Daniel Lindsay Russell and the Tradition of Dissent in the South

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At the height of the Democratic party's violence riddled white supremacy campaign in 1868, Governor Daniel L. Russell issued an executive proclamation enjoining "all ill-disposed" persons of every party to "desist from all unlawful practices and all turbulent conduct" and to preserve the peace. So-called Red Shirts were roaming the eastern counties terrorizing Republicans, Populists, and black people in general. Alfred Moore Waddell, a leading Democrat and old foe of Russell's, was then canvassing the state, proclaiming that the Democrats in Wilmington would seize control "if we have to choke the current of Cape Fear River with negro carcasses." The same day that the governor released his proclamation, a kinswoman of Waddell insisted to him that the time had come for "white men to get out their shotguns." Characterizing Russell as "that infamous malignant blot upon the State," she declared: "I do most earnestly trust, if it comes to blows, that he will chamber the first ball fired in that mass of vul[la]r tissue which does duty for a heart in the gubernatorial carcass."

Two weeks later Alfred Moore Waddell led the coup d'état in Wilmington, since known as the Wilmington race riot, which forced Republican officeholders to resign and once again ensconced the Democrats in power in that city. Waddell became the new mayor of Wilmington. As for Russell, Waddell's cousin nearly got his wish, for the governor barely avoided a lynch mob on his return to Raleigh after voting in Wilmington. Cameron Morrison, a future governor of North Carolina, probably saved Russell's life by hiding him in a baggage car when a party of Red Shirts swarmed the train at Hampton. If Russell escaped the wrath of zealous Democrats on that occasion, he has not been as fortunate in the hands of some historians and memoirists. As late as 1938 Josephus Daniels concluded that Russell had never done a good thing in his life, or at least mighty few. Daniel Russell inspired fierce hatreds in his political opponents, a feeling which he returned in kind.

No barefoot, pitchfork wielding plebian, Daniel Lindsay Russell sprang from the planter aristocracy of eastern North Carolina. His father, Daniel Russell, Sr., and his maternal grandfather, David Ward Sanders, were among the wealthiest planters in the state. Both were staunch Whigs who took an active part in state and local politics before the Civil War. Their example of civic leadership and their social standing deeply impressed young Daniel, who manifested early the self-assurance—some would say arrogance—fitting to one "to the manor born."

Secession tested the strong Unionism of the Russell family and tempered their loyalty to the Confederate government. Young Daniel may or may not have shared his family's Unionist views initially, for in 1862 he left the University of North Carolina and organized an artillery company of men from Brunswick County at his own expense. But thereafter he was in and out of hot water with Confederate authority. Weary of repeated denials of his request for transfer to the battlefields of Virginia, the youthful captain hired a boat and took his men to Wilmington, where he expected to entrain for Virginia. Arrested for acting without orders, Russell escaped with only a reprimand. But his next scrape would not end so happily.

By 1863, if not sooner, Daniel Russell, Sr., like many other old Whig Unionists, made no secret of his disenchantment with the Confederate government in Richmond. He was especially critical of the Confederate conscription law, an often voiced view which ultimately earned the censure of the Confederate recruiting officer in Wilmington. Defensive of his father's good name and honor, young Captain Russell took it upon himself to teach the Confederate recruiting officer a lesson in good manners. Armed with a hickory stick and a pistol, he marched into the recruiting officer's headquarters and proceeded to whip him with the stick in a manner reminiscent of Preston Brooks's famed attack on Charles Sumner. When bystanders managed to stop the fray, young Russell broke away and was about to shoot the officer when a third party deflected his arm and sent the bullet into the wall.

Russell was quickly court-martialed and initially dismissed from the army. But his commanding officer later

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MEETING

Date: Wednesday, May 11, 1977

Time: 8:00 p.m.

