
James L. Hunt
Creating North Carolina Populism, 1900–1960,
Part 1: The Progressive Era Project, 1900–1930

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In his preface to Origins of the New South, 1877–1913 (1951), C. Vann Woodward quoted historian Arnold J. Toynbee’s boyish celebration of the British Empire. On the occasion of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee, Toynbee thought, “Well, we are top of the world, and we have arrived at this peak to stay there—forever! There is, of course, a thing called history, but history is something unpleasant that happens to other people.” As for American history, Toynbee thought a New Yorker would have felt the same way. But “if I had been a small boy in 1897 in the Southern part of the United States, I should not have felt the same; I should have known from my parents that history had happened in my part of the world.” Both Toynbee’s observation and Woodward’s use of it reflect the belief that perspective matters in history.1

Taking Toynbee and Woodward’s cue, this article focuses on the construction of history by North Carolina historians. The approach is not typical historiography. Instead, it describes historians’ lives, values, personal correspondence, and working careers to better understand the process of twentieth-century historical writing. The creation of North Carolina Populism between 1900 and 1960 provides the vantage point. During these decades and beyond, historians’ characterization of North Carolina Populism demonstrated that Populist histories only pretended to describe events during the 1890s. They were really about the present and also a future desired by the historians. In an initial Progressive Era, which lasted from the end of Populism into the 1930s, the historians offered an account they hoped would appeal to and influence behavior during their own generation. Perhaps more importantly, these Progressives inaugurated a tradition of politicized purpose in academic history that

continued long after they departed from the scene. The next generation of Populist historians, writing between the 1930s and the 1960s, challenged the Progressive vision and offered a different meaning to Populism. Both the Progressives and their critics, however, agreed that history was a tool for providing moral, economic, and political foundations for contemporary politics. This result is not in itself surprising. More pertinent to understanding the evolution of Populism is describing precisely how and through whom the process occurred.

North Carolina Populism offers a compelling opportunity for evaluating the process of written history. First, Populism’s political failure occurred simultaneously with a transformation in historical writing. Populism was the most recent political event for North Carolina’s first “professional” historians. That is, Populism’s death corresponded precisely with the birth of a new kind of history. Often state employees, the first historians aimed to legitimize themselves and their emerging social function. They did this by creating a past directly relevant to the present, a past that also explained and justified their employers’ political and economic power. Prior to 1900, persons lacking a university-issued doctorate generated North Carolina history. But after the turn of the century, the graduate school product and wage-earning historian appeared. The political class encouraged these institutional developments. For example, the Democratic-controlled state government launched an official historical agency in 1903, the North Carolina Historical Commission. A scholarly journal, the North Carolina Historical Review, and the University of North Carolina Press, both born in the 1920s, reflected the modern desire for usable history. Like up-to-date businessmen drawn to the increasingly popular corporation form, North Carolina’s colleges established the first history “departments.” By the 1930s, two emerging “research” universities, Duke University and the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, offered the history doctorate, the legitimizing academic badge for history writing.

The death of Populism, which occurred just as the subsidized historian arrived on the scene, provided the new group of salaried storytellers with one of their first


3. On the professionalization of history in North Carolina, see H. G. Jones and Timothy D. Pyatt, “Historical Collections” (describing the history of university library resources especially devoted to North Carolina history), 570–571; H. G. Jones, “Historical Commission” (describing state agencies for state history), 571; and Jeffrey J. Crow, “North Carolina Historical Review” (describing the state’s preeminent history journal, founded in 1924), 817–818, all in Powell, Encyclopedia of North Carolina.
real opportunities for self-definition. Punctuated by fierce and violent contests, the People’s Party in the Tar Heel State featured intense confrontations over divisive issues. Ultimately, early North Carolina Populist histories revealed less about the 1890s than they did about the beliefs of its historians. The professors and their best students took sides when declaring who and what should matter in politics, ethics, and economics. They frankly articulated a moral and social agenda in their accounts of the Populist experience. Most important, Progressive-Era historians described Populism as a flawed but useful stage in the state’s allegedly ongoing improvement, led by a Progressive version of white supremacy Democrats. Perhaps this was predictable, given that the professional historians were themselves overwhelmingly Progressive white supremacy Democrats and owed their jobs to Democratic appropriations or the largesse of the conservative business leaders who supported the state’s colleges and universities. Twentieth-century academic Progressivism corresponded with the North Carolina Democratic Party’s core values: a mildly larger state sector, especially support for public education; financial and legal encouragement of expanding urban industrial capitalism as a means of replacing agriculture’s preeminence; and the economic and political suppression of African Americans as well as radical ideas about property rights, labor, and wealth distribution. The enduring impact of Progressive-Era polemics extended for decades, even after Populism had to be reinvented for different political causes. Prominent historians always agreed with Progressives’ assumption that their principal role was to make Populist history relevant.

The economic basis of the emerging history profession deserves emphasis because it helped determine how the past would be portrayed. For the first time, a perceived need to pay for professional history, including by taxpayers, meant there would be “new perspectives” that invariably challenged previous accounts. History, like the textiles and cigarettes pouring from the state’s new factories, became a commodity. The historian as employee generated what one scholar has called “the...
market principles governing individual success in American academic life,” with its “intellectual arena in which reputations are made and battles about power and status are fought out.” Thanks to the Progressives, by the 1930s, professional history in North Carolina operated within a capitalistic environment where “the young or marginalized could [and in fact must] challenge the views of those who currently occupy positions of authority” in order to get heard, obtain jobs, and place themselvesrespectably in the historians’ pecking order. Writing about Populism therefore resembled a form of business innovation, a product paid for by tuition fees, public subsidies, and gifts with the aim of making older history “goods” obsolete. As the century unfolded, these market dynamics encouraged salaried historians to give Populism new and more dramatic meanings by linking the movement to the whole of American history, including the Civil War, Reconstruction, and eventually New Deal and Great Society liberalism.6

The standard facts of North Carolina Populism can be easily summarized. North Carolina was among the leading Populist states. Inspired by the growth and decline of an agricultural organization, the Farmers’ Alliance and Industrial Union, Tar

