

John Walter Stephens

In 1868, Republicans carried fifty-eight counties and took control of the state legislature. This Republican success was credited to relentless and tenacious Republicans, such as John Walter Stephens. As a Union League worker, he was in the trenches of Caswell County working towards rebuilding the state. Albion Tourgee, a carpetbagger, had become Stephens mentor. He tutored him in the basics of law, gave him a bar exam and then made him justice of the peace. Tourgee also passed down his political beliefs and ideal of color-blind justice to Stephens. As magistrate, Stephens exemplified those ideals. Stephens was not associated with much popularity, or charisma. He was very tenacious, which lead to him being described as “arbitrary, repressive, and austere.” He was focused and did not deter from what he felt was right. As a person he was characterized as, “unpleasant, unpopular, disagreeable and odious.” He was especially disagreeable and unpopular with the Ku Klux Klan and the Democratic Party. He was not only a Republican, and a Union League Worker but also an agent of the Freedman’s Bureau. He worked closely alongside African-Americans, on the basis of equality. He was very loyal to the African American community and was acknowledged as the Republican leader of Caswell County. Thus making him a threat to the Klan. When their violence erupted in Caswell County him and other Republican leaders advocated against freedman retaliation and repeatedly asked for troops from Governor Holden. When troops were not sent in, the weight fell on Stephens; in 1869 he became one of two dozen detectives employed by Governor Holden to contain the spread of the Klan violence. (Massengil 1985) While their efforts were not largely successful, they did play a significant role in Governor Holden’s efforts to suppress the Klan. As more violence ensued, Stephens continued his work making him even more of a target to the Klan. On May 21,1870 the Conservatives held a campaign rally at the Caswell County courthouse, and Stephens showed up taking notes. Prepared and expecting him to show up, Klan members in attendance sought out his execution, murdering him in the Caswell county courthouse. (Wise 2010, 122) In one of Albion Tourgee’s letters he illustrated how important the citizens of Caswell County were to Stephens, “He was accustomed to say that 3,000 poor, ignorant, colored Republican voters in that county stood by him and elected him, at the risk of persecution and starvation, and that he had no idea of abandoning them to the Ku Klux Klan.” (Tourgee 2010, 48) Stephens stood by his citizens and continued to fight to rebuild the state he refused to back down from the Klan. His bravery and brutal murder was the last straw, Governor Holden and his Republican advisors declared it was time for the state militia to intervene. Through his political work he fostered a sense of hope within his citizens, they looked to him to lead them, he did just that allowing for the Republican party to gain power and after his death gave the Republican party determination to take back their state from the Ku Klux Klan.

Republicans and the Ku Klux Klan in North Carolina

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