**Biographical Summary of James Lawson Fleming (1867-1909)**

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- Graduated Wake Forest College 1889
- Admitted to North Carolina Bar 1892
- North Carolina Senator, Pitt County, 1905-1909
- Introduced legislation in the state Senate creating East Carolina Teachers Training School, (ECTTS) 1907

**Summary:**

James Lawson Fleming was a Greenville Democratic politician and one of the primary advocates for a state teacher-training college in eastern North Carolina in the early 20th century. He was not a key leader of the Democrat’s white-supremacy movement of the turn of the century, although he certainly benefitted from that party’s dominance over state politics. Fleming’s legislation establishing ECTTS as a white-only institution demonstrates Jim Crow’s impact on the educational reforms of the Aycock era.

**Background and Early Life:**

Born into a farm family in Pitt County in 1867, James Fleming attended Greenville Academy as a boy, where he was taught and mentored by his future ECTTS collaborator William Henry Ragsdale. After graduating from Wake Forest College, Fleming returned to Greenville, read law, and became an attorney in 1892. In 1899 he married Loula White, daughter of a wealthy farmer and entrepreneur. The two moved into a grand home on the corner of 3rd and Greene Streets in 1902, where they lived until James’s untimely death in 1909.¹

Rising Democratic Politician:

As a young lawyer in Greenville, Fleming was a man on the rise in the 1890s. He was a member of local civic organizations and helped found the city’s Chamber of Commerce. He associated and corresponded with Democratic leaders such as Thomas Jordan Jarvis, Furnifold Simmons, and Charles B. Aycock (with whom Fleming partnered in the law firm of Fleming, Aycock and Moore). Fleming does not appear to have been a major leader in the racial strife of 1898, however, he did play his part to assist the Democrats white-supremacy campaign in Pitt County. In October of 1898, Fleming helped to found a “White Government Union.” He gave several speeches in Pitt County about “the misdeeds and broken promises of the fusionists,” and was touting by the Eastern Reflector as having “done much good for the cause of good government and white supremacy.”

When he was elected to represent the 6th District in the North Carolina Senate in 1904, Fleming took his place in an institution dominated by white Democrats who were dedicated to maintaining their racial supremacy. Race was very much on the minds of Fleming’s constituents, many of whom wrote him letters urging him to solve “the negro problem,” or complaining that “the negro has become worthless and cannot be relied upon.” One constituent who wrote Fleming asking for a low-level patronage job touted his party loyalty by boasting about his previous record as town voting registrar. “With a colored voting population of over two hundred, including preachers and teachers, there is not a negro’s name on the registration book of this township,” he wrote proudly. Fleming himself seems not to have referred to race very frequently in his speeches, although he did spend time searching diligently for “reliable white help” to assist with housekeeping duties in his Greenville home. It should also be noted that as a Senator, Fleming sponsored a bill to expand the use of convict labor in Pitt County public works. Historians now recognize convict labor of that time to be an exploitative and harsh experience for black prisoners or, as one scholar has put it, “slavery by another name.”

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3 Members, State Committee to J.L. Fleming, December 14, 1906, Fleming Papers, Box #4; Ibid., Alston Grimes to J.L. Fleming, June 26, 1907; Ibid., Richard N. Hackett to J.L. Fleming, November 22, 1904; Ibid., Box #5, Oscar Van der Meersch to J.L. Fleming, December 8, 1908; *Journal of the Senate of the General Assembly of the State of North Carolina, Session 1907* (Raleigh: EM Uzzell & Co., 1907); Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).
Fleming, Jim Crow, and East Carolina Teachers Training College:

Education was the centerpiece of James Fleming’s public career. Like many progressive-minded white Southerners, Fleming saw education as the key to modernizing North Carolina, and believed that improved training for teachers was the surest route to lifting the prospects of students. Upon his election to the state senate in 1904, he took up a cause that had been languishing in the assembly for years – establishing a modern teacher-training college in eastern North Carolina. For Fleming, the project promised to provide fully prepared instructors in the rural districts in the east, where too many schools were staffed by unqualified teachers. Although he supported Governor Aycock’s call for a massive expansion of schools, Fleming argued that all the new schools would be useless unless they were staffed by well-educated teachers. “The trained teacher is the only hope for an educated citizenship,” Fleming stated.4

However, it is important to note that educational progressives like Fleming saw absolutely no contradiction between expanded education and Jim Crow. Indeed, school reform took place in the context of white supremacy, as an educated white citizenry was seen as vital if white voters were to pass the literacy tests required for suffrage by the constitutional amendment of 1900. Fleming’s proposed legislation for ECTTS, therefore, mandated the school would be “for white men and women” only. Fleming and others used race as a rhetorical point when arguing for the establishment of ECTTS, employing the curious reasoning that the status quo actually favored blacks at the expense of whites in the east. “There is not one dollar of the States fund appropriated to any state Institution East of Raleigh except to two negro Normals [i.e. teacher training schools] and negro asylum,” Fleming argued. “Why give the negroes two normals and the whites none in the East?” Fleming’s allies in the assembly echoed these arguments, with one claiming that “in Eastern Carolina . . . the negroes have better opportunities for training teachers than for the white teachers, and the state is . . . neglecting the white children and fostering with greatest care the negro children.” Another advocate followed Fleming’s line of argument when he stated “With the colored normal schools scattered over the state . . . the production of these schools in first class colored school teachers make a heart-sickening comparison with white teachers.” This rhetoric mirrored in the education sphere the cries of “negro domination” in the political sphere during the crisis of 1898. Fleming’s comparison ignored the fact that white normal schools received nine times the total state funding of black normal schools at the

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time. Fleming and his allies thus used the specter of racial competition to support the cause of building ECTTS.5

Conclusion:

James Lawson Fleming was an effective advocate for establishing East Carolina Teachers Training College. He was a vital member of the cadre of political and educational leaders that successfully pushed the ECTTS legislation through the assembly, secured the state funding for the school, and ultimately ensured the campus location in Greenville. It is ironic that Fleming himself did not live to see his dream realized, as he was killed in a car accident just days before the campus opened.6 Fleming’s career is also a reminder of the complicated legacy of this period, during which the state began to become a regional leader in education, yet also reinforced the existing regional structures of segregation and Jim Crow.


6 Eastern Reflector, November 12, 1909