6. Umberto Eco, Interpretation and Overinterpretation, ed. Stephan Collini (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 5, 119. None of this article is meant as a wholly negative assessment of historians’ achievement. Compared to the Populist actors, the historians typically possessed more sophisticated ideologies, higher literary talents, and at least as profound and deeply held moral visions. The historians recognized this, with many leaving their personal papers for the kind of analysis without which this article would not have been possible. A key member of the group writing after 1930, C. Vann Woodward, once criticized a historical manuscript about state supreme courts on the ground that the author “concentrated entirely on printed decisions; he gave no evidence of going through the private papers of the various judges.” C. Vann Woodward to Leslie E. Philla-baum, November 3, 1967, C. Vann Woodward Papers (hereinafter Woodward Papers), Manuscripts and Archives, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, New Haven, Conn. This article uses both the printed products of historians as well as their private papers in order to understand North Carolina Populism as it was created. A sampling of recent general commentaries on the broader issue of the relationships between history and politics shows a predictable lack of consensus. See Peter Novick, That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 628 (“[T]he evolution of historians’ attitudes on the objectivity question has always been closely tied to changing social, political, cultural, and professional contexts.”); Allan Megill, Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 109 (“Objectivity, then, is not neutrality—although it does involve a measure of detachment from one’s own commitments.”); Paul K. Conkin and Roland N. Stromberg, Heritage and Challenge: The History and Theory of History (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Forum Press, 1989), 192–216 (“Can history really be objective? It can be, but only when the term ‘objective’ has a practical and very restricted meaning.”); Richard J. Evans, In Defense of History (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1999), 193–220 (“Historical judgment does not have to be ‘neutral,’ but it does mean that the historian has to develop a detached mode of cognition, a faculty of self-criticism, and an ability to understand another person’s point of view.”); David Harlan, The Degradation of American History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 96 (“What we need from American historians is not a new defense of objectivity but a little help in finding the predecessors we need.”); and Hélène Bowen Raddiker, Sceptical History: Feminist and Postmodern Approaches in Practice (London: Routledge, 2007), 27 (“Meaning is arbitrary, as I have noted, because it resides in language, not in the real world it seeks to describe.”). Perhaps Eugene D. Genovese, in The Southern Front: History and Politics in the Cultural War (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 6–8, expressed the politics of history writing most colorfully: “Those who denounce objectivity as a fraud in the service of oppression are offering flagrant mendacity as a Higher Law. . . . It is one thing to lay bare the political implications of our analyses; it is quite another to whoré in some ostensibly worthy cause.”
Heel Populists created a vigorous political organization that lasted from 1892 to 1900. Populists responded to commercial farmers’ sense of economic, social, and political marginalization, the same urban industrial forces that benefited the universities and the professional historians. Simply put, Populists rejected laissez-faire and the conservative Democratic leadership that ruled the state after Reconstruction. Populists looked to government and to international markets in agricultural commodities to bring prosperity, particularly to landowning farmers. The party’s platforms endorsed government ownership of railroads to lower costs to shippers and consumers of agricultural goods; a shifting of the existing real property tax burden to the wealthy and to corporations and away from middling landowning farmers; government control of the money supply in order to avoid the constraints of a metal-based currency; destroying the power of national banks, particularly to increase the money supply and thus presumably the price of commodities; and federally-backed credit and marketing programs to reduce costs and increase profit in a manner beneficial to commercial farmers. This message allowed North Carolina Populists to elect scores of local, state, and national representatives to all three branches of government. They published weekly newspapers, held well-attended conventions, and sponsored impressive public events. Two of their leaders, L. L. Polk (1837–1892) and Marion Butler (1863–1938), shaped the national movement. Populist political power in North Carolina culminated during the 1894 and 1896 elections. With the cooperation of an overwhelmingly black Republican Party, Populists and Republicans won control of the state legislature as well as portions of the judicial and executive branches. This triumph, however, spawned a violent reaction by Democrats, who cynically used whites’ racial and economic fears to retake the state by force in 1898 and 1900. Thereafter, Democrats enacted election laws that practically eliminated black and anti-Democratic voting and deflected any meaningful challenge to Democratic power until the early 1970s.7

The Progressive Era history project commenced almost immediately after Populism’s collapse. It derived almost entirely from persons employed by state-controlled or private organizations closely linked to existing economic power. The initial generation of university-trained historians, Joseph Gregoire de Roulhac Hamilton, Simeon A. DeLapp, Florence E. Smith, and John D. Hicks, demonstrated considerable skills at gathering evidence. The successful pursuit of facts ranked high among their goals. Yet the new professionals rejected mere recitations of data. They always believed that more facts allowed an increasingly powerful and persuasive political argument. Perhaps ironically, better fact-gathering actually enhanced

the political functions of professional history by conferring upon the employee-historians a veneer of scientific objectivity.8

For Populism, Joseph Gregoire de Roulhac Hamilton (1878–1961) was the most important and influential of this generation. He embodied the historian as intellectual entrepreneur, moralist, and loyal Democratic government worker. Hamilton’s understanding of Populism appeared most fully in North Carolina since 1860 (1919), part of a remarkable multivolume survey of North Carolina history and biography. His account represented the first effort by a graduate school-trained historian to describe the Tar Heel agrarian movement. Born in Orange County to a prominent family, Hamilton attended the neo-Confederate University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. Graduating in 1900, the final fatal year of the Tar Heel Populist insurgency, Hamilton taught Greek for a year at a North Carolina military academy and then enrolled at Columbia University, where he received a Ph.D. in 1906 under the direction of William A. Dunning. Dunning (1857–1922), a leading Reconstruction scholar, did not think much of the postwar experiment and supervised a slew of like-minded dissertators, including Hamilton. While a graduate student, Hamilton also served as principal of Wilmington High School (1904–1906), the location of an 1898 white Democratic coup d’état against Republican and Populist local government. His graduate work culminated in a study of North Carolina Reconstruction, a choice that would have significant implications for Populist historiography and broadly affect the trajectory of professional history in North Carolina. Landing a professorship at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, Hamilton eventually founded the Southern Historical Collection manuscript depository. Hamilton’s hiring as a state employee in 1906 should be considered the beginning of professional academic history in North Carolina public higher education. During his half-century career Hamilton wrote prolifically, publishing numerous works on southern and American history. These included an edited compilation of Dunning’s scholarship, Truth in History and Other Essays (1937), a title that reflected the ambitions of the new breed of Ph.D.-toting historians.9

Hamilton believed professional history possessed a special moral purpose, which of course dovetailed with its political and economic goals. More precisely, these ethical values required that history be used to educate selected elements of the public
about present issues. Hamilton thus aimed to judge the violent Populist experience and properly steer the white citizenry, always his intended audience. In a 1922 paper, “Vitality in State History,” Hamilton called for a purposive professionalism that required state historians to promote progressivism, greatness, and social improvement. Populism, to Hamilton, threatened these goals, so naturally his History condemned it harshly. The farmers’ revolt “imperiled the foundations of the social and governmental structure in North Carolina.” Hamilton sneeringly described Populist leaders as “radical fanatics” and “political adventurers of demagogic sort who saw in [Populism] the opportunity for advancement for themselves which had been hitherto denied for reasons more or less obvious.” Although he recognized rural depression and described Populism’s first platform as “in all respects an admirable document,” Hamilton condemned the farmers’ tendencies to be misled by “economic heresies,” such as government control of the money supply. He viewed Populist interest in public education positively, however. This can partly be explained by the fact that Hamilton’s Democratic Party had adopted that cause as its own after 1900. In the end, his professional conclusion was that Populist failure was necessary because its defeat promoted the public interest. Articulating a key theme repeated by historians in his generation and beyond, Hamilton argued that Populist agitation had the desirable effect of pushing the Democratic Party toward beneficial, but not radical, legislation. His new Democracy was Progressive, while Populism was ultimately backward-looking. The best future, according to Hamilton, was in the cities and the universities, and not the countryside. A reformed Democratic Party, unlike the Populist Party, stood boldly for Jim Crow capitalism. Hamilton’s scholarly endorsement of the Democratic regime defined the role of the historian-employee in a one-party state.10

