

GOVERNOR CHARLES B. AYCOCK, n.d., 1901-1905

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Reprocessed by: James Mark Valsame

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Charles Brantley Aycock (November 1, 1859 – April 4, 1912), governor of North Carolina, was born on a farm near Fremont in the broad, flat valley of the Neuse River. Ancestors of his father, Benjamin Aycock, and his mother, Serena Hooks, had come to the valley from England during the colonial period. Benjamin and Serena Aycock were industrious, thrifty, and pious, and both had a good sense of management. About 1840 they settled in a house on 50 acres of land. By 1860 they had accumulated 1,036 acres, and in 1863 they owned 13 slaves. Benjamin Aycock participated avidly in the Primitive Baptist church and the Democratic party. He served in the North Carolina Senate from 1863 to 1866 and for eight years was clerk of court of Wayne County. In the senate he distinguished himself by his willingness to centralize power in the Confederate government and his unwillingness to elevate the status of the Negro.

The youngest of ten children, Charles B. Aycock attended private schools in Fremont and Wilson. At the age of sixteen, he taught in the public school in Fremont for one term. After preparing himself further for college by an additional year of study at a private academy in Kinston, he enrolled at The University of North Carolina in 1877. Ambitious and energetic, he read widely, became a student leader in oratorical and literary activities, worked with the Young Men's Christian Association, and taught a Sunday school class for boys in a rural congregation. He joined the Missionary Baptist Church, a denomination to which he belonged for the rest of his life. In the summers of 1878 and 1879 he attended the university's normal school. In 1879, in Durham County, he delivered an address on education, apparently his first public performance apart from teaching. For three months he edited the Chapel Hill *Ledger*, a small weekly newspaper. In the spring of 1880 he took an extracurricular course in law and completed the requirements for a degree. Being graduated after only three years, he won commencement awards for oratory and English composition.

Aycock apprenticed himself in the law office of A. K. Smedes in Goldsboro, received a license to practice in January, 1881, and formed a partnership in Goldsboro with Frank Arthur Daniels. The two men became, and remained, general practitioners of the law. In 1880, Aycock delivered campaign speeches for the Democratic party; he continued to do so in every election year for the rest of his life. In 1882 he was conspicuous in county and district conventions. He joined with Joseph E. Robinson and William C. Munroe to establish a Democratic newspaper, the *Goldsboro Daily Argus*, in 1885. In the next year he was a delegate to the Democratic State Convention, and in 1888 he served as district presidential elector and made numerous speeches in behalf of Grover Cleveland.

In 1890, Aycock sought the Democratic nomination to the U. S. House of Representatives in the Third Congressional District. Many voters had joined the

Farmers' Alliance. Although Aycock expressed his approval of Alliance demands, he was handicapped by being neither a farmer nor an Alliance member. Nonetheless, at the district convention, he contended strongly against four other candidates and received a plurality on numerous ballots. Distressed by the continued deadlock, he withdrew as a candidate in order to make nomination possible.

During the same year in which he was building a law practice and a political reputation, Aycock was also working vigorously in behalf of the public schools. In 1881 he campaigned for a special tax to support a graded school in Goldsboro; it was approved in a referendum on 2 May. Under the provisions of the statute, the revenues collected from white children, and the revenues collected from Negroes were applied to Negro schools. In June, Aycock was chosen by Wayne County officials to be county superintendent of public instruction, a part-time position that he held until the summer of 1882, at which time he resigned in order devote more attention to his law practice. In 1886 the state supreme court ruled that separate taxes for the races were unconstitutional. Aycock formed a campaign to raise an emergency fund to keep the Goldsboro schools operating until the adoption of a new tax, uniform and nondiscriminatory, to support schools for both races for nine-month terms. The act authorizing the referendum on the tax also named a board of trustees for the entire city system. Aycock was one of the members, and as long as he lived in Goldsboro he served on the board, often as chairman. Also in 1887, Aycock was selected as a member both of the committee of a Wayne County Negro school district and of the board of directors of the State Normal School for Negroes in Goldsboro.

At the Democratic State Convention in 1892, Aycock helped Elias Carr, a Farmers' Alliance leader, win the nomination for governor and was himself chosen presidential elector-at-large. Carr lacked oratorical skill, and Aycock became the party's chief stump speaker in the eastern half of the state. As a reward for his services, he was selected by President Cleveland to be the U.S. attorney for the eastern district of North Carolina, a position he held from 1893 to 1897.

The Populists and Republicans won a majority of seats in the General Assembly in 1894, and Aycock's rise to eminence slowed perceptibly. In 1895 the General Assembly removed him from the board of trustees of the State Normal School for Negroes in Goldsboro. In 1896 he was recommended for the gubernatorial nomination by the Democratic convention in his congressional district, but he declined to be a candidate against the strong Populist and Republican forces, by then loosely united in a "Fusion Party." Nonetheless, prior to the elections of that year, he campaigned for Democratic presidential nominee William Jennings Bryan and substituted for Democratic gubernatorial candidate Cyrus Watson in a series of speaking engagements. In 1897 he cooperated with Fusion leaders in a state-wide effort to persuade voters in local school districts to adopt school taxes.

The Fusion-dominated legislatures of 1895 and 1897 and Republican Governor Daniel L. Russell encouraged an enlarged political role for Negroes, who voted in great numbers and held a variety of public offices. Many white people, Democratic and Fusionist, were unprepared for the abrupt change. Imbued with the white supremacy

traditions of his family and sensitive to the growing social and racial tensions under the Fusion administration, Aycock stressed, early in the campaign of 1898, that the Democrats must adopt a platform emphasizing white supremacy and appealing to all classes of white people. Foremost among a large group of able Democratic orators who spoke throughout the state, Aycock represented the party in debates with Cyrus Thompson, Populist secretary of state. Racial tensions were heightened by the anti-Negro sentiments expressed in the campaign, and weapons were displayed at some political gatherings. Aycock argued that a Democratic administration could restore white supremacy and peace.

