

Executive Summary

Sallie Southall Cotten

She was an active advocate of social reform and education who shared the belief in white supremacy common among white Americans of her era. Her private writings and public words contain scattered evidence of these beliefs, including her favorable view of the new pseudo-science of racial eugenics. By current standards, these comments in isolation would be highly objectionable; in comparison to Aycock (or Jarvis) they represent a much less significant aspect of her public character.

Biographical Summary of Sallie Southall Cotten (1846-1929)

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- Graduated Greensboro Female College, 1863
- Appointed by Governor Elias Carr as one of the North Carolina Managers for the Chicago Columbian Exposition (or World's Fair), 1893
- Founder of the Turn of the Century Book Club (which eventually became Sheppard Memorial Library), Greenville, N.C. 1899
- Author of the epic historical poem "The White Doe," 1901
- Co-founder of the North Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs, 1902
- President, North Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs, 1912-13

Summary:

Sallie Southall Cotten was one of the most notable North Carolina women of the Progressive Era. Like most Southern reformers, she was an activist for education, women and families, and social uplift. Also like most members of this class, she implicitly or explicitly supported white supremacy and eugenics. However, she does not seem to have been an important leader of either of these now-discredited ideologies.

Background and Early Life:

Born in Virginia in 1846, Sallie Southall Cotten moved to North Carolina on the eve of the Civil War. She married planter Robert Cotton in 1866 and eventually settled on a plantation in Pitt County, where Sallie engaged in the traditional roles of homemaker, household manager, and mother to six children. In 1893 Cotten's life changed irrevocably when Governor Elias Carr appointed her as one of four women managers to represent the state at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. She returned to North Carolina inspired by the collective power of educated women to affect social change, and dedicated the rest of her life to the clubwomen movement for reform during the Progressive Era.¹

¹ Margaret Supplee Smith, "Sallie Southall Cotten: Organized Womanhood Comes to North Carolina," in Michele Gillespie and Sally McMillen, eds., *North Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 213-221

Women and Reform in the Progressive Era:

Cotten's visit to the Columbian Exposition came on the cusp of the Progressive Movement of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Progressives were a loose coalition of social activists, professionals, technocrats and politicians who broadly agreed on the need for reforms to fix the problems caused by the industrialization and urbanization of America. In North Carolina, Progressives sought to modernize the state, advocating universal education, improved public health and universities, and uplift for the state's growing population of poor mill families.² Middle-class women were key leaders in this reform effort. Although not feminists in the modern sense, women such as Sallie Southall Cotten sought to expand their traditional roles as wives and mothers by public advocating for child welfare, female education, and government regulation of industry. Unlike some female Progressives, Cotten initially opposed female suffrage, but she was convinced that collective action by women was a public good in and of itself.³

But although Progressives saw themselves as modern and forward-looking, they also held views that reinforced the racial status quo in the South. White reformers such as Charles B. Aycock saw no conflict between modernization and Jim Crow (hence the Governor's support for massive improvements in segregated public education). The women's clubs that Cotten helped organize were also racially segregated. More troubling, progressive enthusiasm for scientific remedies to social problems caused many to embrace eugenics – a popular theory for racial improvement that in its most extreme forms led to the forced sterilization of “undesirables.”⁴

As a progressive, Sallie Southall Cotten embodied all the positive and negative attributes of the movement, but it must be said that she was much more active in advancing the former than the latter.

Cotten and White Supremacy:

Some Progressive women (like Georgia's Rebecca Latimer Felton, who openly advocating lynching) were vocal and dedicated white supremacists. Sallie

² William A. Link, *North Carolina: Change and Tradition in a Southern State* (Wheeling, Illinois, Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2009), 285-307

³ *Raleigh News and Observer*, May 26, 1897

⁴ Link, *Change and Tradition*, 287; Gregory P. Downs, “University Men, Social Science, and White Supremacy in North Carolina,” *Journal of Southern History* Vol. 75., No. 2 (May, 2009), 280-284; Anna Krome-Lukens, *The Reform Imagination: Gender, Eugenics and the Welfare State in North Carolina, 1900-1940*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2014

