

Biographical Summary of Robert Herring Wright (1870-1934)

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- Graduated University of North Carolina, 1897
- Graduate studies, The Johns Hopkins 1901-1903
- President, East Carolina Teachers Training School 1909-1934
- President, North Carolina State Teachers Assembly, 1916

Summary:

As the first president of East Carolina Teachers Training School, Robert Herring Wright was one of the most important individuals in the college's early history. As a progressive reformer, he was a vocal and effective advocate for progressive educational development. He worked tirelessly for universal eight-month schooling, stable and equitable state funding for education, and, most importantly, for expanding the professional training of public school teachers.¹ Even to modern ears, many of Wright's ideas seem quite prescient and forward thinking. However, Wright also shared some of the troubling assumptions held by other Southern progressives of his day. Most 21st-century citizens are likely to be troubled by Wright's expressed endorsement of the state's segregated school system and his anti-immigrant sentiments.

Wright and Segregation:

Robert Herring Wright was in the forefront of the educational reforms that swept North Carolina during the turn of the century. He stood foursquare behind the education policies of Governor Charles Aycock and was personally selected to be first president of ECTTS by former governor Thomas Jordan Jarvis.² Perhaps it is not surprising that Wright also shared the essential racial outlook of both these men, although, unlike the two governors, Wright had little to do with the rise of the white supremacist Democratic Party of that time. Rather, Wright devoted his career to furthering the cause of school expansion and professionalized teacher training – for whites. He functioned within a framework of beliefs that characterized the Jim Crow South, and did little or nothing to question it. Indeed, to a degree, he actively supported its maintenance.

¹ Mary Jo Jackson Bratton, *East Carolina University: The Formative Years* (Greenville, NC: East Carolina University Alumni Association, 1986) 90-117; William S. Powell, ed., *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, Vol. 6 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979-1996), 279-280.

² Bratton, *East Carolina University*, 84

Wright overtly endorsed and approved of the racially segregated system of education in North Carolina. In an undated speech in his private papers, President Wright argued that single-sex colleges were as natural and necessary as racially segregated ones. “Unquestionably there are racial characteristics that justify the people of San Francisco, from a purely pedagogical standpoint, in their attempt to segregate the Japanese, [and] also to justify us in providing separate schools for the whites and the blacks,” Wright stated. In 1922, Wright gave a recruiting speech designed to attract young North Carolinians into the noble teaching profession by conjuring “the vision of 515,952 white boys and girls – our children – down in darkness with their hands outstretched to you and me begging us to send them someone who knows how to lead them out of darkness into light.” In these comments, Wright approved of segregation as an accepted part of educational theory, and also cast his teachers as saviors of future white manhood and womanhood.³

It is worth noting that Wright, like Aycock, Jarvis, Joyner and many other progressives, believed in universal education for whites and blacks, albeit within a segregated system. “We must recognize that public education is for all the children of all the people, and not for the favored few nor for the favored race alone,” Wright argued in 1916. However, it is also true that, in his tireless campaign to secure more state funding for ECTTS, Wright on at least one occasion engaged in a kind of soft race baiting to garner public support. “Of the six state schools for negroes and Indians, five are for the training of teachers,” Wright told a college audience in 1924, adding the complaint that “there are only three state institutions devoting all of their time to the training of teachers for whites.” This tactic, claiming that minority groups had an “advantage” over whites in the normal schools, had often been used in the past to stimulate state funding, and Wright was not above recycling these claims as he saw fit.⁴

Therefore, Robert Herring Wright was not one of the architects of North Carolina’s Jim Crow system, but he did endorse and accept the system, and at least in some ways, fostered its continuance with his rhetoric.

³ Undated speech of Robert Herring Wright, Records of Robert Herring Wright, Box#2. UA02-01. University Archives, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC.; “Untitled speech, 1922-1923.” Records of Robert Wright, Box. #2

⁴ James L. Leloudis, *Schooling the New South: Pedagogy, Self and Society in North Carolina, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 178-179; Robert Herring Wright to Teacher’s Association of North Carolina, 1916, Records of Robert Wright, Box #2; Robert Herring Wright, “Some Interesting Facts With Reference to Public Education and Teacher Training in North Carolina,” c.a. 1924. Records of Robert Wright, Box #2.

Wright's Views on Race and Politics:

As a college president and social observer, Robert Wright often commented upon the social and political issues of his day, including race. While these comments evinced none of the vitriolic racism of white supremacists such as “Pitchfork” Ben Tillman, Alfred Waddell, or James Vardaman, they still illustrate Wright’s clear assent to white supremacy. “We, as Anglo Saxons, are among the greatest people on the face of the earth,” the ECTTS president proclaimed proudly.⁵

Wright’s consistent arguments about the connections between literacy and civic participation remind us how central education reform was to white political power. In speech after speech, Wright waxed eloquent about the need for an informed, literate citizenry in a democracy. Echoing many others who advocated for literacy tests as a voting requirement, Wright said that “the privilege of the suffrage should be granted by the state only to those that have intelligence that will enable them to exercise their political freedom for the best interest of the state,” adding that “ignorance on the part of the voting public is a menace to the government.” It should be added that Wright did not openly address black disfranchisement in his speeches, and he played no role in the constitutional amendment of 1900 that effectively stripped blacks of their voting rights. However, Wright’s comments also fit well into the general arguments of Aycock’s Democratic party about universal education being the cornerstone of white political ascendancy – because whites could bypass the literacy tests if they were educated.⁶