Most revealing was that in Hamilton’s story, the devil figures were not Populists, but Republicans, especially black Republicans. Conveniently, Republican influence and political cooperation, or Fusion, with Populists recreated the horrors of Reconstruction, Hamilton’s academic specialty. The trained historian, especially one focused on the racial aspects of the American experience, assumed Populism could only make sense by putting it in the context of race, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. Of course, this had the effect of wrenching Populism from its distinct context. When Populists facilitated black officeholding and voting, they “planted the mine, the explosion of which would destroy them and with them unrestricted Negro suffrage.” Hamilton dismissed Republican governor Daniel L. Russell (1845–1908), who he assumed was elected by black votes in 1896, with the

remark that Russell “was a man full of bitterness who had made an unenviable record in the Confederate army.” Republicans, naturally, lacked principles and tried to absorb Populists for nefarious purposes. In Wilmington, Republican success meant “[b]urglary, robbery, and murder were offenses of increasing frequency and negro juries made conviction practically impossible. . . . As a result of these conditions, business was stagnant, depression was general, and the community which should have been prosperous was retrograding.” In other words, Populism failed because it colluded with a Republican Party tainted by black inferiority and Reconstruction. Republican rule meant crimes by black men against white women and a general lack of “[s]elf-restraint” by African Americans. By contrast, much like during Reconstruction, the Democrats opposing Populists represented “[i]n many cases the very best men in the community.” Thankfully, it all turned out for the best. For Hamilton, the disfranchisement of black voters constituted a “great achievement.” Populism unintentionally awakened whites “to a new sense of the danger of the negro in politics and bred a determination to eliminate him for the future that a new peace and security might come to the commonwealth.”

Altogether, Hamilton contended that the 1890s replayed Reconstruction and offered essential lessons for contemporary southern race relations. Equally important, his ability to make connections across past decades clearly conveyed the function of the professional historian, particularly one employed by the state. Hamilton, after all, had been educated to show the relationships between historical events. He therefore proved that the racial and moral deficiencies of Reconstruction reappeared in Populism, doomng the latter, because history demonstrated that black people in politics meant failure. Each of the key players in the 1870s drama made a return engagement in Hamilton’s Populist saga: venal rape-crazed blacks; ambitious, self-serving office seekers (black and white) selfishly using more gullible citizens; and high-minded men (i.e., white Democrats) leading the way to salvation. Dressed up as scholarly history from the pen of a partly northern-educated professor, Hamilton presented the same “white men triumphant” theme offered by the Democratic Party in its crusade against Populism. Hamilton believed blacks should be excluded from politics and that violence justified this goal. A professor at the state’s Jim Crow Democrat-controlled university supported race riots and intimidation of voters, at least if they assured white dominance and provided safety for capital investment. Altogether, it was a powerful interpretive performance, precisely the sort of polished display of the practical uses of historical facts envisioned by graduate training. The Ivy League-trained Ph.D. described a Populist moment consistent with his assumptions about the meaning of history, Reconstruction, race relations, the

intellectual function of the professional historian, and his dreams of a “Progressive” future.\footnote{12}

Other factors explain Hamilton’s Populism. First, \textit{North Carolina since 1860} was a commercial project. No endowed or publicly-funded scholarly university press existed in the state, and the miniscule academic audience extant in 1919 could not generate a profit for one. The \textit{History of North Carolina} consisted of six volumes, three of which contained obsequious biographies of the white elite: industrialists, bankers, railroad managers, lawyers, and physicians, the “best men” Hamilton associated with Democratic leadership.\footnote{13} The lightweight biographies forthrightly signaled the \textit{History}'s intended readership in terms of both class and political orientation. Tar Heel businessmen, or at least the Top Ten Percent, could read the \textit{History} and hopefully be inspired to continue the fight and be comforted by the morality of its ideology. The narrow audience was just as well, because the \textit{History} needed an income, and former Populists, Republicans, poor whites, and blacks seemed unlikely customers. In a telling demonstration of early academic history’s goals, Hamilton and the publishers assumed those groups would not be included among consumers of professional history. Therefore, they did not publish to or for them.

Robert D. W. Connor (1878–1950), who wrote Volume 1 of the \textit{History}, which covered the period 1584 to 1783, supervised the overall project. Connor hailed from a Democratic and Wilson-based family intimately linked to Populist defeat and present white control. Connor tried to ensure that this control extended to written history. His father, a lawyer, legislator, and judge, served as speaker of the state house of representatives in 1899, when a white supremacy legislature enacted voter restriction laws intended to dismantle permanently the Populist threat. Appointed by Gov. Charles B. Aycock (1859–1912), whose photograph featured prominently at the beginning of Hamilton’s \textit{History}, Connor became secretary of the new Democratic-controlled North Carolina Historical Commission. He earned a bachelor’s degree at Chapel Hill in 1899, later did graduate work at Columbia University, and in the 1920s, accepted a history professorship at the University of North Carolina. In 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed him the first Archivist of the United States. For this generation, the professional and economic rewards for using history to defend the Democratic Party could be substantial.\footnote{14}