Southall Cotten does not appear to be part of this group. Rather, Cotten seems to have embodied traditional white paternalistic attitudes of *noblesse oblige* toward African-Americans. Cotten insisted, for example, that her own family show “equal courtesies” for people of both races in daily life. And while participating in Columbian Exposition in Chicago, she joined other women in signing “an expression of their goodwill and their wish to help the colored people in their respective states.”⁵ When Greenville debated establishing a park for black residents in the 1920s, Sallie supported the idea, writing, “It was a good thing to have such a place in the community for the colored people.” The experience of forming and administering the women’s clubs seems to have broadened Cotten’s social connections far beyond her rural North Carolina experience, as she was exposed to women across ethnic and religious lines. Sallie thus became a friend and mentor to Gertrude Weil, a prominent Jewish clubwoman who later became a tireless advocate for women’s rights and racial equality.⁶

Still, Cotten also embodied the racial biases of her class and region. She was a local leader of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, an organization that helped build the myth of the “Lost Cause” that formed a cornerstone of white supremacy rhetoric of the time. Although she did not play any important role in the turbulent political battles over race in 1898, she did approve of her state having “at last disfranchised the Negro.” And in private letters, Cotten bemoaned what was then called “miscegenation,” and registered nothing but disgust for the blended ethnicities she witnessed on a visit to Cuba. She wrote of the Caribbean island, “Its people are a hopelessly mixed race – black and white with full unquestioned and unobjected to equality . . . and to this I seriously object forever. Is it necessary or desirable to degrade a superior race in order to elevate an inferior race? Why be superior if we are willing to relinquish superiority?”⁷

Some of Cotten’s published writing also contained white supremacist implications. Her epic historical poem “The White Doe,” grew out of Cotten’s

⁵ 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), 105; William Stephenson, *Sallie Southall Cotten: A Woman’s Life in North Carolina* (Greenville, NC: Pamlico Press, 1987), 54; Margaret Supplee Smith, “Organized Womanhood,” 229

⁶ Andrew W. Karhl, “The ‘Negro Park’ Question: Land, Labor and Leisure in Pitt County, North Carolina, 1920-1930,” *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (February, 2013), 138; Margaret Supplee Smith and Emily Herring Wilson, *North Carolina Women Making History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999) 203;

⁷ *Raleigh News and Observer*, July 23, 1893; Margaret Supplee Smith, “Organized Womanhood,” 230; Downs, “University Men,” 285; Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) 191

fascination with Virginia Dare, the first English child born in the New World. Not only did the poem romanticize the English conquest of the New World as a noble Christian crusade, but it also rhapsodized at length about the blue-eyed, fair-haired Anglo-Saxons, contrasting them with dark “savage” Indians:

**“She – whose mind bore in its dawning the Impress of developed races,
To the rude untutored savage
Seemed divinely ‘dowed with reason
She, the heir of civilization,
They, the slaves of superstition.”**

In the poem, incredulous Indians revere Dare as an almost holy “snow baby,” reveling in her “tender whiteness,” and later, lusting after “the Pale Maiden.” When touring the state giving readings of the poem, Cotten herself often dressed in a white deerskin costume.⁸

Cotten also wrote a short book called *What Aunt Dorcas Told Little Elsie*, a collection of “Negro folklore stories” written in the genre of Joel Chandler Harris’s Uncle Remus tales. As with Chandler, Cotton’s use of heavy “negro dialect” and simple-minded characters was condescending and insulting to African-Americans.⁹

Cotton and Eugenics:

One of the most troubling aspects of Progressivism was eugenics, the effort to use public policy and private activism to “purify” the human race of heritable imperfections. This campaign took many forms, from using science to identify the “genetic” roots of criminal behavior to passing stricter marriage laws for the “feeble-minded.” But at its most extreme, eugenics led to the forced sterilization of men and women deemed “unfit” by social welfare offices, police, or medical professionals. Eugenics was widely embraced by scientists, clergymen, and politicians all across the country. North Carolina Progressives were no exception to this trend, and succeeded in setting up what eventually became the State Eugenics Board, which sterilized thousands of residents of various state institutions between 1929 and 1976.¹⁰

