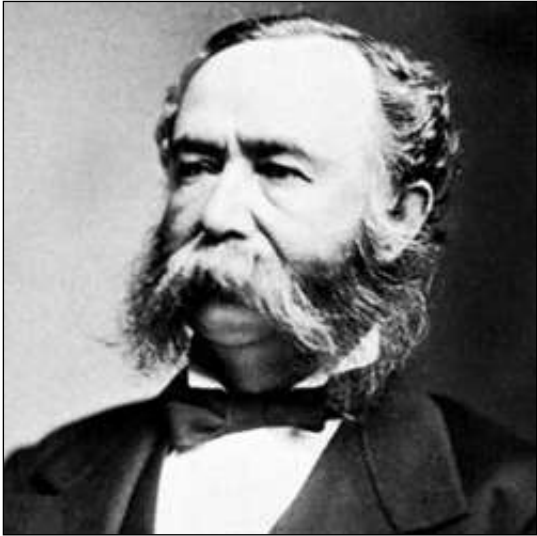


## Wade Hampton and the “Red Shirts” - Part 7



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Examiner

In 1876, South Carolina entered its eleventh year of military subjection after the WBTS and its ninth year Radical Republican *Reconstruction* rule. During this time, South Carolina had undergone such great humiliation, degradation, and corrupt misrule that it had come to be referred to in the national and international media as “*The Prostrate State*,” a name which, in reality, was an understatement.

Financially, the State was ruined. Property values had plummeted, some claiming that the property destruction during the Reconstruction period was more than that of the Civil War itself. Taxes soared dramatically and much land was confiscated. State debt increased to the point of being virtually worthless.

Politically, things were worse. On the national level, the Radical Republicans were in complete control and did not hesitate to show an open hatred and hostility for all things Southern. Federal troops were used to back up the crushing demands of the *Reconstruction Acts of 1868*, under which anyone who had held public office in or had fought for the Confederacy was not allowed to vote, excluding most of South Carolina’s white population.

On the State level, the Legislature was mostly under the control of *Carpetbaggers (Outsiders)* and *Scalawags (Insiders who helped them in their plunder)* and contained many former slaves who had no experience in government, many of whom could neither read or write. Open bribery was the commonly accepted way of getting laws enacted and even the Legislature itself was involved in various corrupt land and utility *enterprises*. The issuing of “*Pay Certificates*”, demands on the state Treasury, given without Legislative approval for virtually any reason, reached incredible levels. So much money was stolen and wasted that there was none left for schools or hospitals. The open statement of South Carolina’s U. S. Senator John Patterson that there was “*yet five years more of good stealing in South Carolina*” gives some idea of the conditions that then prevailed. Even the Republican Governor was moved to denounce the corruption in his Party and warned in a telegram

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that “the civilization of the Cavalier, the Puritan and the Huguenot were in danger”.

By Bob Dill - Publisher of The Times Examiner

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In 1876, things came to a boil when some of the vilest of men in the state’s history, men held in contempt and even denied reelection by their own Party, were appointed as circuit judges. If you think we exaggerate on conditions, the following statement concerning South Carolina was sent to Congress by a group of Northern Congressmen:

*“That once prosperous and beautiful State is on the verge of ruin. A horde of thieves and robbers, worse than ever infested any civilized community on earth, have her by the throat and are fast sucking her blood”*

Saddest of all, race relations soured dramatically in this period as former slaves were fed a steady diet of suspicion toward and hatred for whites. They were constantly told that a vote for a Democrat was a vote for a return to slavery and punishment, while the Republican government was going to take land from the whites and divide it between them. Some Republican speakers openly espoused plans of driving whites into submission by torching their houses and barns at night.

By 1876 conditions had become so intolerable that it was felt that a resort to a civil war within the state would be preferable to what was presently going on – as it would likely result in a return to U.S. military rule (as opposed to the State Reconstructionist rule by the Radical Republicans backed up by the hated State Militia).

It was in this vein that the disarrayed Democrats came together and decided to cast everything on a final stand in the upcoming 1876 election. Throughout the State men armed themselves in “rifle clubs”. Wearing *Red Shirts* by common agreement, these clubs produced a formidable presence at political meetings throughout the State. The *Red Shirt* presence was not there to provoke violence, but to prevent it (especially violence against black Democrats). But it was well-known that the *Red Shirts* would meet violence with violence if necessary. Wade Hampton was selected as the Democratic candidate for Governor and canvassed the state – continually urging all Democrats to avoid any trouble with the Republicans.

It must be understood that political events occurring in SC were being very closely watched and reported on throughout the nation because South Carolina was considered to be the swing state in the upcoming national election. Thus, the *Red Shirts* had to delicately balance the need for a show of strength to maintain order with the need for incredible self-restraint to avoid armed conflict that would result in political problems in the upcoming election.

It is beyond question that both sides used gross intimidation and dishonest methods in the 1876 election. Fire was met with fire. Space will only permit us to say that despite the election machinery all being in the hands of Republicans, Wade Hampton, with the support of many African-American citizens voting Democratic, won the election and was twice certified as Governor by the State Supreme Court. The Republicans sought to void these results by throwing out the votes of several disputed counties - resulting in two Inaugurations of two Governors. President Grant

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himself the head of arguably the most corrupt national Administration in American history) sent troops to keep Hampton and the Democrats out of the State House. Democrats, however, gained entry, with the result that SC had two Governors and two Legislatures from November 1876 to April 1877. Democrats at the behest of Hampton pulled out of the State House twice to avoid riots.

All of this ended when the newly-elected Republican President, Rutherford B. Hayes, whose own election by one electoral vote was not settled until 1877 (the votes of SC, Florida and Louisiana all being contested), withdrew all the Federal troops from the State, bringing an end to the corrupt Republican Reconstruction rule in South Carolina.

(Note: There are only a handful of original Red Shirts known to exist today. One of them can be seen in Greenville at The Museum and Library of Confederate History, which is located at 15 Boyce Avenue, near the BI-LO Center. Hours of Operation are ... Wednesday 10AM-3PM ...Friday 1PM – 9PM ... Saturday 10AM – 5PM ... and Sunday 1PM-5PM. The Museum and Library of Confederate History is a historical and educational endeavor operated by the 16<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Sons of Confederate Veterans of Greenville, SC. Admission is free. School Classes and Private tours are welcome by appointment – Call 864-268-0713.)