

CHAPTER 19

TILLMAN

- A. Introduction. The worsening condition of South Carolina's farmers combined with the "do nothing" attitude of the state's political leaders angered many who tried to make a living tilling the soil. Benjamin Ryan Tillman of Edgefield County was furious about the inaction of those in authority. Utilizing his considerable talents as a public speaker, he built a political following that eventually enable him to win control of state government. His rise to power coincided with similar political upheavals in the West and the South – the so-called Populist Revolt.
- *B. Agricultural Organizations.**
- *1. The Grange, a secret fraternal organization, first appeared in South Carolina in 1871.**
- *a. The Grange flourished in the upcountry and appealed to small farmers.**
 - *b. It successfully agitated for state railroad regulation.**
 - *c. Through its influence, a state Agricultural Bureau was established in 1879.**
 - *d. Its limited successes paved the way for later, more aggressive farmers' organizations.**
2. The South Carolina Agricultural and Mechanical Society was formed to promote scientific farming, but is better remembered for organizing the State Fair.
3. These two organizations provided Ben Tillman with his first notable public speaking opportunity in 1885.
- C. The Farmers' Association
1. Tillman's 1885 speech in Bennettsville before a joint meeting of the Grange and the Agricultural and Mechanical Society shocked those who heard it.
 - a. Tillman attacked the agricultural evils destroying the state's real farmers and the "disreputable politicians" whom he said dominated the Society for their own benefit.
 - b. The speech was widely circulated throughout the state and almost overnight the obscure Edgefield farmer had become a political force in the state.

2. The Farmer's Association, a statewide organization, was formed by Tillman in 1886 to advocate agricultural reforms.
 - *a. One of the Association's highest priorities was the creation of a separate agricultural college.**
 - *i. In 1862, Congress had passed the Morrill Land Grant Act which provided funds for agricultural and mechanical colleges.**
 - *ii. In South Carolina, the first college agricultural courses were taught at the University of South Carolina which received funds under the Morrill Act.**
 - b. Initially, the Association was not involved in politics, but by 1890 had become a vehicle for Tillman's political ambitions.

D. The Clemson Legacy

1. In his will, Thomas G. Clemson left the state property for the establishment of an agricultural and mechanical college.
2. With Tillman's followers in control of the General Assembly, the gift was accepted in 1889 and Clemson College opened its doors in 1893.
3. The agricultural college at USC was closed and Morrill Act funds given to Clemson.

E. The Election Campaign of 1890

1. The "Shell Manifesto," secretly authored by Tillman, called for the Farmers' Association to have a state convention and nominate a slate of officers prior to the annual convention of the state Democratic Party.
2. Tillman was nominated by the Farmers and he campaigned all across the state.
3. The Redeemers and those who opposed Tillman called themselves Conservatives.
4. The campaign of 1890 was a dirty one.
 - a. Both the Tillmanites and the Conservatives disrupted each other's meetings.
 - b. Speakers, even the venerated Wade Hampton, were booed and interrupted.
 - c. Tillman scathingly denounced the Conservatives as a group of men whose time had passed.
 - i. He said that the Conservatives were corrupt, "broken down aristocrats," hanging onto office for financial gain.

- ii. He attacked the University of South Carolina as “the seedbed of the aristocracy” and the Citadel as the “dude factory” and advocated closing both.
- d. In desperation, the Conservatives appealed to the state’s remaining black voters.
- e. The Conservatives were overwhelmingly defeated by Tillman and his followers.

F. The Tillmanites in Power

1. So strong was Ben Tillman’s personality, that for nearly ten years he totally dominated the state’s political life.
2. The Dispensary, a statewide liquor monopoly, was one of Tillman’s most remembered programs.
 - a. It was unpopular in many parts of the state, especially in Charleston, Columbia, and the towns of the Pee Dee.
 - b. There were riots in Darlington against the Dispensary and its officials.
 - c. Throughout its existence, the Dispensary and its officers were notoriously corrupt.
3. Tillman ordered his followers in the General Assembly to vote against Senator Wade Hampton’s reelection in 1892.
- *4. In 1894, Tillman, himself, was elected to the U.S. Senate where he served until his death.**
 - a. As Senator, he effectively sought federal funds and military installations for the state.
 - b. During a debate, he threatened to jab President Grover Cleveland, a rather rotund individual, with a pitchfork – hence his nickname, “Pitchfork Ben.”
5. The Constitution of 1895 was Tillman’s response to the Conservatives’ attempt to attract black voters in the 1890 election.
 - a. The Constitution effectively eliminated blacks’ participation in the political process.
 - b. It repudiated the ideals of equality found in the Constitution of 1868 and laid the groundwork for the segregated society that lasted until the 1960s.
 - c. This Constitution was never submitted to the people for ratification.

- *6. Although Tillman was considered a radical by his opponents, he and his followers remained loyal to the Democratic Party and did not support the Populists.**

G. The Conservative Opposition

1. The Conservatives were soundly defeated in the election of 1890.
2. They continued to oppose Tillman and his programs, but had little success.
3. The State newspaper in Columbia was established by a group of Conservatives to keep the public informed about Tillman's activities and to present the case for his opponents.

H. Race Relations

1. Tillman's determination to eliminate blacks from politics was one of the primary motives behind the Constitution of 1895.
2. The Tillmanite-dominated General Assembly passed the so-called "Jim Crow" laws segregating all aspects of public life.
3. Race baiting became an accepted part of political campaigns, reaching a notorious low in the campaigns of Cole Blease.
4. There were serious racial incidents at Fort Motte in Calhoun County (1896) and at Phoenix in Greenwood County (1898).
5. The lynching of black men by white mobs became an all too frequent occurrence.

I. Summary. The Farmer's Revolt succeeded mainly in providing Ben Tillman with the means to seize political control of the state. With the notable exception of the establishment of Clemson College, there was little else that the farmers could point to as a benefit for them. The ouster of the Redeemers ended almost two centuries of political domination by the spiritual, if not actual, descendants of the old colonial elite.

J. Readings

1. Edgar, South Carolina: A History, Chapter 19
2. Blum, Catton, The National Experience, pp. 502-507
3. Cooper, The Conservative Regime, pp. 143-207
4. Horne, South Carolina, 360-375
5. Jones, South Carolina, pp. 558-576, 595-598
6. Kantrowitz, Ben Tillman & the Reconstruction of White Supremacy
7. Lander, A History of South Carolina, pp. 30-43
8. Simkins, Pitchfork Ben Tillman

9. Tindall, America, pp. 849-856, 898-903, 917
10. Tindall, South Carolina Negroes, pp. 68-91
11. Woodward, The Strange Career of Jim Crow, see index for "South Carolina," "Tillman," etc.