In the elections of 1898, the Democratic party won a large majority of seats in both houses of the General Assembly. In 1899, Aycock worked closely with the Democratic legislators, who proposed an amendment to the state constitution requiring the electorate to pass a literacy test before registering and to pay a poll tax before voting. Through a "grandfather clause," the amendment exempted from the literacy test all men who were qualified voters on or before 1 January 1867 or who were lineal descendants of such voters. The exemption was limited to 1 December 1908. Any man who registered before that date would be validly registered for the rest of his life; any man who applied for registration after that date would have to pass the literacy test. The legislature also provided that \$100,000 would be appropriated annually for distribution among the public schools. Intended to assist the schools in preparing young men to pass the literacy test after 1908, this appropriation was the first direct legislative appropriation for the public schools in thirty years and the first in the history of the state to be paid.

The proposed constitutional amendment was especially significant for Aycock. It enabled him to imbue the campaign of 1900 with a sense of dignity and noble purpose that the campaign of 1898 had lacked. His views and personal attractiveness appealed to so many delegates at the Democratic State Convention in April 1900 that he was unopposed for the gubernatorial nomination. In the campaign, he pledged to devote his four-year term as governor to improving the public school system. He stressed the importance of the suffrage amendment as a device for eliminating the race problem in politics, compelling educational advancement, and preparing the way for Negroes to participate fully in politics when they were literate. In the elections of August 1900, the amendment was approved by a large majority, and Aycock was elected by an even greater majority. His inaugural address in January 1901 emphasized education and the race problem. He promised that universal suffrage would return as a consequence of universal education and that the rights of Negroes would be protected.

In his first year in office, Aycock staged a one-man crusade for education, speaking at local rallies held in behalf of school taxes and bonds, addressing audiences at private schools and at colleges, and whenever possible turning additional public appearances into pleas for education progress. After his first year in office, he broadened the crusade, utilizing funds provided by the Southern Education Board. An Association for the Promotion of Public Education in North Carolina was organized, and speakers were sent to rallies throughout the state. Aycock himself attended as many as time and energy permitted. He remained loyal to his pledge to work for universal education.

When two bills to enable white people to tax themselves to improve schools for white children without improving schools for Negro children were introduced in the legislature in 1901, Aycock stated that he would resign if they were adopted. Both bills died in committee.

Under Aycock's leadership, the appropriations for the public schools and the state's colleges were increased, teaching standards were raised, state adoption of textbooks replaced the more expensive system of local adoption, 877 libraries were established in rural schools, and hundreds of schoolhouses were built. The enrollment of white children rose 11 percent, and the average length of the school term increased from seventy-three days to eighty-five days. Local expenditures for Negro schools did not increase at the same rate as expenditures for white schools, but the enrollment of Negro children rose 10 percent and the average length of the school term increased from sixty-three days to eighty days. Teachers organized into associations for promotion of their profession, teacher pay went up, and compensation for county superintendents doubled. Local school taxes were being collected in 229 districts in 1904, compared to 30 in 1900. In the same period, 37 new municipal graded schools were established. On the basis of the amount of money spent for public education as a percentage of wealth, North Carolina moved in rank among the state from thirty-second in 1900 to twenty-first in 1904.

Also under Aycock's leadership, a temperance law and a child labor law were enacted, taxes on businesses and corporations were increased, the good roads movement was encouraged, and new regulations were imposed on the railroads. When private entrepreneurs tried to use the courts to seize control of the Atlantic and North Carolina Railroad. Aycock thwarted them with charges of conspiracy to injure state property. In an effort to save money that could be diverted to schools and charities, he expanded the program of leasing convicts to private enterprise. He followed a generous clemency policy, granting more full pardons than any other governor in North Carolina history, before or since. Eleven lynchings occurred during his administration. He called out the militia on several occasions to protect prisoners, offered rewards for the apprehension of lynchers, and urged without success, the adoption of an anti-lynch law by the legislature. He supported efforts to study and protect land and wildlife. The activities of the state geological board were broadened, and the department of agriculture was enlarged. The Audobon Society of North Carolina was empowered to enforce the bird and game laws, thus becoming the first state game commission in the South.

After leaving the governorship, Aycock returned to Goldsboro and resumed his law practice with Frank A. Daniels. In 1909 he moved to Raleigh and formed a partnership with Robert W. Winston. In 1911 he yielded to numerous requests that he become a candidate for the Democratic nomination to the U. S. Senate, but on 4 April 1912, before he had begun an active campaign, he died while addressing the Alabama Educational Association in Birmingham. His heart suddenly failed; the last word the audience heard him speak as he collapsed on the platform was "education." He was buried in Oakwood Cemetery in Raleigh. As a sponsor of education, he perhaps has had no peer among state governors in American history.

Aycock married Varina Woodard on 25 May 1881, and the couple had three children: Ernest, Charles Brantley, Jr., and Alice. In January, 1891, after Varina's death in 1889, Aycock married her sister, Cora. This marriage produced seven children: William Benjamin, Mary Lily, Connor Woodard, John Lee, Louise Rountree, Frank Daniels, and Brantley (Charles Brantley, Jr. had died in 1901).

Portraits of Aycock are located in the North Carolina State Capitol, the Governor's Mansion, and the Wake County Courthouse in Raleigh. Statues stand on Capitol Square in Raleigh and in the U. S. Capitol in Washington, DC.

Source: Orr, Oliver H., Jr., "Charles Brantley Aycock," Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, Volume 1, A-C, William S. Powell, ed., Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979, pp. 73-75.

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