white men who owned at least fifty acres of land could vote for state senators. Reid’s reform proposal, although viewed with suspicion by the state’s conservative leaders, was widely praised by average citizens as a major step toward democracy.

Reid’s most valuable ally in the political struggle of 1848 was influential journalist William Woods Holden. Holden, editor of Raleigh’s *North-Carolina Standard*, had made it the state’s leading Democratic newspaper by advocating the rights of “the common people,” whom he described as the “honest yeomanry and mechanics.” Holden was responsible for persuading Reid to accept the Democratic nomination.

Reid was the son of a yeoman farmer and storekeeper and began work in an uncle’s store at the age of twelve. By the age of sixteen he had been appointed Reidsville’s first postmaster. Lacking the advantages of wealth and formal education, Reid was essentially self-educated—a self-made man in the image of his political hero, Andrew Jackson. Just over five feet in height, “Little Davy,” as his opponents nicknamed him, successfully ran for the state senate when he was just twenty-two years old, beginning a forty-year career of public service to the state in 1835.

Committed to his 1848 campaign strategy of free manhood suffrage, Reid engaged Whig candidate Charles Manly in dramatic debates across the state and came within 864 votes of toppling the Whig establishment in the closest gubernatorial election ever. The shaken Whigs were unable to recover, and Reid won the 1850 election, becoming the first elected Democratic governor in the state’s history. This victory brought a permanent change to North Carolina politics, for never again would a Whig win election as governor. The Democratic Party became dominant in North Carolina and remained in

control for more than a century.

During his two terms as governor, Reid's progressive program, reflecting his own lack of opportunity as a boy, sought to improve public education and economic development in the state. With his strong support, North Carolina's common, or public, school system became the best in the region. He advocated continuing construction of the North Carolina Railroad, which was already under way, and conducting a geological survey of the state's natural resources. Ironically, his free manhood suffrage amendment, opposed by conservatives in both parties, would not pass until three years after his term of office ended.

At the time of Reid's death in 1891, a state historian wrote that "there are few men in the State who enjoy more of the respect, regard, and the affection of the people than Governor Reid."

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