

GOVERNOR CAMERON MORRISON, n.d., 1921-1926

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Reprocessed by: James Mark Valsame

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Cameron Morrison (October 5, 1869-August 30, 1953), governor, U.S. senator, and congressman, was born near Rockingham, Richmond County, the son of Daniel M. and Martha Cameron Morrison. Daniel, a Confederate veteran who became a staunch Republican during the postwar years, was at one time or another a tanner, carpenter-contractor, deputy sheriff of Richmond County, and postmaster of Rockingham.

Cameron Morrison attended the public schools of Rockingham and the academy of N.C. McCaskill in Ellerbe Springs. After completing his formal education, he had various jobs in and around Rockingham for several years. He subsequently read law under the supervision of Judge Robert P. Dick of Greensboro and in 1892 was licensed to practice. Morrison remained in Rockingham until 1905, when he moved to Charlotte, his permanent residence for the remainder of his life.

He first became active in Richmond County politics while still not of voting age. Due largely to paternal influence, he was in his youth an avowed Republican. In August 1890 Morrison, then only twenty, was elected to the executive committee of the state Republican party. The following year, however, he resigned, renounced the Republican party, and became a Democrat. In the bitterly contested white supremacy campaigns of 1898-1900, he won recognition as a leader of the "Red Shirt" movement. The unruly and boisterous Red Shirts specialized in harassing Republican candidates and in intimidating black voters. According to Morrison, his followers never "bullied or beat" blacks - just scared them.

During his early political career, Morrison served as mayor of Rockingham in the mid-1890s and won a seat in the state senate in 1900. Thereafter, until his elevation to the governorship, he held no other public office. But he continued to be active in state politics, serving often as a delegate to state Democratic conventions. Throughout this period, he was allied with the party's conservative faction headed by Senator Furnifold M. Simmons.

With the support of the Simmons organization, Morrison won the Democratic gubernatorial nomination in 1920. In the hard-fought primary campaign, his opponents were the incumbent lieutenant governor, O. Max Gardner, and former congressman Robert Newton Page. Morrison subsequently defeated Republican John J. Parker in the general election.

Impulsive, emotional, and "bluff and hearty in his bearing and manner," Morrison was easily one of the more colorful public figures in the North Carolina of his day. But there was little reason to suspect that as governor he would provide anything other than unimaginative, routine leadership. His administration, however, proved to be one of the most constructive in the state's history.

Inaugurated on January 12, 1921, Morrison promptly endorsed the goals of both the Good Roads and educational reform movements. In response to his demands, as well as to pressure from the Good Roads organizations, the General Assembly enacted the historic Highway Act of 1921, enlarging the powers of the Highway Commission and providing for a \$50 million bond issue with which to initiate the construction of a 5,500 mile state highway system. In 1923 the legislature, at the behest of the governor, authorized an additional \$15 million in road bonds. Substantially completed by the end of Governor Angus McLean's

administration (1925-29), the successful and popular highway program begun during the Morrison era was an important factor in North Carolina's emergence in the 1920s as a modern commonwealth.

While best known today as the state's "Good Roads Governor," Cameron Morrison took equal pride in his contributions to enhance educational and charitable institutions. Under pressure from both the governor and citizens' groups, the 1921 General Assembly committed North Carolina to an ambitious six-year, \$20 million expansion program at the overcrowded state institutions of higher learning and at the dozen or so state-operated insane asylums, reformatories, sanatoriums, and schools for the deaf and blind. Moreover, in 1921 the operating budgets for these facilities, as well as for the State Board of Health, were significantly increased.

During the administration of Morrison's predecessor, Governor Thomas W. Bickett (1917-21), public education in North Carolina had experienced a genuine revival. With Morrison's active support, the legislatures of 1921 and 1923 expanded the school programs of the preceding administration. Appropriations for the Department of Public Instruction were considerably enlarged, a loan fund for schoolhouse construction was increased from \$1 to \$10 million, and the county tax structure was reformed to compel more generous local support for the schools. Morrison, on the other hand, performed a disservice to public education when in 1924 he publicly endorsed the antievolution crusade and used his influence as ex officio chairman of the State Board of Education to ban the use of high school biology textbooks that discussed the theory of evolution.

Morrison took a special interest in policies designed to stimulate the economic well-being of the state. His "Live-at-Home" program of 1922 encouraged crop diversification among farmers, and his half-million-dollar fisheries program of 1923 sought to promote the commercial fishing industry. In 1923 he recommended the establishment of a State Department of Commerce and Industry, but the General Assembly rejected his suggestion.

