

The "education governor"

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY DAVID WALBERT AND
L. MAREN WOOD

Charles Brantley Aycock, excerpt from inaugural address as Governor of North Carolina, January 15, 1901. In R. D. W. Connor and Clarence Poe, *The Life and Speeches of Charles Brantley Aycock* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page, & Co., 1912).

As you read...

Charles Brantley Aycock (1859–1912), born in Wayne County, was a lawyer in Goldsboro and as a young man served as superintendent of his county's schools. In the 1890s he served as United States District Attorney for the Eastern District of North Carolina.

Aycock was elected governor in 1901 as part of the rise of the Democratic Party in North Carolina. Aycock campaigned on the promise to disfranchise African Americans and was a strong supporter of segregation. He was, however, strongly opposed to mob violence, and he brought the full force of the law against those who committed acts of violence against African Americans, including the Klan.

Aycock was a "progressive" politician who believed in using government to reform society. As governor, he supported prohibition, and his influence helped make North Carolina the first state to ban sales of alcohol. He also supported the building of a state penitentiary. But his greatest successes were in education. Governor Aycock worked to increase state funding for education at all levels, including colleges and universities. During his administration, hundreds of schools were built, teacher salaries were increased, and longer school terms were established. Aycock also supported education for people with mental illness, for the mentally challenged, the deaf, and blind, and he increased state funding for specialized institutions.

Although Aycock believed that whites were superior to blacks and should control the government, he believed that African Americans should have access to education. His insistence on strong public funding of schools for blacks brought him criticism from other white supremacists. Although it may seem contradictory to be racist and yet support education for African Americans, Aycock's views were not so different from other "progressives." Aycock believed that, although African Americans could never be the equals of whites, they would benefit from education, and it was whites' responsibility as the superior race to help educate them.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why did Aycock believe it was so important to act on his campaign promise to improve education in the state?
2. How did Aycock plan to pay for his ambitious agenda?

3. Although Aycock could raise money for schools, who did he believe would be responsible for ensuring that children attended school?
4. Why did Aycock believe education for all children was crucial?
5. How did Aycock use history and national images to bolster his arguments in favor of public education?
6. How did Aycock justify the “suffrage amendment” requiring literacy tests for voting?

AYCOCK’S LEGACY

For most of the twentieth century, North Carolinians remembered Aycock as the “education governor” and one of the state’s great leaders. Schools and buildings on college campuses were named after him.

In the 1990s, people began to dig into the history of the Wilmington Race Riots and Aycock’s role in the “white supremacy campaign” of 1898 and the disfranchisement of blacks a few years later. Now, some people are arguing that Aycock’s name should be removed from buildings and other things that were named for him. For example, when Richard Moore ran for governor in 2008, he argued (see http://projects.newsobserver.com/blogs/moore_change_name_of_democratic_dinner) that the state Democratic Party should rename its annual “Vance-Aycock” fundraising dinner.

What do you think? What are the arguments for leaving Aycock’s name in place? What are the arguments for removing it?



Figure 1. Charles Brantley Aycock served as Governor of North Carolina from 1901 to 1905.

Gentlemen of the General Assembly, you will not have aught to fear when you make ample provision for the education of the whole people. Rich and poor alike are bound by promise and necessity to approve your utmost efforts in this direction. The platforms of all the parties declare in favor of a liberal policy toward the education of the masses; notably the Democratic platform says, “We heartily commend the action of the General Assembly of 1899 for appropriating one hundred thousand dollars for the benefit of the public schools of the State, and pledge ourselves to increase the school fund so as to make at least a four-months’ term in each year in every school district in the State,” and in the campaign which was conducted throughout the State with so much energy and earnestness that platform pledge was made the basis of the promises which we all made to the people. Poor and unlettered men, anxious about the privileges of their children and hesitating to vote for the Amendment¹ were finally persuaded to accept our promise and place their children in a position in which they can never vote unless the pledges which we made are redeemed to the fullest extent. For my part I declare to you that it shall be my constant aim and effort during the four years that I shall endeavor to serve the people of this State to redeem this most solemn of all our pledges. If more taxes are required to carry out this promise to the people, more taxes must be levied. If property has escaped taxation heretofore which ought to have been taxed, means must be devised by which that property can be reached and put upon the tax list. I rejoice in prosperity and take delight in the material progress of the State. I would cripple no industry; I would retard the growth of no enterprise; but I would by just and equal laws require from every owner of property his just contribution, to the end that all the children may secure the right to select their servants. There are many important matters which will claim your attention. The problems before us are of the gravest nature, but among them all there is none that can approach in importance the necessity for making ample provision for the education of the whole people.

Appropriations alone cannot remove illiteracy from our State. With the appropriations must come also an increased interest in this cause which shall not cease until every child can read and write. The preachers, the teachers, the newspapers and the mothers of North

