



In 1835, Chatham's Whigs drew most of their backing from the working class, the yeoman farmers, and the underprivileged classes.

Whigs Restored Two Party Rule to Chatham and North Carolina

by Fred J. Vatter*
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The term Whig originally referred to the American revolutionaries who were fighting the Crown. In September of 1781 the notorious local Tory, David Fanning, led 1,100 men to attack Hillsboro, a center of discontent and also the capital of North Carolina. There they killed 15 Whigs and captured more than 200 others including the Governor and other prominent military and civilian officials.

Whig militiamen tried to free the prisoners at Lindley's Mill on Cane Creek but ran out of ammunition and lost over one hundred men. There were two local Whigs of importance among the dead, Col. John Lutterhell of Haw River and Major John Nall of Bear Creek. The Whig hero of the battle, Col. Robert Mebane was murdered some time later in what is now Williams Township, and his killer, a Tory named Henry Hightower was captured and hanged.

The term Whig was revived again in 1834 when a coalition of diverse groups, all opposed to some of President Andrew Jackson's policies, formed the Whig Party. Jackson himself was elected by a broad coalition of conflicting interest groups and was frequently involved in fights not only with his opponents but also with diverse factions among his supporters.

For many years since North Carolina had joined the Union, the Jeffersonian Republican party controlled the state's political scene, and the Eastern end of the state controlled the Republicans. They favored a strict interpretation of the Constitution, states' rights, feared the influence of any federal internal improvements, and rigid economic controls. In the election campaign of 1824 they backed William Harris Crawford, but dissidents in the Republican Party formed a People's Party which backed Andrew Jackson.

The People's Party, much to the dismay of the Republicans, carried North Carolina in the 1824 election, with heavy support from the western end of the state which favored federally financed internal improvements, constitutional reform, a reform of party machinery and the exclusion of slavery above 36° 30'. Chatham, Randolph and Guilford Counties, supported Crawford, the Republican. The election of 1824 had Jackson winning a plurality of popular and electoral votes, but none of the five candidates had a majority. This situation threw the election into the House of Representatives which chose John Quincy Adams as President.

Jackson spent the next four years polishing his image and in 1828 he was elected, winning a clear majority in the Electoral College, and he was re-elected in 1832. During these two terms he gradually fell out of favor with the West and the Sound region of North Carolina because of his opposition to federally financed internal improvements, his devotion to states' rights, and his obsession with economy.

In 1834 a group of diverse factions, all opposed to Jackson's policies and forceful attitude, formed the Whig party. Lacking in unity, except for common antagonism toward Jackson, the new party was comprised of proponents and opponents of protective tariffs, federal aid to state projects, the right of states to nullify unpopular federal laws, and national banks. The following year the Whig party was established in North Carolina and managed to elect seven of the state's thirteen congressmen and a fairly good minority in the General Assembly. The formation of the North Carolina Whig Party put a stumbling block in the ability of the conservative plantation holders in the East to dominate the state's role in national and state politics.

Soon the Jackson backers dropped the various names they were known by and became known as Democrats. The Whig-Democrat split restored the two party system to North Carolina.

A Chatham County resident from Pittsboro, Abraham Rencher, served in Congress from 1821 to 1834 under the National Republican banner, but in 1836 he ran again as a Whig and was elected. After his tenure in Congress, Rencher served as Minister to Portugal and Governor of the territory of New Mexico. He and his wife Louisa are buried in St. Bartholomew's Churchyard in Pittsboro.

The Whigs strongly favored public schools, a special school for the deaf and mute, a hospital for the insane, state aid to internal improvements, a national bank, protective tariffs, and revisions of the North Carolina Constitution of 1776.

In November 1833 the State Assembly recommended that the North Carolina Constitution be revised either by legislative amendment or by a "people's convention." The East favored the legislative amendment procedure while Chatham County and the West wanted a convention. The deadlock resulted in the matter being dropped.

Finally in January 1835, strongly pushed by Gov. David L. Swain and the growing power of the Whigs, a bill was passed calling for a referendum on the question of holding a convention. The call for a convention won by a margin of 5,856, in spite of objections by the privileged classes in the east. The convention was held in July 1835 and produced a revised Constitution.

The new Constitution called for popular election of the governor for a two year term, the assembly would meet bi-annually instead of annually, and the North Carolina Senate was to consist of 50 members and the House of Commons of 120 members. The members of the lower House were to be elected according to federal population figures, with each county guaranteed at least one, but the Senators were to be elected by districts according to the amount of state taxes paid. Free Negroes were disfranchised, and religious qualifications for office-holders and special representation in the legislature by larger boroughs was abolished. The Western end of the state overwhelmingly ratified the work of the convention, overcoming a nearly total vote against it in the East. Chatham County citizens voted for approval, with 556 for and 200 against.

Chatham's Whigs drew most of their backing from the working class, the yeoman farmers, and the underprivileged classes. The party's emphasis on education, humane treatment of the sick and poor, and absence of a pro-slavery stance, may have attracted votes from western Chatham's significant Quaker population.

Cotton was Chatham's most important crop, cultivated mainly by slave labor, but the slaveholders were far fewer in numbers than the small farmers, Quakers, and tradesmen who outvoted the Democrats locally and in national elections. The Chatham vote was carried by the Whig candidate for governor in every election between 1836 and 1854. Chatham also voted for the Whig candidate for President from 1832 to 1852, and the Whigs not only carried North Carolina in Presidential elections between 1840 and 1852, but also accounted for one half or more of the State's Congressional delegations during the same period.

In 1848 Charles Manly, a Chatham native who practiced law in Pittsboro but lived in Raleigh, was elected Governor on the Whig ticket, beating Democrat David S. Reid by less than 1,000 votes. Reid had surprised Manly in a public debate by calling for free suffrage and Manly committed his party against it. This stance by Manly did some damage, and even in his native Chatham he received 935 votes against a surprising 781 for Reid. Two years later Reid defeated Manly by almost 3,000 votes statewide, even though Manly took Chatham by 312 votes. There were no Whig governors after Manly.

In 1857 the Democrats' free suffrage bill was approved by the electorate, with Chatham voting for approval, 1047 to 735. The bill ended the freehold qualification for voting for senators, and apportioned the state senators as well as legislators on the same population basis as in federal elections, with slaves counting as three fifths.

The debates over slavery and the question of extending it into the southwestern territory acquired in the Mexican War caused a division in the national political parties. The Northern anti-slavery groups united in the new Republican party. Many Whigs flirted briefly with the Know-Nothing or American party, which after six years took on the Whig name in 1860.

The conservative element of the Democratic Party and the Whigs resisted the call for secession by the radical wing of the Democrats. An election was held in February 1861 to let the people decide whether or not to call a convention to consider secession, and they voted not to do so. In Chatham 283 votes were for the convention and 1,795 were cast against it.

The voter's opinions changed after the battle over Fort Sumter and Lincoln's call for troops. Party quarrels were forgotten and a new convention, assembled May 20, 1861, subsequently voted to secede and ratified the Provisional Constitution of the Confederate States of America. Once this happened, party lines were set aside and people of all sides of the political spectrum concentrated on the war effort. The Whigs were no longer a factor in North Carolina politics, but during their existence they had broken the grip of the Eastern plantation class and restored a two party system to North Carolina.

Major sources for this column were: "The Presidency of Andrew Jackson" by Donald B. Cole and "Chatham County 1771-1971" by Hadley, Horton, and Strowd.

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