

Aycock issue requires context

... debating the name of Aycock Hall on ECampus, historical context is important. Many people acknowledge that Gov. Charles Brantley Aycock, for whom the dormitory is named, held racially insensitive views but argue that he was a man of his time. Such a stance, however, vastly underestimates Aycock's influence. Gov. Aycock was not merely a man of his time; he shaped his time.

In 1894 and 1896 an interracial coalition wiped out Democrats in state elections. African Americans held an unprecedented number of elective offices at every level of government, especially in Eastern North Carolina. Aycock fretted that his party would become irrelevant. To change the political landscape he met with Furnifold Simmons in New Bern to plot out a strategy for retaking the state.

The plan, in short, was to foster racial hatred to split the reigning interracial coalition that was central to defeating Democrats. A

key feature of the campaign led by Aycock and Simmons was to represent black political power as a threat to the chastity and purity of white women in the state. White men were urged to protect their women by breaking with black allies. This approach proved perfectly successful. Aycock was elected Governor, Simmons went to Congress, and black North Carolinians faced violence and disenfranchisement.

In some ways, whether or not Gov. Aycock was personally racist is beside the point. By fear mongering and race baiting Aycock took the easiest, and most cowardly, path to political power and left a destructive legacy. East Carolina University, in contrast, stands for leadership, service, and doing the right thing even when doing the right thing is hard. Students deserve to live in a space that memorializes these values.

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