Carolina must be unceasing in their efforts to arouse the indifferent and compel by the force of public opinion the attendance of every child upon the schools. It is easier to accomplish this since the Amendment to our Constitution raises its solemn voice and declares that the child who arrives at age after 1908 cannot share in the glorious privilege of governing his State nor participating in the policies of the nation unless he can read and write. This is, therefore, the opportune moment for a revival of educational interest throughout the length and breadth of the State. We shall not accomplish this work in a day, nor can it be done by many speeches. It is a work of years, to be done day by day with a full realization of its importance, and with that anxious interest on our part which will stimulate the careless and will make all our people eager to attain the end which we seek. Our statesmen have always favored the education of the masses, but heretofore interest in the matter has not approached universality; henceforth in every home there will be the knowledge that no child can attain the true dignity of citizenship without learning at least to read and write. This simple fact alone justifies the adoption of the Amendment, for it was its passage that first brought home to all our people the necessity for universal education. We enter an era of industrial development. Growth in that direction is dependent upon intelligence — not the intelligence of the few, but of all. Massachusetts realized this fact from the day when the Pilgrim fathers landed on Plymouth Rock, and by that clear perception she has won wealth out of bleak coasts and sterile lands. Our forefathers acknowledged the same fact in their first constitution, and from that time to the present our Constitutions and Legislative acts have all looked toward this end; but the whole people have never before been awakened to its advocacy. From this time forth opposition to education will mark a man as opposed to the theory of our Government which is founded upon the consent of the governed, and our Constitution provides that this consent in the not distant future can be given only by those who can read and write.

We need have nothing to fear, then, from any party or any politician when we make liberal provision for education. But if there were opposition, our duty would be none the less clear. It is demonstrable that wealth increases as the education of the people grows. Our industries will be benefited; our commerce will expand; our railroads will do a larger business when we shall have educated all the children of the State. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance from a material point of view that our whole people should be educated. Care must be taken on your part, gentlemen of the Legislature, to bring the schools in the remotest districts up to the standard of the Constitution which solemnly admonishes you, as it did me but a moment ago when I took the oath to support it, that at least four months of school must be carried on in every school district in each year. Our party platform follows the Constitution and we cannot afford to violate either. If there are districts which are weak they must be strengthened by those who are strong. The Good Book ² tells us that the strong should bear the infirmities of the weak and the lessons of that great authority are of utility in our political life. There has grown up an idea among strenuous men that only the strong are to be considered and benefited; that the poor and weak are the burden-bearers who deserve no aid and are weak because of their follies. A great State can never act on this theory, but will always recognize that the strong can care for themselves while the true aim of the State is to provide equal and just laws, giving to the weak opportunity to grow strong and restraining the powerful from oppressing the less fortunate. It will be a glorious day for us if our people in the hour of their prosperity and wonderful growth and development can realize that men can never grow higher and better

by rising on the weakness and ignorance of their fellows, but only by aiding their fellowmen and lifting them to the same high plane which they themselves occupy. It may require sacrifice to accomplish the promises which we have made and men may be compelled to bear additional burdens, but I am persuaded that the sacrifice will be made and the burdens borne with that cheerfulness which has ever characterized us when we were doing a righteous thing. Our fathers have done well their work. They have sought this day through many difficulties; illiterate or learned, they have ever striven to do their duty by the State, and they have laid her foundations so strong and deep that we have but to build thereon the splendid home which they saw only in anticipation. Let that home be bright with the shining of ten thousand lights emanating from as many schools. Some of these lights will shine but feebly, mayhap with but four-candlepower, while others shall shine with sixty-four and some few with the radiance of a thousand, but let them all shine together to brighten life and make the State more glorious, and may they all have as their source that God who first said "Let there be light."

I pledge you, gentlemen of the Legislature, such power as the Constitution vests in the Governor and all the energy of my soul and heart to the education of the people, and rely with entire confidence upon you and the promises which each of you have made. With these promises kept there will break upon us a day such as has never before dawned upon our State. Our Government is founded upon intelligence and virtue. We shall provide for intelligence by a system of schools which is designed to reach every citizen. The schools look to the preparation of the voter for the use of the ballot. We admit to the elective franchise every man capable of intelligently exercising that right and so anxious are we to approach as near as may be universal suffrage that we have made the test of intelligence simply ability to read and write, an accomplishment which can be acquired in a few months.

On the web

Aycock Birthplace

<http://www.nchistoricsites.org/aycock/aycock.htm>

Charles Aycock's birthplace in Wayne County is a state historic site.

Governor Charles Aycock: A virtual exhibit

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/6553>

In this activity, students learn about North Carolina governor Charles Aycock by reading historical commentary and a transcript of Aycock's inaugural speech. Students create museum exhibits about Governor Aycock using PowerPoint software.

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Visit us on the web at www.learnnc.org to learn more about topics related to this article, including Charles Brantley Aycock, North Carolina, Progressive era, education, history, politics, and reforms.

Notes

1. Aycock is referring to the Suffrage Amendment (see <http://www.learnnc.orghttp://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-newsouth/4365>) to the North Carolina constitution, which was passed in 1900. The main purpose of the amendment was the disfranchisement of African Americans.
2. The “Good Book” refers to the Bible.

Contributors

DAVID WALBERT

David Walbert is Editorial and Web Director for LEARN NC in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Education. He is responsible for all of LEARN NC's educational publications, oversees development of various web applications including LEARN NC's website and content management systems, and is the organization's primary web, information, and visual designer. He has worked with LEARN NC since August 1997.

David holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of *Garden Spot: Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish, and the Selling of Rural America*, published in 2002 by Oxford University Press. With LEARN NC, he has written numerous articles for K–12 teachers on topics such as historical education, visual literacy, writing instruction, and technology integration.

L. MAREN WOOD

Maren Wood is a research associate with LEARN NC's North Carolina History Digital Textbook Project. She is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, having received a B.A. from the University of Lethbridge (Alberta, Canada) and an M.A. in British History from Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada). Her dissertation is titled *Dangerous Liaisons: Narratives of Sexual Danger in the Anglo-American North, 1750 to 1820*.

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