

GOVERNOR TOD R. CALDWELL, n.d., 1870-1874

Arrangement: By record series, then chronological

Reprocessed by: James Mark Valsame

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Tod Robinson Caldwell (1818-July 11, 1874), lieutenant governor and governor, was born in Morganton, the son of an Irish immigrant who became a prominent Burke County merchant. He obtained the rudiments of reading and writing at a local school and then went to Hillsborough, where he prepared for college by studying under William J. Bingham. Caldwell entered The University of North Carolina and was graduated with honors in 1840. While in college, in addition to pursuing the regular curriculum, he read law under President David L. Swain. In 1841, he began practicing law in Burke County, and in the same year he won the first of many elections to public office, that of county prosecuting attorney. He never lost an election. His success as a criminal lawyer brought him a measure of fame in the mountain counties, which contributed to his election at the age of twenty-four to the state House of Commons. "A Henry Clay Whig of the most enthusiastic stripe," Caldwell served several terms in the house and in the senate, to which he was first elected in 1850.

During the sectional crisis of the 1850s, Caldwell, like most North Carolina Whigs, resisted the movement to take the state out of the Union. But unlike most of his fellow Whigs, he retained his allegiance to the Union after secession, taking no part in the war, although his only son to survive infancy fought in Lee's army – and died at Gettysburg. After the war, Caldwell, along with the many Union Whigs who were anxious for an early restoration of the state to the Union, served in the constitutional convention of 1865 called under President Johnson's plan of Reconstruction. When Johnson's lenient policies toward Confederates failed to result in reunion and, in fact, alienated the Republican majority in Congress, Caldwell disassociated himself from the president and in 1867 served as one of the founders of the Republican party in North Carolina. Although no friend of black rights when he joined the Republican party, he warmed to the idea of supporting its platform of Negro suffrage and rights. Before reentering politics, he served in 1865-66 as president of the state-owned Western North Carolina Railroad.

In the new government required under the congressional plan of Reconstruction, Caldwell was elected lieutenant governor on the Republican ticket headed by William W. Holden. As the presiding officer of the senate, he served with considerable tact and fairness to all factions. On December 20, 1870 he assumed the duties of governor, when Holden was suspended from office pending his impeachment trial before the senate. Upon Holden's removal on March 22, 1871, Caldwell became governor.

As governor he faced the difficult task of working with a General Assembly dominated by Conservatives hostile to the very existence of the Republican party in the

state. Nevertheless, his sense of moderation and an obvious integrity in the performance of his duties went far not only to appease many of his political foes but also to win support for his much-abused party. Although his staff was reduced by the General Assembly to one secretary and his authority under the constitution challenged, he vigorously sought solutions to the more vexatious problems confronting the state during Reconstruction. He especially pressed the legislature for a systematic settlement of the state debt, which he claimed amounted to thirty-eight million dollars in 1873. He proposed that a compromise "be effected with the creditors, by which the whole debt could be reduced to an amount within the capacity of the State to pay." The General Assembly refused to cooperate with the scalawag governor in any plan for the settlement of the debt. When an arrangement with the state creditors was finally made in 1879, it followed Caldwell's general recommendations, although the conservative regime probably reduced the total amount of the debt far more than he would have desired.

With little success, Caldwell repeatedly urged the General Assembly to reinvigorate the languishing public school system that the Republicans had begun with considerable promise in 1868-1869. He demonstrated no similar interest in the state university, which he believed "may be dispensed with until a new era of prosperity shall dawn upon us." As chairman of the board of trustees, he cautiously but unsuccessfully worked to place the university in the hands of "reliable Republicans" in anticipation of its reopening, after the closure of 1870.

He also futilely sought legislative action to restore law and order in the state and provide protection for the rights of black citizens, as called for by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments. Caldwell's vigorous effort to prosecute the notorious Milton S. Littlefield and George W. Swepson, although ending in failure, demonstrated his determination to act scrupulously in enforcing the laws of the state against violators, despite possible close ties between the corruptionists and members of his party.

As a result of his successes, and in spite of the attempts of the Conservatives to discredit him, Caldwell in 1872 defeated Augustus S. Merrimon for governor by a margin of 1,898 votes. He did not live out the new term; he died suddenly at Hillsborough.

