Biographical Summary of Thomas Jordan Jarvis (1836-1915)

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- Speaker of the North Carolina House of Representatives 1870-72
- Lieutenant Governor of North Carolina 1876-1879
- Governor of North Carolina 1877-1885
- U.S. Minister to Brazil 1885-1888
- U.S. Senator from North Carolina 1894
- Chairman of the Executive Committee of the East Carolina Teacher’s Training School Board of Trustees 1908-1915

Background and Early Life:

Thomas J. Jarvis was born in 1836 in Currituck County, North Carolina, to a moderately wealthy farm family (Jarvis’s father, Banister, owned five slaves in 1860). Thomas Jarvis graduated from Randolph-Macon College in 1860, enlisted in the Confederate army in 1861, and served with distinction in the 17th North Carolina Infantry Regiment during the Civil War. After the war ended, he read law, became an attorney, and went into politics as a Democrat.¹

Reconstruction Era:

Jarvis rose quickly in politics after the war. He represented Currituck County in the Constitutional Convention of 1865, and was elected to the House of Representatives from Tyrell County in 1868. By 1870 he was Speaker of the House, and was elected as Lieutenant Governor under Zebulon Vance in 1876. As one of the state’s most important postwar Democratic leaders, Jarvis opposed Republican efforts to reform North Carolina’s racial caste system. Jarvis and the Democrats fought the Constitution of 1868, which expanded the franchise to black men and protected civil rights of black citizens generally. As Speaker of the House, Jarvis led the successful effort to impeach Republican Governor William Holden, who had earned the enmity of Democrats for using force to

suppress the Ku Klux Klan during his administration. Like most Democrats of his time and place, Jarvis castigated Republican-led efforts at reform, criticized Republican governance as corrupt, and argued that North Carolina’s black population was being misled by conniving reformers who took advantage of the freedpeople’s “submissive nature.” Jarvis helped rewrite the state constitution again in 1875, and authored a provision giving the legislature power to appoint justices of the peace and other county-level officials. As one sympathetic biographer wrote, this stripping away of local electoral power “insured white control of any county government regardless of the racial distribution there.” When Jarvis and Vance were swept into office in 1876, they helped codify these changes and "redeem" the state in favor of the white Democrats.

As Governor:

Jarvis succeeded Vance as Governor in 1879, and served until 1883. As Governor, Jarvis consistently supported education. His administration favored universal state educational standards, development of normal schools, and support for white and black public schools (which were of course, segregated). Jarvis also voiced concern about the increasing concentration of economic power in the United States, and although he was generally opposed to “big government,” he also criticized corporate excesses and supported regulation of the railroads.

Governor Jarvis’s record on race relations was mixed. He fully accepted Emancipation as a fait accompli, saying to a black audience “you are freemen in the sight of God, of men, and of the law.” He supported funding for black schools, and also secured state monies for the building of mental health facilities for blacks in Wilmington and Goldsboro. He often spoke at meetings of organizations such as the Negro State Industrial Agricultural Society, and boasted of the postwar progress made by black Carolinians in education and land ownership. Politically, he did not oppose black voting per se, but rather urged his party to court more black voters rather than concede them all to the Republicans.

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3 Yearns, *Papers of Thomas Jarvis*, 544, 605
4 *Ibid.*, xxi
But despite this record of moderation, Governor Jarvis also echoed the implicit white supremacy of his time. Many of his speeches evinced the kind of condescending paternalism toward African-Americans that was characteristic of elite whites. “I have done for them exactly what I though was best for them,” Jarvis claimed of African-Americans. He often urged black audiences to be “more industrious and thrifty,” and warned that too many black politicians were corrupt and untrustworthy. He condemned the Republican Party in racialized terms, calling it “black and odious.” Jarvis was also a strong proponent of convict labor, an exploitative system whereby a disproportionate number of black prisoners were put to work in harsh conditions that included whipping as a penalty. Historians characterize the convict-lease system as slavery by another name, but under the Jarvis administration, the state used convict labor to build the new Executive Mansion in Raleigh. When one legislator complained that there were not enough convicts to meet demand, Jarvis wrote that was because “the colored people in the East are beginning to quit stealing and start working.”

Perhaps the most charitable summary of Governor Jarvis’s racial record comes from noted North Carolina historian Paul Escott: “If not the Negroes’ friend, Jarvis was not their worst enemy.”

Role in 1898 Coup:

Perhaps the most problematic element of Jarvis’s career was his role in the state election of 1898. As many prominent historians have revealed, the 1898 campaign saw white Democrats blatantly exploiting racist white fears of “negro domination” to suppress black voting and purge the state of black political representation. The campaign’s bloody end in Wilmington led to a racial pogrom that left uncounted dead and amounted to an extralegal seizure of power – a virtual coup d’etat. Thomas Jarvis held no major state office in 1898, but in his

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7 Yearns, Papers of Thomas Jarvis, 545, 307, 120, 606
8 Ibid., xxiv, xxx, 311, 327, 384; Douglas A. Blackmon, Slavery by Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black Americans From the Civil War to World War II (Doubleday, 2008); Escott, Many Excellent People, 192
role as Democratic elder statesman, he worked to support the coup, especially in eastern North Carolina.

To his credit, Jarvis officially decried political violence, and urged Democrats to use the power of their votes exclusively to regain power from the “Fusionists” (the alliance between the Republicans and the new Populist Party). He again urged Democrats to increase their political power by recruiting black voters and co-opting some of the issues of the Fusion party, such as free silver.  