\footnote{12} An alleged connection between Populism and Reconstruction helped define this generation of historians. John David Smith, “Introduction,” in Smith and Lowery, \textit{The Dunning School}, 8, makes the point that Dunning and later C. Vann Woodward argued Reconstruction did not really end until disfranchisement in the 1890s. Hamilton’s dissertation, which judged Reconstruction a “crime,” also made this argument in 1906. Hamilton, \textit{Reconstruction in North Carolina}, 662, 666.  
Connor’s largely derivative contribution to Populist history was *North Carolina: Rebuilding an Ancient Commonwealth, 1584–1925* (1929). “Rebuilding” referred to Progressivism, the cause that motivated North Carolina Populism’s first historians. Connor’s account of Populism regurgitated Hamilton’s polemic ten years later. According to Connor, Democratic leadership in the 1880s was reactionary. Many of the Alliance’s complaints, such as unjust taxation, had merit. Unfortunately, a self-serving element within the Alliance, led by L. L. Polk and Marion Butler, disturbed the racial harmony between a white Alliance and a white Democratic Party. Political Fusion between black Republicans and white Populists was therefore “unnatural” and characterized by a “swarm of hungry office-seekers.” Fusion’s success depended on “a solid negro vote” and raised the same black power issue as Reconstruction. Counties in the east “suffered” horribly from African American officials. Blacks’ “conception of the functions and duties of public office did not get beyond the pay check,” and in some places, “neither life nor property nor woman’s honor was secure.” Democrats, by contrast, correctly viewed white supremacy as a prerequisite to the overarching, if always somewhat vague, goal of progress. Aycock, savior spokesman for the cause, believed in “justice” for blacks and carried the day for the benefit of all Tar Heels. Connor’s house speaker and anti-Populist father could not have stated the 1890s Democratic narrative more effectively. But as with Hamilton, Connor’s standing as a university professor with Ivy League credentials conferred legitimacy on what originally had been expressed as political propaganda.\

Hamilton’s personal connections also ensured that his version of Populism mirrored the political perspective of his Democratic employers. When he obtained appointment as associate professor of history in 1906 at a salary of $1,000 per year, Richard H. Battle (1835–1912) sent a congratulatory letter. Battle did not focus on Hamilton’s scholarship. Instead, he cited their common blood connections with powerful antebellum families. The university in Chapel Hill was a very small family, employing less than fifty faculty members, only about one-third of whom possessed a Ph.D. Battle, a lawyer and university trustee, taught briefly at the university in the 1850s, became a Confederate soldier, attended the anti-Reconstruction

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Constitutional Convention of 1875, and was a Democratic state legislator and state party chairman in the 1880s. Richard Battle’s brother, Kemp Plummer Battle (1831–1919), had been university president and in 1906 was the only other history professor besides Hamilton. Although a lawyer who lacked graduate history training, the university named him professor of history in 1891. Kemp Battle eventually initiated graduate study in history at Chapel Hill. Most relevant to Hamilton’s career, the Battle brothers opposed Reconstruction and lost state government positions because of its temporary success. Hamilton’s selection also received strong endorsement from trustees Josephus Daniels (1862–1948), the state’s most prominent Democratic white supremacist newspaper owner and former anti–Populist propaganda master, and James Sprunt (1846–1924), Confederate blockade runner, wealthy cotton broker, ally of Wilmington’s 1898 white supremacy uprising, local historian, and financial supporter of the university’s historical monographs series.16

Hamilton even engaged in Democratic politics himself, albeit at a low level. He served as secretary for the party’s primary in his Chapel Hill precinct during the 1912 election as well as a delegate to the state Democratic convention that year. Putting the alleged lessons of history into action, he lobbied for the state Constitutional Convention of 1913, a key aim of which was to remove the taint of Republican Reconstruction from the existing state charter. On more pecuniary grounds, Hamilton authored school-level history textbooks and involved himself in the political process of having those books selected by fellow Democrats for use in the state’s public schools. Apparently, his party’s newfound commitment to public education could be both Progressive and profitable. In addition, Hamilton gave lectures to support the Woodrow Wilson-Democratic World War effort and traveled to France in 1919 as a citizenship speaker with the Army Educational Corps.17


Equally important in evaluating Hamilton’s Populism is that he did not seem to put much effort into the History’s account. Not only did a wide range of teaching and civic activities occupy his time, he maintained a daunting publishing regimen on other subjects. The principal work was Reconstruction in North Carolina (1914), his dissertation. He self-published part of it in 1906. Hamilton also wrote Party Politics in North Carolina, 1835–1860 (1916), as well as many shorter pieces, usually biographical or edited documents focused on North Carolina. Among the other projects were two children’s books, Our Republic: A History of the United States for Grammar Grades (1910) and The Life of Robert E. Lee for Boys and Girls (1917), both of which reflected didactic motivations. Hamilton’s bibliography for the 1919 History revealed limited research about Populism. He claimed it was “an impossibility to list in this bibliography all the sources available in preparing this book” and so referred serious readers to his Reconstruction monograph’s footnotes. Hamilton apparently did not consult any manuscript collections from Populist sources, and the manuscripts he cited tended to relate to Reconstruction. The bibliography included public documents for the period 1860 to 1917, such as legislative and judicial reports. Periodicals, especially newspapers, also appeared. Hamilton cited one Populist (later Democratic) weekly, the Raleigh Progressive Farmer, along with a variety of mostly Democratic papers, such as Josephus Daniels’s News and Observer. The most important Populist source cited was the series of “handbooks” published by the party. It is likely that the materials he used were housed either at the University of North Carolina library or with the state government in Raleigh.\textsuperscript{18}

Other factors controlled his portrait of Populism. Hamilton’s hectic schedule seems to have generated tension with Connor, who tried to expedite the History’s appearance. The original contract with the publisher required Hamilton’s manuscript to be delivered by January 1, 1918. More than thirteen months later, Connor still badgered him for it. Given that Hamilton left for France in the spring of 1919, was out of country for two months, and that the book appeared in late 1919, there was likely little time for research or writing. Connor also worried about costs and sales, an attitude that demonstrated the economic considerations of early professional

history. Someone with money had to pay for the expensive high-end product. He and Hamilton made efforts to get favorable reviews, but the publisher resisted efforts to send out too many free copies of the pricy six-volume work.19

In the end Hamilton’s Populist history revealed more about Hamilton, his Progressive Democratic views and connections, and his status as a professional historian at state-controlled Chapel Hill than the events and leadership of Populism. Hamilton’s links to the ruling elite, which were responsible for his job; Hamilton’s apparently mandatory Democratic affiliation (as well as his race and sex), which encouraged him to defend the existing state leadership; Hamilton’s dislike for the Republican Party generally, reinforced by his studies of the 1860s and 1870s; his racist preference for white rule; his own career and organizational ambitions, including for history studies at the University of North Carolina; and his strong belief that trained historians had a special obligation to provide inspiration for fellow elites all determined his portrait of the agrarians. Perhaps ironically, the alleged accuracy of his account received credibility from Hamilton’s access to selected primary materials and the intense focus that could result from a dependable salary. Footnotes, bibliographies, and income mattered. He held a Ph.D. from a presumably meritorious university and worked as a taxpayer-funded employee in a history department that offered university degrees. Hamilton’s efforts also reflected the imperialistic impact of Reconstruction scholarship on Populist studies. For North Carolina, Hamilton pioneered the academic argument that Populism reeked of Republican Reconstruction. As a result, he acted simultaneously as a trained historian, government worker, opponent of Populism, and devoted white supremacy Democrat in a one-party environment. The state controlled the principal depositories of information, and the people who overthrew Populism controlled the state’s educational institutions, including the University of North Carolina. Equally important is how Hamilton’s understanding of Reconstruction portrayed Populism in perverse and narrowing ways. Hamilton believed Reconstruction had a present meaning, and that this meaning also defined Populism. When explaining the violence of 1898, he wrote: “In spite of race antagonism the feeling was fairly general that after all the negro was not to blame. It was the old story of Reconstruction—an ignorant and inferior race politically deluded and exploited for the benefit of the white men who rose to place and power by means of the indivisible negro vote.” The professional historian could stand for election fraud and murder if “history” proved their necessity.20