Place: Thalian Hall

Subject: Our National Archives

Speaker: Dr. James E. O'Neill, Deputy Archivist of the United States, received his A.B. (1952) and M.A. (1954) in history from the University of Detroit and his Ph.D. in history (1961) from the University of Chicago. He is the author of articles in a number of journals, including the Journal of American History, Victorian Studies, the Catholic Historical Review, the South Atlantic Quarterly, Prologue: The Journal of the National Archives, and the American Archivist. He is co-author of Episodes in American History (Ginn, 1973) and co-editor of the National Archives Conference volume, World War II, recently published by the Howard University Press. A member of the History Department of the University of Notre Dame, 1957-63, specialist in the Library of Congress, 1963-65; associate Professor History, Loyola University, Chicago, 1965-69; director of the Franklin D.

Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York, from 1969 until May 1971, Dr. O'Neill was appointed Special Assistant to the Archivist of the United States from May 1971 until January 1972; and has been the Deputy Archivist of the United States since January 1972. As the Deputy Archivist of the United States he shares with the Archivist the responsibility for operating the National Archives and Records Service nationwide. This includes responsibility for the National Archives in Washington, for 15 records centers, for the 6 Presidential Libraries (including the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library), for the Federal Register and its numerous official publications, and for the government's nationwide program of records management.

Attention: Members of The Lower Cape Fear Historical Society

FEDERATION AFTERNOON: STAGGVILLE PLANTATION

The Lower Cape Fear Historical Society belongs to the Federation of North Carolina Historical Societies. Therefore the members and their families may take advantage of the following program offered by the Federation.

The Federation of North Carolina Historical Societies and the Stagville Preservation Center will co-sponsor a Federation afternoon at the two-hundred-year-old Stagville Plantation on Saturday, May 28 from one until five. The Historic Preservation Society of Durham, a member of the Federation, will act as the official host society for the occasion. The afternoon program will include guided walking tours of the grounds, tours of the 18th and 19th century buildings on the property, and lectures on the Cameron estate. The program will be followed by an informal reception for the guests. The Federation afternoon is open to members of the Federation as well as their families. Participants are asked to assemble at the Stagville Preservation Center by one o'clock.

The tentative schedule for the afternoon is, as follows:

1:00 Welcome
Mr. John Baxton Flowers, III
Executive Director, Stagville Preservation Center
Tour of Bennehan House
Lecture Group: Bennehan House
Lecture Group: Furniture
Lecture Group: Archaeology
Lecture Group: Restoration

2:30 Walking Tours of Plantation
Georgian Plantation House
Slave Houses (1852)
English Barn (1859)

4:00 Informal Reception

Please contact Ms. Elizabeth F. Buford, Historical Organization Services Coordinator, 919-733-7350, if you have any questions.
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continued

rescinded the court's order and ruled that Russell should again be enrolled in the service. By this time, the Russells, both father and son, had no intention of accepting such a sentence. Through the powerful influence of Governor Zebulon Vance as well as through the younger Russell's appointment as a Brunswick County commissioner and later election to the legislature, they kept him out of the army. Indeed, by 1864 the younger Russell clearly echoed his father's views. Writing the Whig editor of the Fayetteville Observer, he accused the Davis administration of being "one grand consolidated military despotism to which the government of Abraham Lincoln is not a circumstance." Russell's life-long aversion to Democrats, his fiery temper, his proud, aristocratic manner, and his maverick tendencies were all evident in his stormy Confederate career. Never, in the words of a kinswoman, would Russell know "the relaxation of conformity." Indeed, Daniel Russell represented a tradition of dissent in the South that would repeatedly challenge Democratic hegemony down into the twentieth century.