However, Jarvis also played an active role in the campaign for what he and others consistently and openly called “white supremacy.” Jarvis was a significant figure at the Democratic state convention in 1898, a convention which approved a manifesto that stated in part:

“This is a white man’s country and white men must control and govern it. They must govern it not only because they are white men, but because they can do it better than the negro. The negro has, whenever tried, demonstrated his unfitness and inability to rule. It is better for the negro, as well as for the white man, that the white man should make and administer the laws. It is a mercy to the negro himself to save him from his own ruin. It has been in the past, and is to-day, the special mission of the Democratic Party to rescue the white people of the east from the curse of negro domination.”

After the convention, Jarvis joined other prominent Democrats such as Charles B. Aycock and Wilmington coup leader Alfred Waddell as part of the Democratic Speaker’s Committee. His mission was to travel the state and drum up support for white supremacy. Jarvis made speeches decrying black political power and office holding, especially near his adopted home of Greenville. In one such speech, Jarvis claimed the Republicans had “divided up a town [Greenville] into wards for the purpose of turning it over to the Negroes.” Elsewhere Jarvis lamented that the Republicans had “filled Eastern North Carolina with negro postmasters and other officials,” and complained that “hundreds of negroes now fill the offices of justices of the peace and school committeemen.” Jarvis was particularly worried about the African-American police officer, Moses King, who had been hired to patrol the streets of Greenville. He implied that the result of black political leadership was “lawlessness and disorder,” and that in Greenville “white men and women . . . frequently leave the sidewalks and walk in the middle of the street to avoid disorderly negroes.” For Jarvis, this all amounted to

10 Raleigh News and Observer, October 28, 1898; Escott, Many Excellent People, 243-244

“negro domination,” and in response, he told the crowds to “vote for the Democratic Party for white supremacy . . . ”

In connecting black political participation to a criminality, in decrying black officeholders as drunkards and predators, and in urging citizens of his own adopted hometown to rise up and overthrow the Fusionists in the name of white supremacy, Jarvis was an important part of the Democratic apparatus that successfully seized power by stoking racial fears. The results were disastrous for black North Carolinians. In addition to the murders in Wilmington, black voters were intimidated from the polls throughout the state and the Democrats won resounding success. In Jarvis’s adopted hometown of Greenville, the results were similar. Soon after the election was over, the Eastern Reflector (predecessor to the Daily Reflector) noted with satisfaction the Democratic victory in the all the important local races. “The white people have arisen in their might and majesty,” the paper crowed, “no town or county shall ever again be dominated by negroes.” The paper paid special tribute to Jarvis for raising the consciousnesses of white Carolinians, claiming that “Gov. Jarvis’s letter telling of Negro domination in Greenville” played a key role in Democratic success statewide. Less than two years later, the Democratic-controlled state legislature pushed through a constitutional amendment that essentially disenfranchised black voters through use of literacy tests, poll taxes and a grandfather clause. Jarvis once again took to the hustings to convince North Carolinians to approve the new voting restrictions, stating that the amendment “insures to the intelligent, worthy white man the management of public affairs.” By that time, Moses King, the black Greenville policemen pilloried by Jarvis and the Democrats, was off the force.

Thomas Jarvis was, therefore, a key local leader in the 1898 campaign to stifle black political participation in Greenville, Pitt County, and throughout the state.

Postscript: Mary Woodson Jarvis:

Although not of direct relevance to Thomas Jarvis’s career and contributions to North Carolina history, it is worth mentioning the writings of his wife, Mary Woodson Jarvis, especially as it related to white supremacy. The daughter of a Virginia Judge, Mrs. Jarvis was an articulate published writer and influential first lady who founded the Greenville chapter of the United Daughters of the

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12 Cecelski & Tyson, eds., Democracy Betrayed, 21; Goldsboro Daily Argus, August 18, 1898; Raleigh News and Observer, August 11 and October 28, 1898; Eastern Reflector, April 8, 1898; Edmonds, The Negro and Fusion Politics, 130.

Confederacy in 1899. Two years later, Mrs. Jarvis wrote a two-part essay in the *North Carolina Booklet* on the history of the Ku Klux Klan. In these essays, Mrs. Jarvis blamed the rise of the KKK on Northern oppression of the South during Reconstruction, and defended the Klan of that era as “a modern order of Knighthood” whose members had saved the state from “the unbridled propensities of a newly liberated race.” In one particular example, Mrs. Jarvis praised the Klan's beating of some black schoolchildren and their teacher as revenge for their alleged assault on a white student. In her apologia for the Klan, Mary Jarvis's writings fit squarely within the tradition of Thomas Dixon's novels *The Leopard's Spots* and *The Klansman*, which also romanticized the KKK as a defender of white womanhood.\(^{14}\)

There is no evidence that Thomas Jarvis had any role in writing these essays, nor is there any documentation that he supported his wife's views on the matter. Thomas Jarvis did speak about the “the curses of Reconstruction,” but did not mention the Klan in any public speech available in his collected papers.

**Conclusion:**

In his last years Thomas Jarvis devoted his career to education, and was one of the founders of East Carolina University. The University website notes that Jarvis is “affectionately known as the father of ECU” for his work in overseeing construction of the original campus buildings and serving as the first chairman of the ECTTS Board of Trustees.\(^{15}\) The research presented here is not intended to invalidate this record, only to provide broader context for the individual in question.

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\(^{15}\) University Archives – Building Histories., Joyner Library, East Carolina University [http://media.lib.ecu.edu/archives/bldg_history.cfm?id=41](http://media.lib.ecu.edu/archives/bldg_history.cfm?id=41)