20. Hamilton, North Carolina since 1860, 298. On the other hand, failure to support the kind of history promoted by Hamilton could lead to exile. The best example is John Spencer Bassett (1867–1928), an 1888
A second Progressive study, appearing in 1922, began as an undergraduate thesis. Simeon Alexander DeLapp (1897–1976) wrote the paper while a student at Trinity College in Durham. Although spending some of his senior year (1917–1918) in Trinity’s law school, DeLapp won the college’s Southern History Prize and twenty-five dollars in 1918 for the thesis. He stayed on as a law student and English assistant until 1921, with Prof. William K. Boyd as his history adviser. Along with teaching duties, Boyd managed the Trinity College Historical Society, which published DeLapp’s work. A diligent researcher who eagerly absorbed the new professional model, DeLapp read Populist newspapers and corresponded with Populist leaders. Unlike Hamilton and Connor, however, DeLapp, a Republican from Lexington, looked nostalgically to the 1890s as the decade when Democrats suffered crushing defeat. He acted in GOP politics while a student. Trinity, a Methodist institution financially linked to Durham’s tobacco industrialists, provided a less Democratic environment than nearby Chapel Hill, thanks especially to its Republican Duke family benefactors. DeLapp’s father, A. T. DeLapp, won election as Republican sheriff of Davidson County four times between 1906 and 1918. Well before he launched into his study of Populism, “Sim” DeLapp aimed to use his history training to construct a tradition on which to build renewed Republican power. Consistent with the Democratic neighbors in Chapel Hill, the young Republican believed the academic history of Populism had a political, economic, and moral purpose.

Amazingly, DeLapp eventually helped transform Tar Heel politics. After Trinity, the new graduate returned home to practice law, biding his time with personal injury, divorce, real estate, and business disputes during the lean decades of Democratic rule. The national Democrats’ leftward turn, however, generated the possibility of Republican resurgence. DeLapp despised the New Deal, complaining in 1940 that FDR “teaches us to hate.” He chaired the Davidson County GOP for twelve years and ran, unsuccessfully, for the state legislature. He attended Republican
national conventions, presided over the state party’s executive committee, and led organizing efforts for Gen. Dwight Eisenhower in 1952. When the black civil rights movement erupted—he believed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 attempted “to give the negro privileges to which the white man is not entitled”—the long-awaited opportunity for hungry Republicans had arrived. In 1970, DeLapp supported Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan, Spiro Agnew, and Richard Nixon. He praised “the Lord that the Republican Party is not the party of hippies, yuppies, campus agitators, be they students or professors, militants, black or white.” DeLapp, among other party stalwarts, welcomed Raleigh television journalist Jesse Helms (1921–2008) to the Republican Party. He encouraged the television personality and former loud supporter of segregation to run for the U.S. Senate in 1972. Populist-Republican success had finally come full circle. Helms became the first Republican senator from North Carolina since Jeter C. Pritchard (1857–1921), elected by Populist and Republican Fusion votes in 1897, DeLapp’s birth year.22

22. See generally, DeLapp Papers. Senator Helms wrote an introduction to DeLapp’s 1975 book: DeLapp “is probably the most faithful Republican I ever met,” and he “feels from the depth of his being that his country’s
Back in 1918, DeLapp’s Republican faith generated a more favorable perspective on Populism than did Hamilton or Connor’s Democratic loyalties. His thesis portrayed the agrarian party as a rational response to rural depression, including freight rate oppression by railroads and an inadequate currency supply. He discussed Populist-Republican politics and legislation without the Hamilton-Connor presumption of incompetence. As a Republican, he did not view Fusion as...
Inherently flawed simply because Republicans participated. Nonetheless, DeLapp’s racism and the already dominant analogy between Reconstruction and Populism dictated that the “great and sudden” failure of the Populist movement in 1898 be partly ascribed to a “growth of negro influence in the politics and government.” Unfortunately, in DeLapp’s estimate, blacks “negroized” eastern counties. Thus, the key theme that unified Progressive Era Republican and Democratic university-based historians was the racist assumption that black people in politics failed. Nonetheless, to this Republican, Populism’s disappearance could not be blamed entirely on “willfully and deliberately pushing the negro into politics.” And DeLapp argued that “the part played by the negro” had been “over emphasized.” Instead, Populism collapsed because it lacked any “special principle, as for instance, Prohibition or Socialism.” Happily, however, Populists stimulated both older parties, not just Democrats as Hamilton contended, to address “vital” problems with “New blood.” Perhaps incredibly, given the era’s violent attacks on Republicans, DeLapp’s fairy tale ending mirrored Connor and Hamilton’s conclusions about the wonderful triumph of progress in the twentieth-century Old North State. According to the young and optimistic DeLapp, Populism unwittingly contributed to present gains because its messiah-like death ushered in a glorious future for white Republicans and Democrats.

DeLapp’s thesis confirmed the political and economic functions of North Carolina’s early university-based history. Like Hamilton and Connor, DeLapp approved of white racism, as well as the intimidation and cynicism necessary to maintain it. Celebrating a new lily-white GOP, he decried the problems created by “negro influence” during Fusion. DeLapp failed to describe Populist economics coherently, probably because he lacked any interest in it. Later in life the small-town lawyer poured abuse on unions and communism, suggesting that “Hitlerism,” although mistaken, was superior to Marxist ideas. Populist economic reform meant nothing to him except that it had caused the other parties to adopt Progressive ideas. Practically, this meant continuing the current distribution of private property and a segregated form of “free enterprise,” subject in his case to Republican tariffs. DeLapp, the star pupil who won Trinity’s history prize, displayed admirable research skills and rational argument, both essential hallmarks of scientific history. Functionally, however, along with Hamilton and Connor, he believed the past should be used as cheerleading for contemporary “progress,” orthodox conservative economics, and white supremacy. Populism could only be understood through that Progressive lens.