Wright, who was a trained historian and the son of a Confederate veteran, frequently used the “Lost Cause” myth of the glorious Confederate past to reiterate the historical roots of black suppression. In a speech before a chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1913, Wright dismissed the idea that the Civil War had anything to do with slavery, or that emancipation had materially advanced conditions of black Americans. Indeed, elsewhere Wright claimed that the freeing of the slaves had represented a dire threat to white people, “and to protect ourselves we have made a number of laws that were intended, in large measure, to help solve the Negro problem” (here Wright was referring to the “black codes” that severely limited African-American rights to public and private freedom after the Civil War). As many scholars have noted, the white South’s effort to excise slavery as a cause of the Civil War was part of a

⁵ Robert Herring Wright, “Chapel Talk”, March 18, 1927, Records of Robert Wright.

⁶ Robert Herring Wright, “The Education of the Masses,” November 4, 1915, Records of Robert Wright; Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 121

complex campaign to legitimize white political control in the former Confederacy, as the black codes did by statute.⁷

On one of the rare occasions where Wright did speak exclusively about “the negro problem,” it was with a heavy dose of stereotyping about black criminality. In one 1927 address, Wright congratulated blacks of his day for their strict adherence to the law. However, Wright reminded his white audience that obedience had had to be forced on African Americans through the rigid black codes instituted after emancipation. “We have said that the negro must stay in his place, and the white men are going to see that he does,” Wright said approvingly, continuing “we almost have to do that to protect the white women, and we are going to protect the white women, *law or no law.*” [emphasis added].⁸ The reference to white women was telling, since, as historians have amply demonstrated, tensions over gender and sexuality helped fuel the wave of lynchings that killed approximately 4000 people in the South between 1877 and 1950. Indeed, elsewhere, Wright called white womanhood “the standard bearer of advancing civilization,” and added that “the purity of the race . . . depends on the purity of the women. Give us an impure womanhood and we will soon have a debauched nation polluted home and a deteriorating civilization.” These clear allusions to lynching and the preservation of white womanhood had chilling implications, given the tenor of the times. But Wright was quick to defend the racial caste system in North Carolina against outside criticism, particularly that of northerners. “The people in Pennsylvania have been taught to believe that the people of North Carolina wouldn’t give a negro a fair trial, and then they turned right around and ran all the negroes out of a town in Pennsylvania,” Wright complained in one speech.⁹

Robert Herring Wright On Immigrants:

The first two decades of Robert Wright’s presidency coincided with a tremendous upsurge in the arrival of new immigrants to the United States from eastern and southern Europe. Many of these immigrants were Jews or Catholics, whose assimilation into the mainstream culture was far from smooth. This, in

⁷ Speech to the Daughters of the Confederacy, c.a. 1913, Records of Robert Wright, Box. #2; Robert Herring Wright “Chapel Talk”, March 18, 1927. Records of Robert Wright, Box #3; David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2002)

⁸ Robert Herring Wright, “Chapel Talk,” March 18, 1927. Records of Robert Wright, Box #3.

⁹ Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror* (Equal Justice Initiative: Montgomery, Alabama, 2015) 4-5; Robert Herring Wright to the Council of Federation of Women’s Clubs, 1912, Records of Robert Wright; Robert Herring Wright, “Chapel Talk,” October 18, 1923, Records of Robert Wright.

addition to the First World War, led to a rise in nativist hostility to foreigners, leading to calls for new immigration restrictions and a revived Ku Klux Klan standing for “100% Americanism.”

Robert Herring Wright gave voice to many of these prejudices, especially during and after World War I. During the anti-German hysteria of 1917-18, Herring gave a speech vilifying the German people as “Enlightened Outlaws, Kultured Pirates, and Civilized Savages, without any of the love of mankind.” And in the next decade, as many Americans looked to the immigrants as sources of disease and instability, Wright also echoed some of these sentiments. In one 1923 speech, Wright worried over the immigrants flocking to large American cities, characterizing the process as “a constant influx of people who are against all law, who are against all government, and they represent an element that is trying to break down the government that you and I live under.” He worried about America becoming “a dumping ground for the slums of the world,” and said that the foreign born were “a menace to this republic of ours.” And he took pride that North Carolina seemed immune to this plague of outsiders, noting “the pure American stock of people is nearest to 100% in North Carolina, nearer 100% with us than with any other state in the union.” In the socio-political context of the time, characterized by the “Red Summer” riots, the Sacco and Vanzetti trial, and other acts of intolerance against immigrants, Wright’s comments did little to ease ethnic tensions.¹⁰

Conclusion:

Robert Herring Wright’s speeches and writings evince a passionate commitment to education, to teachers, and to the idea that East Carolina Teachers Training School had a sacred mission to provide professional, capable teachers to uplift humankind. Like many progressives, he believed in the power of education to be the great leveler in American life and the key to political freedom for the citizenry. The historical record also reveals that, back of these assumptions, Wright shared many of the racial presumptions of his class, and that his conviction in the equalizing power of schools had definite limits.

¹⁰ Robert Herring Wright, Untitled Speech, c.a. 1918, Records of Robert Wright, Box #2; Robert Herring Wright, “Chapel Talk,” November 23, 1923, and December 10, 1923, Records of Robert Wright, Box #2.