⁸ Sallie Southall Cotten, *The Legend of Virginia Dare* (Reprint edition, Manteo, NC: Roanoke Island Historical Association, Inc., 1937) xix, 40-46; W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005) 30; Stephenson, *Sallie Southall Cotten*, 105

⁹ Sallie Southall Cotten, *What Aunt Dorcas Told Little Elsie* (Charlotte: Queen City Print Company, 1923); Stephenson, *Sallie Southall Cotten*, 162

¹⁰ Winston-Salem *Journal*, “Against Their Will,” December 9, 2002;

Some North Carolina women reformers were key proponents of eugenics. Influential Progressives such as Annie Lowrie Alexander, Sarah Cowan Denson, and Kate Burr Johnson all advocated eugenics as a way to improve the human species. Not only did these women serve as advocates for eugenics, but they actually helped to craft and implement eugenic policies through their positions of authority in the state Board of Charities and Public Welfare. Some of these women eagerly supported compulsory sterilization of the unfit, some opposed it, and some others accepted the practice reluctantly in the name of “uplifting the race.”¹¹

The record does not show any clear, strong connections between Sallie Southall Cotten and the organized eugenics movement. She does not seem to have voiced approval for compulsory sterilization in her public speeches or writings. However, she worked actively within an atmosphere of women reformers who did directly and indirectly support eugenic ideas. The North Carolina Federation of Women’s Clubs frequently hosted speakers, established discussion groups, and studied popular books about eugenics. As one of the foremost experts on the subject has written, “white clubwomen were an important and sympathetic audience for the state’s experts on eugenics.” For many of these earnest women, purging humanity of defect through modern science promised to rid society of all the ills of poverty and disease that they were so committed to eradicating.¹²

And Cotten herself at times implied or partially adopted eugenics themes in her public advocacy. In a speech to the National Mother’s Congress in 1897, Sallie made a strident case for “scientific motherhood,” which she claimed would create “a grander, nobler race.” The speech mostly focused on the need for educating would-be mothers on the latest theories and practices in household labor and home management. However, Cotten also spoke of women’s unique duty to “improve and develop her race,” and referred to “the control of hereditary weaknesses, of mind and of body, all by pre-natal influences.” Cotten also echoed eugenics rhetoric in her presidential address before the North Carolina Federation of Women’s Clubs in 1913, when she reminded the ladies in attendance that “the welfare of future generations” depended on educated mothers. “The law of evolution needs her cooperation to the end that a better race may bless the earth,” Cotten stated.¹³

¹¹ Anna Krome-Lukens, *The Reform Imagination*, 121-127; James Douglas Alsop, “Annie Lowrie Alexander: ‘A Woman Doing Great Work in a Womanly Way,’” Gillispie and McMillan, eds., *North Carolina Women*, 241-262

¹² Krome-Lukens, *The Reform Imagination*, 121-123

¹³ *Raleigh News and Observer*, February 21, 1897; Krome-Lukens, *The Reform Imagination*, 123.

Conclusion:

Sallie Southall Cotten was a remarkable woman, but she was a woman of her time. She shared in the assumptions of white supremacy to a degree, and validated some of the essential precepts of eugenics philosophy. However, the record does not show Cotten to have been an important leader in either of these insidious ideologies. Some Southern women did devote substantial portions of their careers to supporting racism (like Rebecca Latimer Felton) or compulsory sterilization (like Kate Burr Johnson). But for Sallie Southall Cotten, the main focus was always organizing women for mutual aid and social uplift. The women's clubs were her central mission, "a body of women associated together for systematic study and united effort for mutual improvement and the general good."¹⁴

¹⁴ *Raleigh News and Observer*, May 26, 1897