Another study written before 1930 was Florence Emeline Smith’s University of Chicago dissertation, “The Populist Movement and Its Influence in North Carolina.” Despite its midwestern origins, the work possessed strong Tar Heel ties. Smith (1895–1979) lived in Raleigh and Greensboro during the 1910s and 1920s, conducting research and teaching Western civilization briefly at the North Carolina College for Women. She eventually accepted a position at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Georgia, where she remained on the faculty for almost forty years. At Chicago, William E. Dodd (1869–1940), an eastern North Carolina native and perhaps the outstanding southern historian of his day, was Smith’s Ph.D. adviser. Dodd, a loyal and highly placed Democrat, closely associated himself with the Progressive Democratic movement. He supported that other southern-born professor, President Woodrow Wilson, befriended Josephus Daniels, and frequently corresponded with Hamilton. In 1933, President Franklin Roosevelt appointed Dodd ambassador to Germany. Smith easily surpassed Hamilton, Connor, and DeLapp as a researcher. She read contemporary newspapers and interviewed important Populists, including Marion Butler and Cyrus Thompson (1855–1930). Duly citing DeLapp, Connor, and Hamilton, her dissertation sources reflected the latest standards of professional scholarship.

Smith’s life displayed remarkable achievement. While clearly facing sexist barriers to a university career, she also benefited from women’s growing access to higher education. Born in Ohio, Smith seems to have grown up in Virginia. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Westhampton College, the female component of what later became the University of Richmond. Class president and star basketball player, she earned a bachelor’s degree in 1917 and immediately enrolled in graduate school at Chicago. Smith completed an A.M. degree there with a thesis that made “A Statistical Study of the Sections of the United States in 1860” in 1919. She then moved to North Carolina, where her family had likely located, remaining in the state eight years to teach and research her dissertation. Smith did much of this work, especially with newspapers, at the State Library and the North Carolina Historical Commission, the two principal scholarly centers of Democratic white supremacy Progressivism.
FLORENCE EMELINE SMITH
Raleigh, N. C.

_Applicant for B.A. Degree_

'13-'14—Class Basketball Team; Freshman Historian. '14-'15—Class Basketball Team; Varsity Basketball; Athletic Council; Y. W. C. A. Cabinet; Student Government Council; Captain Class Track Team; Treasurer Chi Epsilon Literary Society; President Sophomore Class. '15-'16—Class Basketball Team; Captain Odd Hockey Team; Varsity Basketball; Varsity Hockey; Treasurer Student Government Association; Assistant Business Manager “Messenger;” President Chi Epsilon Literary Society; Vice-President Athletic Association. '16-'17—Student Government Council; President Chorus Choir; Art Editor “Spider;” President Senior Class.

“Grammarian, orator, geometrical;
Arts, gymnastic teacher, physician;
Fortune-teller, rope-dancer, musician;
She knows everything.”

Versatile—yes, that is the best word to describe our President. She can do everything from standing on her head in “gym” to playing any musical instrument you might mention, even the “ukulele.” There she is playing basketball; now she is drawing a frontispiece for the Spider, or maybe she is up on the housetop taking a picture, but she is just as likely to be acting in her capacity as History Assistant and giving us “D” on notebooks. There she goes fitting up into the “tower room,” and soon the strains of her violin playing “Indian Lament” come floating down to us, so that we feel indeed

“She makes sweet music with the enamelled stones,
Giving a gentle kiss to every sedge
She overtaketh in her pilgrimage.”

Westhampton College senior Florence Smith, 1917 [University of Richmond] Spider, 245, Boatwright Memorial Library, University of Richmond, Richmond, Virginia.
Unfortunately, Smith’s work received a limited audience. She did not publish anything about Populism. Despite a long teaching career, Smith wrote little on any subject, apart from book reviews in the *Journal of Politics* and the *Journal of Southern History*. No doubt this can be partly explained by her employment in women’s undergraduate education at Agnes Scott. Smith’s heavy classroom duties seem well removed from Populism: the French revolution, nineteenth-century Europe, the Renaissance, and European government. Nevertheless, she demonstrated an ongoing interest in politics, becoming chairwoman of the Department of the Legal Status of Women in the DeKalb County League of Women Voters and supporting the “Institute of Citizenship,” a reform organization that also included Chapel Hill sociologist Howard Odum. She opposed the 1923 Equal Rights Act (“Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States”) on the ground that it would interfere with women’s Progressive protective labor legislation, including limitations on working hours. She endorsed the Wilsonian League of Nations and the World Court.27

Phillip Davidson, a history department colleague, gave a revealing interpretation of Smith’s career. During the 1930s, “The ideals of [Agnes Scott] were simple and clear—devotion to liberal learning, deep religious conviction in the leadership of the institution, and dedication to an educated womanhood.” Smith evidently embodied those values, which implied a certain respect for the college’s Presbyterian businessmen trustees. According to Davidson, Smith was “one of the most organized persons I have ever known. Her hair never fell down, her shirt waist never pulled loose from her skirt, never a pin was out of place. Her teaching was the same way, perfectly organized, systematic, and she and every student in the class knew exactly what they were doing and where they were going.” Students “flocked” to her office, but she “was a very private person and kept her personal life separate from the College.” Smith retired from Agnes Scott as an associate professor of history at the age of seventy.28

In 1929, Smith’s dissertation focused on the causes of Populism, the reasons for its demise, and most importantly, as her thesis title emphasized, its long-term...
effect. As for causes, Smith cited rural depression and farmers’ jealousy of growing urban wealth, the latter point effectively discrediting it from her university-based perspective. As for decline, like Hamilton and Connor, she looked to race. The Chicago Ph.D. faithfully adhered to Democratic Progressive white supremacy values, relying, like Hamilton, Connor, and DeLapp, on the supposed negative lessons of Reconstruction. During that unfortunate mistake, few blacks “had any initiative of their own or any constructive ideas.” The era surely produced “trying days.” She explained Democratic triumph in the 1870s oddly and vaguely as resulting from the “rigors of Reconstruction and the operations of the Union League.” In her
view, during the 1880s and 1890s, Democrats correctly condemned the earlier experience, especially the pervasive fear of “negro domination” it caused among whites. When Populist-Republican Fusion once again elected black officeholders, “[m]ost of the negroes were inexperienced and ignorant and had little idea of how to carry on their offices.” Although the elections of 1898 and 1900 reflected “passion and prejudice,” Democratic Red Shirts committed “no actual violence.” Charles Aycock tried to keep the 1900 campaign “on a higher plane” by preaching the gospel of public education.29