The step from dissident Confederates to Radical Republicans after the war proved a small one for the Whiggish Russells. Daniel Russell, Jr., read law and was admitted to the bar in 1867. Then, as now, the law was the traditional pathway to a political career, one to which the younger Russell plainly aspired. For in 1868 he was the Republican candidate for election to the Superior Court. The Republican party in the Lower Cape Fear country consisted of three distinct groups: "scalawags"; the freedmen; and carpetbaggers. Dominating the new party was an inner circle of prominent old Whig families and a number of carpetbaggers, many of whom had served in the Union army. The Democrats, or Conservatives as they styled themselves during Reconstruction, dubbed this inner circle the "Ring." The Russells were clearly among the most influential members of the "Ring." In the bitter campaign of 1868, the younger Russell won election to the bench in the Fourth Judicial District, which consisted of seven counties. His Republicanism was grounded not only in his Whiggish roots and wartime experiences but also in his belief that all men, white and black, rich and poor, should receive equal treatment before the law. Writing a Republican colleague in 1874, Russell asserted: "The last man and the last dollar to enforce political and legal, not social, equality. In hoc signo vinces." In the Reconstruction South where a white majority hoped to replace slavery with a permanent caste system for blacks, such views were indeed revolutionary.

The highpoint of Russell's six-year tenure on the bench came in 1873 when the Republican judge rendered his once-famous "Wilmington Opera House" decision. Four black men, rather than accept segregated seating, purchased first class tickets and sat in the orchestra section. The manager promptly ordered them to leave and swore out warrants for forcible trespass. When the case came before him, Russell ruled that no citizen could individually enforce his civil rights or resort to violence if denied those rights. But he dismissed the warrants against the four black men and ordered them to pay only the court costs. The Republican jurist, however, was not content to stop there. He continued: "The pretension that any person or class may be prevented from resorting to a public place whose doors are open to all but them and denied to them only on account of color or race, will not be tolerated by any Court honestly and sincerely desirous of expounding the constitution and laws according to their true meaning." Anticipating the famous separate-but-equal accommodations ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court two decades later, Russell argued that while "different classes of persons" might be segregated they must not be discriminated against and must receive equal accommodations and equal consideration.

Russell's decision startled those Democrats who hoped to prohibit blacks altogether from various public places, and the ruling soon plagued Russell when he ran for reelection in 1874. His Conservative opponent scored him as "the first advocate of civil rights in the state" who deserved to be "the first martyr." When Russell was defeated, a Conservative newspaper gloated over the demise of "the most able and popular Radical leader in Eastern North Carolina." Russell was not down for long, however. Throughout his career he proved to be a wily proponent of various strategies for beating the Democrats, and a new opportunity came quickly. In 1878 Russell won election to Congress as a Greenbacker. His candidacy thoroughly confused and frustrated Republican and Democratic regulars alike. Though an old Whig, Russell had embraced a number of reform causes, particularly those pertaining to the currency and the regulation of corporate enterprise. His short-lived congressional career marked him as an incisive critic of the Bourbon Democrats whom he believed menaced free institutions. As Russell perceived the Bourbon South, it meant "the minimum of liberty to the many and the maximum of power to the few." Searching unsuccessfully for an appointment to the federal bench during the 1880s, Russell had to content himself with his roles as Wilmington lawyer and planter. In 1888, however, he reemerged as a leading spokesman for one element of the Tar Heel Republican party. Declining to run for the state Supreme Court for which he had campaigned in 1884, Russell published a searing letter which sharply criticized Republican leadership and Bourbon Democrats alike. Russell believed that the GOP had become too much identified with the Negro thus enabling the Democrats to capitalize on the race issue. Indeed, the old Whig planter displayed a distinctly paternalistic attitude toward Afro-Americans and urged them to seek racial uplift through avenues other than politics. In a dramatic over-statement that haunted him the rest of his career, Russell declared: "The negroes of the South are largely savages. We with Northern aid and sanction kidnapped them, enslaved them, and by most monstrous wrong degraded them so that they are no more fit to govern than are their brethren in African swamps..."