Caldwell was married in 1840 to Minerva Ruffin Cain of Hillsborough; he was the father of three daughters and two sons.

Source: Harris, William C., "Tod Robinson Caldwell," Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, Volume 1, A-C, William S. Powell, ed., Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979, pp. 305-306 .

Governors' Papers

<u>Box</u>	<u>Contents</u>
G.P. 227	Correspondence, Petitions, etc., December 15, 1870-December 30, 1870 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., January 1, 1871-January 14, 1871 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., January 16, 1871-January 23, 1871 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., January 24, 1871-January 30, 1871 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., February 1, 1871-February 14, 1871 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., February 15, 1871-February 28, 1871 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., March 1, 1871-March 31, 1871 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., April 1, 1871-April 28, 1871 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., May 1, 1871-May 30, 1871
G. P. 228	Correspondence, Petitions, etc., June 1, 1871-June 30, 1871 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., July 1, 1871-July 15, 1871 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., July 17, 1871-July 31, 1871 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., August 1, 1871-August 31, 1871 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., September 1, 1871-September 15, 1871 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., September 16, 1871-September 30, 1871
G.P. 229	Correspondence, Petitions, etc., October 1, 1871-October 14, 1871 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., October 16, 1871-October 31, 1871 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., November 3, 1871-November 28, 1871 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., December 1, 1871-December 14, 1871 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., December 16, 1871-December 31, 1871 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., 1871 [Undated]
G. P. 230	Correspondence, Petitions, etc., January 1, 1872-January 31, 1872 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., February 1, 1872-February 29, 1872 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., March 1, 1872-March 30, 1872 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., April 1, 1872-April 29, 1872
G. P. 231	Correspondence, Petitions, etc., May 1, 1872-May 31, 1872 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., June 2, 1872-June 15, 1872 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., June 18, 1872-June 29, 1872 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., July 1, 1872-July 10, 1872 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., August 1, 1872-August 31, 1872
G. P. 232	Correspondence, Petitions, etc., September 1, 1872-September 30, 1872 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., October 1, 1872-October 11, 1872 Correspondence, Petitions, etc., October 12, 1872-October 31, 1872

Correspondence, Petitions, etc., November 1, 1872-November 15, 1872
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., November 15, 1872-November 30, 1872
Correspondence, Petitions, etc. Thanksgiving Day Proclamations by other Governors, 1872

G. P. 233 **Correspondence, Petitions, etc.,** December 1, 1872-December 10, 1872
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., December 11, 1872-December 31, 1872
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., 1872 [Undated]

G.P. 234 **Correspondence, Petitions, etc.,** January 1, 1873-January 16, 1873
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., January 17, 1873-January 31, 1873
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., February 1, 1873-February 28, 1873
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., March 1, 1873-March 31, 1873

G. P. 235 **Correspondence, Petitions, etc.,** April 1, 1873-April 30, 1873
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., May 3, 1873-May 31, 1873
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., June 2, 1873-June 12, 1873
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., June 13, 1873-June 30, 1873
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., July 1, 1873-July 30, 1873

G. P. 236 **Correspondence, Petitions, etc.,** August 1, 1873-August 10, 1873
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., August 11, 1873-August 30, 1873
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., September 2, 1873-September 30, 1873
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., October 1, 1873-October 31, 1873

G. P. 237 **Correspondence, Petitions, etc.,** November 1, 1873-November 16, 1873
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., November 17, 1873-November 30, 1873
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., December 1, 1873-December 30, 1873
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., 1873 [Undated]

G.P. 238 **Correspondence, Petitions, etc.,** January 1, 1874-January 31, 1874
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., February 2, 1874-February 28, 1874
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., March 2, 1874-March 30, 1874
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., April 1, 1874-April 29, 1874

G.P. 239 **Correspondence, Petitions, etc.,** May 1, 1874-May 30, 1874
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., June 1, 1874-June 30, 1874
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., July 1, 1874-July 10, 1874
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., 1874 [Undated]
Correspondence, Petitions, etc., Undated

Governors' Letter Books

G.L.B. 62 Letter Book, December 21, 1870- July 3, 1874