Most importantly, as it did for Hamilton, Connor, and DeLapp, Smith’s Populist tale had a cheerful ending. The Progressives were unanimous in their approval of Democratic political leadership since 1900. The third party’s annihilation allowed supposedly forward-looking Democrats, apparently represented by role models including Dodd, Josephus Daniels, and Woodrow Wilson, to move on to genuinely valuable issues. Smith seemed most interested in analyzing third parties generally and not Populism itself. For her, the larger conclusion was that throughout American history, the “major parties have received reviving interests from these minor organizations.” It followed that when Progressive Era Democracy in North Carolina appeared in the late 1890s, there was “little excuse for the continued existence” of Populism. It did not help that the Populists committed fatal errors. Fusion meant Populists became “inevitably associated with the race issue.” They clearly failed to grasp the tragic lessons of Reconstruction. According to Smith, Charles Aycock correctly made the negative link between Populism, Reconstruction, and white supremacy: “Few people [could] see any good behind this dark cloud of ‘negroism.’” Despite racial and political errors, Populists at least forced Democrats to “face issues, not avoid them.” To the rescue came “younger, wide-awake, and capable men” who “took charge of [Democratic] party affairs.” By eliminating black voters and black officeholders, the Democratic Party emerged “free to take up much more important questions of education, prohibition, good roads, and public health.”30

Ultimately, Smith’s message, despite solid fact-finding, years of incubation, and association with an eminent historian at a northern university, differed little from either Hamilton’s partisanship or Josephus Daniels’s rants during the 1890s. It offered the same political, economic, and moral themes and conclusions. And, like DeLapp, Smith never paid much attention to Populist economic ideas. They appeared unimportant to her overarching goal of describing Populism in present political terms, meaning the movement’s relationship to the political winners, the people who destroyed it. In agreeing with her academic contemporaries, Smith ignored or excused Democratic violence. She claimed Red Shirts were conscientious

citizens who organized peaceful rallies. What mattered was not Populism itself, but that Populism be linked to a regrettable Reconstruction and identified as merely a narrow precursor to truly desirable reform. Of course, this reform was the same Progressivism she personally endorsed and represented. Populism, as a result, rationalized and bolstered current political arrangements. Of course, it also functioned to justify professional history, including its accounts of Reconstruction. For Smith, the up-to-date southern history Ph.D. stood for Progressivism and therefore against Populism. Smith believed political and economic conditions in North Carolina improved under Democrats, and so the most important question about Populism was how it contributed to those improvements. She chose the title of her dissertation, with its emphasis on the “influence” of Populism, carefully.

A final North Carolina Progressive Era scholar was John D. Hicks (1890–1972). Born in Nodaway County, in northern Missouri, Hicks earned an undergraduate degree from Northwestern University in 1913 and a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin in 1916. His dissertation, a study of “Western State Making, 1888–1890,” introduced him to agricultural history, from which flowed his later interest in Populism. Despite his midwestern background, Hicks achieved a North Carolina experience. After his first position at Minnesota’s Hamline University, Hicks taught briefly (1922–1923) at the North Carolina College for Women. He received the typical junior faculty member’s heavy teaching load: European history; United States history surveys; and upper-level courses in southern, western, and American diplomatic history. Greensboro struck him as an exotic exile. Not only was Hicks “dismayed at the thought of spending the rest of my life in the Southeast,” but “[t]eaching southern girls proved to be no great challenge. . . . [They] were docile, studied hard, got good grades, and longed for matrimony, the only career to which, with a few exceptions, they aspired.” Worse, the sight of a Tar Heel chain gang “curdled [his] blood” and made him want to leave the benighted region as soon as possible. Fortunately, he decided to take advantage of local historical resources while waiting for another job. In 1925, Hicks published an article on the Tar Heel Farmers’ Alliance in the North Carolina Historical Review, the new state-sponsored vehicle for North Carolina history.31

31. Bulletin of the North Carolina College for Women (Greensboro: North Carolina College for Women, 1923), 106–107 (Hicks did not teach at Women’s College the same year as Florence Smith); John D. Hicks, “The Farmers’ Alliance in North Carolina,” North Carolina Historical Review 2, no. 2 (April 1925): 162–187; John D. Hicks, My Life with History: An Autobiography (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), 83–123. See also Martin Ridge, “Populism Redux: John D. Hicks and The Populist Revolt,” Reviews in American History, 13, no. 1 (March 1985): 142–154. Hicks’s autobiography states that he relied on the Greensboro Daily Record, a previously untapped source, and traveled to the Raleigh offices of the Progressive Farmer to view its files. Hicks read the finished product at the American Historical Association meeting in December 1922. By chance, in the audience was Guernsey Jones, chair of the history department at the University of Nebraska. Jones offered Hicks a job at Nebraska, thereby rescuing Hicks from his North Carolina outpost.
Hicks’s article focused on the Farmers’ Alliance prior to the creation of the Populist Party. It referred to Hamilton’s 1919 *History* as “the best secondary account of conditions in North Carolina during this period,” while DeLapp’s work was “amateurish but useful.” Hicks offered the usual Progressive presentation of rural complaints: economic decline resulting from low prices for commodities; contrasting urban profits and success, especially in manufacturing; the high cost of credit; unfair rural real property taxes; freight rate discrimination by railroads; monopolistic trusts that elevated the cost of necessaries; inelasticity and a consequent shortage of currency; and an absurd reliance on national banks for circulating negotiable instruments. These legitimate concerns, in Hicks’s mind, led to phenomenal membership growth for the Farmers’ Alliance. Although Hicks noted the Alliance’s initial focus on self-help, including instruction in scientific farming and discounted merchandise sales, the order’s limited economic gains for its members meant that “[f]undamentally the Alliance was interested in politics.”

Political strategy presented Hicks, a Republican, with special opportunities for new interpretation. He described Alliance efforts to control the Democratic Party, praising them as desirable and relatively effective. On the other hand, they did not bring economic relief. This failure led to Alliance agitation for legislation, especially subtreasuries, federal warehouses that would issue negotiable notes on the deposit of nonperishable agricultural products. According to Hicks, the subtreasury issue triggered a political crisis in North Carolina: “It soon became evident that the Democratic party, in spite of the strong Alliance influence over it in the South, could never be relied upon to enact the Sub-Treasury panacea into law.” The scheme contradicted the party’s traditional laissez-faire values. Most significantly, Hicks believed disagreement among Democrats about the Alliance’s demands raised the political specter of divided white votes. As a result, he concluded that farmers were forced to choose between the Alliance and white supremacy.33