With the formation of the Tar Heel Populist party in 1892, the Russell wing of the Republican party recognized an opportunity, in Russell's words, to readjust party lines on "issues other than race and color." Russell's insistence that the Populists and Republicans cooperate to defeat the Democrats and his acrimonious attacks on certain Negro Republicans, principally Henry Plummer Cheatham, congressman from the Second District, badly divided the party. According to the old Greenbacker, there was nothing in the Populist platform "objectionable to Southern Republicans."
“Almost everybody in the South is in favor of Free Silver,” he asserted. “The graduated income tax is nothing but common justice. . . . And who would be hurt by government control of railroads except the people whose money is invested in railroad securities?” Indeed, Russell went so far as to argue that government ownership of the railroads would mean lower freight and fare rates for everyone. His economic radicalism stamped him as a leading advocate of fusion between the Republican and Populist parties, and when such a coalition succeeded in winning control of the legislature and two U.S. Senate seats in 1894, Russell ambitiously eyed the Republican gubernatorial nomination for himself in 1896.

The North Carolina election of 1896 stands out as one of the most important in the post-Reconstruction South, for it demonstrated the strength and appeal of reform-minded Republicans and Populists. Because of the electoral reforms passed by the fusionist legislature in 1895 and the high degree of interest in the election, an astonishing 85.4 per cent of the electorate turned out to vote, including an estimated 87 per cent of the black voters. Russell proved himself to be a cagey and resourceful candidate. To win the GOP nomination he had to overcome the stiff opposition of Old Guard Republicans who resisted cooperation with the Populists as well as conservative Negro Republican leaders who resented his earlier attacks on the Negro’s fitness to hold office. Once nominated, he had to defeat the Democratic candidate and outmaneuver the Populist nominee who expected Russell to withdraw from the race as part of the fusion agreement. The action of Tar Heel voters in electing an overwhelmingly fusionist legislature and the first Republican governor since Reconstruction underscored the vitality and viability of coalition politics, and it threatened to destroy forever one-party rule in the state.

Perhaps no one was better suited to run a fusionist administration than Dan Russell, who plainly shared as many views with the Populists as with the Republicans. In his inaugural address Russell predicted reform of railroads and termed his election a victory for the “weak and oppressed” over the entrenched battlements of prevailing privilege and lawless power.” Promising to seek the reduction of freight rates from the Railroad Commission, the Republican governor astounded his party and conservative Democrats by urging the nullification of the 99-year lease of the state-owned North Carolina Railroad to J. P. Morgan’s Southern Railway Company which the previous Democratic administration had granted in 1895.

Russell’s Populist rhetoric and fervor in the inaugural address set the tone for his first two years in office. His progressive initiatives, however, ultimately faced insurmountable hurdles. First, the fusionist alliance in the General Assembly of 1897 quickly ruptured in a battle concerning the reelection of Republican Senator Jeter C. Pritchard. Second, Russell alienated Republican stalwarts when he advocated a comprehensive railroad reform bill which would have annulled the North Carolina Railroad’s 99-year lease and placed nonresident corporations under stringent state regulation; he also planned to increase railroad taxation and reduce fare and freight rates. Third, Tar Heel Democrats, nursing their wounds after the bitter defeats of 1894 and 1896, were already gearing up for a white supremacy campaign which would crush what they termed “Russellism” and “negro supremacy.”

By the spring 1898, having lost his legislative and legal struggle to annul the 99-year lease, Russell was a governor without a party or even a firm base of support. Indeed, he and Populist Senator Marion Butler had cemented a political and personal friendship which they hoped would enable them to restructure the Tar Heel party system. Their plan was bold. They would use the Populists as the nucleus for a new coalition of reformers from all parties. In a highly unorthodox but not uncharacteristic move, Russell worked secretly behind the scenes to bring about the fusion of the Populist radicals led by Butler with the reform wing of the Democratic party, since the business-oriented GOP had all but disavowed him. Russell’s flirtation with Progressive Democrats like Walter Clark and his ever-closer bond with the Populists marked the zenith of his apostasy from the GOP, but it also illustrated the depth and intensity of Russell’s commitment to reform.