Far and away the most controversial of Governor Morrison's proposals relating to economic development was one calling for a \$8 ½ million bond issue to finance the construction of state-owned port terminal facilities at one or more coastal towns and to establish a state-owned ship line between these points and the seaports of the industrial Northeast. Morrison argued that implementation of his ship and port terminal plan would stimulate commercial development of the state's eastern seaboard, encourage the growth of a seaport in North Carolina rivaling those of Norfolk and Charleston, and compel railroads operating between the state and the great commercial centers of the North to reduce their freight rates. Denounced by many prominent leaders in the State as "socialistic" or as economically unsound, the ship and port terminal proposal was defeated in a referendum in 1924 by an electorate already disturbed by the enormity of the state's debt.

During the Morrison administration North Carolina's bonded debt increased from approximately \$12 million to \$107 million. This indebtedness alarmed fiscal conservatives and led to frequent warnings that North Carolina was rapidly spending itself into bankruptcy. But at no time in the years that followed did the state default on the bonds issued during this period. On the other hand, a deficit, arising from the failure of the governor and the General Assembly to support a sufficient increase in taxes, occurred in the state's current operating fund during the Morrison administration. The State Budget Commission calculated the amount of the accrued deficit to be \$9.4 million as of 30 June 1925, \$1.3 million of which was attributed to the earlier Bickett administration. During the term of Governor Angus W. McLean (1925-29), this deficit

was funded, state taxes were increased slightly, and in 1929 McLean was able to bequeath a \$2.5 million surplus to his successor, O. Max Gardner.

While decidedly a traditionalist in his views on the Negro, Morrison made a sincere effort as governor to improve race relations in the state. In 1921 he summoned a conference of prominent black and white citizens, out of which evolved the North Carolina Commission on Interracial Co-operation. More significantly, he took a vigorous stand against lynching. Due largely to Morrison's policy of dispatching troops to a locality at the slightest hint of impending violence, no lynchings occurred in North Carolina during the last three and one-half years of his term. "I want to let the world know," he declared in 1922, "that lynchings have ended in North Carolina."

Although Morrison was later a U.S. senator (1930-33) and a congressman (1943-45), he is best remembered, and rightly so, for his progressive achievements as governor. To be sure, he was either indifferent to, or opposed outright, such old-style progressive reforms as workmen's compensation legislation, child labor laws, and woman suffrage. But he did favor enlarged state services and economic development schemes. Thus he supported increased appropriations for education, public health, and care of the handicapped and advocated the highway, fisheries, and port terminal programs. That North Carolina acquired a reputation in the 1920s as the South's most progressive state may be attributed in large measure to the policies of his administration.

By all accounts Morrison possessed many admirable qualities as governor such as boldness, determination, and vision. But he was also inclined to be intemperate and disputatious. Sensitive to criticism, he was frequently at odds with two of the most influential newspapers in the state, the Greensboro Daily News and the Raleigh News and Observer.

On the expiration of his term in January 1925, Cameron Morrison, dejected by criticism of his spending policies and by the defeat of his port terminal plan, retired to Charlotte. Having recently married the widow of George Washington Watts, the millionaire Durham financier, he could now afford a life of relative ease. He remained active in state politics, however, virtually until his death twenty-eight years later.

Morrison was among those Democrats in North Carolina who, while rejecting the leadership of Senator Furnifold M. Simmons, elected to support the 1928 national ticket headed by Governor Alfred E. Smith of New York. Two years later he backed Josiah Bailey, once a harsh critic of the Morrison administration, in Bailey's successful primary campaign against Senator Simmons. Later in 1930, when the state's junior senator Lee S. Overman died, Governor O. Max Gardner appointed Morrison to Overman's vacant Senate seat.

Seeking election to a full Senate term, Morrison entered the Democratic senatorial primary of 1932. Although endorsed by most of the state's leading Democrats, he was defeated in the primary by Robert R. Reynolds of Asheville. Ten years later, in 1942, Morrison was elected to Congress from the newly created Tenth Congressional District. In the House he generally supported the wartime domestic and foreign policies of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. His last attempt at public office came in 1944, when he and several lesser candidates were defeated by Clyde R. Hoey for the Senate seat vacated by Reynolds.

In 1952 Morrison, then eighty-two but still vigorous, headed the North Carolina delegation to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Although initially opposed to the nomination of Adlai E. Stevenson, he later campaigned in North Carolina on behalf of the party's nominee.

In 1905 Morrison married Lottie May Tomlinson of Durham. The couple had four children, only one of whom, Angelia (Mrs. James J. Harris), survived infancy. Mrs. Morrison died in 1919, and in 1924 Morrison remarried, taking as his second wife Mrs. Sara Virginia Watts, the widow of George Washington Watts. Cameron Morrison died while vacationing in Quebec City, Canada. He was buried in Elmwood Cemetery, Charlotte.

Source: Magruder, Nathaniel F., "Cameron Morrison," Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, Volume 4, L-O, William S. Powell, ed., Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991, pp. 328-330.

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