This reasoning led Hicks to the most obviously political task confronting Populism’s Progressive historians: How to portray the overthrow of Populist-Republican government in the 1898 and 1900 elections. Was it a genuine effort to

save the state from an inferior race or a brutal power grab dependent on inducing fear through lies? Although Hicks, like Hamilton and Connor, was a North Carolina government employee, his connections to the state lacked similar layers of time and Democratic bias. His northern origins clearly distinguished him from all other Tar Heel Progressive Era historians. If scholarship could trump politics, Hicks was the historian most likely to prove it. Hicks understood that the men who chose Populism “became in the eyes of their Democratic neighbors political apostates and traitors to civilization itself, more to be reviled than even the Republicans into whose hands they played.” He ultimately concluded, however, that black incompetence dictated the third party’s demise. The Republican decision to name a full state ticket in 1892 doomed Populism by driving white agrarians back to Democracy. Thus, after 1892, a pure (to Hicks, northern) form of Alliance-Populism could never be achieved in North Carolina. Accepting Hamilton’s interpretation, Hicks explained that between “1894 and 1896 designing politicians succeeded in bringing about a half-hearted fusion between the Populists and the Republicans which in 1896 won for the latter the governorship and a dominant position in the State.” Worse, the “period of misrule which followed not only revived the memories of reconstruction but it served to bring about the complete rehabilitation of the Democratic party.” To Hicks, as to Hamilton, Connor, DeLapp, and Smith, Fusion meant “the Republican party was able to regain control of the State through negro votes—a costly and unfortunate experiment.” In the end, Hicks echoed Hamilton’s Populism-as-Reconstruction. He even repeated the religious-like teaching of white Progressivism, assuring his readers that “the new Democracy which in due time [after 1898] assumed control was abreast of the times. Its eyes were turned to the future and not the past.”

Maybe Hicks spent too much time in North Carolina. He reached essentially the same conclusions as his Tar Heel counterparts. Hicks thought Hamilton was a reliable scholar in tune with contemporary Progressive academic standards. He had consulted a variety of primary sources: The Progressive Farmer, the Raleigh News and Observer, the Greensboro Daily Record, official proceedings of the Farmers’ Alliance meetings, and an array of public documents. He cited the latest secondary materials, including Hamilton, DeLapp, and University of Minnesota professor Solon J. Buck’s The Agrarian Crusade (1920). He viewed Populism as promoting democratic reforms and as responding to the business interests of small-scale rural producers. But the decisive and more telling words in his article were “designing politicians,” “Republicans,” “reconstruction,” “negro votes,” and a “new Democracy” under

34. Hicks, “The Farmers’ Alliance in North Carolina,” 181–187. Hicks claimed the national Populist Party failed because in 1896 it chose the free silver “panacea” as the “chief remedy for ills that undoubtedly existed and needed remedying.” This “insured the indefinite delay of a badly needed movement, already too long delayed, for the reform of the existing economic order.”
Aycock and his Red Shirts. In the final analysis, the political party that appropriated funds for his Women’s College employer was modern, Progressive, and forward-looking. Hicks, like his southern peers, left out the violence and race-baiting, and ultimately offered racist explanations. Confirming his generation’s defense of white supremacy, Hicks linked Populism to the dominant interpretation of Reconstruction. In the process, he used academic history to legitimize the political, economic, and moral standing of the one-party Jim Crow state.35

35. Solon J. Buck, The Agrarian Crusade: A Chronicle of the Farmer in Politics (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1920); Hicks, My Life with History, 107, 120. Ironically, Hicks took pains to portray himself as an enlightened northern outsider in backwater Greensboro, emphasizing his distaste for racial segregation and sympathies for the working-class whites who toiled in the city’s textile mills. Hicks later outgrew some, but not all, of his Progressive Era upbringing. Eight years after leaving North Carolina, he published The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers’ Alliance and the People’s Party (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931). The book’s somewhat altered conclusions about North Carolina can be traced to personal political evolution, including relationships with a more diverse variety of historians. While still teaching at Hamline, Hicks supported Warren Harding in the 1920 election because he thought the Ohio senator represented the best chance for the United States to enter the League of Nations. Hicks never voted for another Republican.
Between 1900 and 1930, university-based writing about North Carolina Populists conveyed the perspective that twentieth-century Progressivism, the universal faith of the Populists’ first historians, was a good thing, and that professional history proved why economic radicalism and black participation in politics should be condemned.36 Populism, when married to current Reconstruction scholarship, appeared useful primarily because it showed directly why black people should stay out of politics and why farmers of both races deserved to be at the bottom of the economic ladder. Unlike the historians themselves, neither African Americans nor white farmers were classed among the genuine Progressive forces. The first academics used Populism to promote a mildly larger state sector directed to maintaining antidemocratic white supremacy, more money for public education, and capitalist industrial development. Populist proposals for state ownership of transportation and banking, by contrast, appeared dangerously misguided. Notably, this was a young people’s argument for their supposedly forward-looking generation: Hamilton, Smith, Hicks, and DeLapp were all under thirty when they commenced serious historical study. As for Populism, their principal accomplishment was to uplift southern Progressivism by pretending to write the history of its Populist victim. This achievement justified their social, economic, and intellectual function as North Carolina’s first professional historians.

presidential candidate. During the early 1920s, Harriett Elliott (1884–1947), chair of the political science department at the Women’s College, encouraged Hicks to rethink government’s rightful purpose. Elliott, who later held prominent positions in the Roosevelt administration, was a “militant” who, according to Hicks, “opened my eyes” to politics. Moreover, when preparing Populist Revolt, Hicks visited at Harvard, where Arthur Schlesinger Sr. (1888–1965) and Reconstruction revisionist Paul Buck (1899–1978) read the manuscript “approvingly.” Hicks also received encouraging correspondence from the liberal historian Henry Steele Commager (1902–1998). Altogether, this meant that in Populist Revolt, the “designing politicians” who Hicks had once claimed engineered North Carolina’s Fusion victory in 1894 disappeared. Now, the election results “constituted the outstanding Populist victory of the year and pointed clearly to the means by which in 1896 the fusionists might hope to obtain complete control of the state.” As for 1896, the election “in North Carolina constitutes one of the few outstanding episodes in the history of southern Populism.” The new Hicks believed Tar Heel Democracy in 1898 merely “alleged” to be interested in reform and claimed that a white riot in Wilmington “killed a dozen negroes.” Nonetheless, Hicks failed to jettison the Progressive tradition entirely. Democrats regained control, largely (citing DeLapp) because of “negro officeholders in large numbers,” which alienated the Populist faithful: “If the existence of a third party was to mean in practice that the negroes were to have the upper hand, many reformers were ready to abandon their third-party tickets.”


36. The political character of Progressive Era history extended to African American historians. The work is briefly summarized: They tended to ignore Populism, especially North Carolina Populism, largely because it seemed to them white-driven and unrelated to the need for black equality, their leading motivation as historians. For North Carolina, the best example is Benjamin G. Brawley, A Short History of the American Negro, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1919), 148–157. Brawley (1882–1939), a University of Chicago and Harvard University graduate, served as professor and dean at Raleigh’s Shaw University during the 1920s and early 1930s. In describing southern disfranchisement, Brawley emphasized its illegality. He discussed peonage, lynching, and lack of protection for black private property, subjects omitted by Hamilton and other white
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