The Democrats’ white supremacy campaign of 1898, backed by certain segments of the business community, quashed the efforts of Russell and Butler to accent economic issues and silence the old Democratic cry of “negro rule.” Ironically, the Progressive coalition that emerged in the first decade of the twentieth century in North Carolina drew much of its vigor from powerful business groups. During the 1890s, however, Piedmont manufacturers and merchants were yet unwilling to champion railroad regulation when sponsored by a renegade Republican governor like Russell, who depended on the Populists for political support. Russell’s reform plans had too much of an anticapitalist edge to them. But by 1907 Progressive Democrats in legislatures throughout the South were enacting antitrust reforms espoused by Russell a decade earlier.

Through all his tribulations as a southern dissenter, Russell maintained his public image as a pugnacious and crusty curmudgeon. Nearly 300 pounds in weight, the blustery planter wore his hat at a rakish tilt and carried a heavy walking cane, affectations which doubtless accounted for such sobriquets as “the Knight of the Lordly Strut” and the “Duke of Brunswick.” The irascible Russell was always ready to skewer an opponent with a sharp rebuttal. When a federal judge ruled against him during the railroad lease fight, Russell fulminated: “If the plebeians and middle classes get control of this country in 1900 they may take these capitalists and corporation judges . . . and chuck them into the manure pile, a setting septicum.”

Russell’s final shot at the Democrats came in the famous interstate lawsuit between South Dakota and North Carolina over repudiated Reconstruction bonds. In that instance, Russell obviously stood to gain considerable sums of money from his bond scheme, but his attempt to force North Carolina to pay off its debts represented a steadfast conviction, voiced repeatedly for many years and notably in his inaugural speech, that a state’s repudiation of debt was dishonest and unethical.

What does Daniel Russell’s career tell us about the “Other South,” as historian Carl Degler has termed southern dissenters? In a peculiar and perhaps unique sense, Russell personified one dissenting tradition in the South from the Civil War until the twentieth century. His development from a dissident Confederate of the Whiggish persuasion to a Radical Republican, Greenbacker, fusionist, and perhaps crypto-Populist covered the sweep of southern dissent for more than four decades. Though he was no “socialist,” as his wife once suggested, Russell was a nonconformist who offered sometimes radical alternatives to the economic and
political dicta of the Democrats.

The heretical notion, moreover, might even have ventured that Dan Russell was a Progressive. George Tindall has argued persuasively that the Progressives represented an Hegelian synthesis of the Bourbons and Populists who went before. The Progressives combined the social standing and respectability of the Bourbons with the Populist belief in an active government. In the case of Russell, the mixture produced a slightly different hybrid, for Russell was indeed a curious blend of Old South paternalism and New South radicalism. At a time when other southern Progressives such as Charles B. Aycock, James K. Vardaman, and Hoke Smith were rising to power on the waves of racial antipathies, Russell represented a different strain. Though a member of a tiny planter elite, he had consistently taken the side of the impoverished southern masses, black and white, for more than forty years. If Russell's attitudes toward Negroes were paternalistic, he still recognized their right to legal equality and a role in the political process. Whether from expediency or intense racism, few Democrats could swallow such dangerous ideas after the Populist revolt. The black electorate had potentially become the balance of power in politics. After all it had helped elect the much feared and hated Daniel Russell in 1896. As Russell's experience graphically illustrated, Negro suffrage saddled the reform movement with an emotional issue which it never overcame. Russell's brand of Progressivism simply challenged too many southern sanctities concerning race, class, and party.

With all of the conflicting elements of his background and career, Russell still defies easy categorization. He was above all his own man. Perhaps a close Republican ally best understood the ironies of Russell's career. Though "born [an] aristocrat," Charles Cook wrote, Russell's "sympathies" had always remained "with the worthy and the poor. No man ever lived in the State who is least understood and worse represented."

FOOTNOTES

2. Rebecca Cameron to A. M. Waddell, Oct. 26, 1898, Alfred Moore Waddell Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
13. J. Morgan Kousser, The Shaping of Southern Politics Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South (New Haven, 1974), Table 1.5, p. 41; Table 7.1, p. 183.