

The Watauga Club

*Its Origin, Purposes and
Early History*

1884-1955



By CLARENCE POE

President, 1925-1955

The Watauga Club of Raleigh

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I wonder what would happen in every North Carolina town or city if a dozen or more of its most progressive and congenial spirits should meet together twice a month to help encourage and promote all forms of wholesome progress?

Well, on May 26, 1884, such a group met and organized in Raleigh, achieved results beyond their highest expectations, and their example still inspires a club of the same name which meets regularly in our capital city.

These impatient young North Carolinians of 1884 were unknown men at the time. But they didn't remain unknown. And perhaps one reason they didn't is precisely because they did associate themselves together. In this way each man inspired the others, and every fine aspiration of one gathered support from the rest.

Young Founders

Walter Hines Page was still in his 20's when he helped organize the Watauga Club here in Raleigh in 1884 and Josephus Daniels only 24 when he became a member in 1886. Charles D. McIver, who seems to have joined the same year (he was then teaching "Greek, Latin, English literature and bookkeeping" at Peace Institute), was only 24. Founder of the club seems to have been another young man in his 20's—Wm. J. Peele. Dr. Charles W. Dabney, then Director of the State Experiment Station and later President of the University of Cincinnati, was only 29. Another very



Walter H. Page

young member was Thomas Dixon, Jr., who came to the Legislature of 1885 at age 21.

Nobody old enough to have been in the Civil War was admitted. There was reverence for those men, but the first aim of the Watauga Club was to look future-ward. And unfortunately all too many of these old soldiers looked backward. As Page wrote of them in his largely autobiographical book *The Southerner*: "The war gave every one

of them the intensest experience of his life, and ever afterwards he referred every other experience to this. Thus it stopped the thought of most of them as an earthquake stops a clock. The fierce blow of battle paralyzed the mind. Their speech was in a vocabulary of war; their loyalties were loyalties, not to living ideas or duties, but to old commanders and to distorted traditions. They were dead men, most of them, moving among the living as ghosts; and yet, as ghosts in a play, they held the stage."

"They were our fathers and they were brave," Page continued, but because they "held the stage" in an era to which they could not belong, he was impatient of the political leaders who stood in the way of progress. In one climaxing burst of such impatience Page called them "mummies" and exclaimed, "What North Carolina needs is a few first-class funerals!"

A Roll of Members

A roll call of other young men in the Watauga Club of the 80's would include the names of W. E. Ashley, J. G. Brown, Alex Field, Alfred Haywood, A. D. Jones, G. E. Leach, Charles Latta, Arthur Winslow, F. O. Moring, J. S. Wynne, R. H. Lewis, E. P. Moses, E. A. Oldham, Sterling Price, W. S. Primrose and J. W. Thompson.

An important factor in the club's success has been the widely varied interests of its members as indicated by the early 1955 list of members: R. Mayne Albright, Carey H. Bostian, Henry Brandis, B. F. Brown, T. E. Browne, Charles F. Carroll, Christopher Crittenden, Jonathan Daniels, E. B. Denny,

W. C. Davidson, Edwin Gill, Frank P. Graham, J. W. Harelson, Luther H. Hodges, R. B. House, Calvin B. Hoover, Robert Lee Humber, R. L. McMillan, Clarence Poe, Wm. T. Polk, E. McNeill Potat, Gilbert T. Stephenson.

No less varied has been this list of 21 former members: Albert Anderson, L. D. Baver, R. F. Beasley, T. W. Bickett, W. T. Bost, James Boyd, E. C. Brooks, J. M. Broughton, R. D. W. Connor, J. C. B. Ehringhaus, Clyde A. Erwin, Francis P. Gaines, O. Max Gardner, Paul Green, B. W. Kilgore, Thurman Kitchin, A. J. Maxwell, W. A. Montgomery, Frank Page, W. S. Rankin, W. Kerr Scott, Capus M. Waynick, George T. Winston, Wm. B. Umstead.

Purposes of the Club

So much for the personnel of this club which had its formal beginnings in May, 1884 . . . ceased to exist a few years later . . . was revived for a brief period during Governor Aycock's administration . . . and has been functioning actively again for around 30 years.

As to where the name Watauga came from, there are varying traditions. One I like is that it is an Indian name meaning, "The Land Beyond"—and so challenges us to the perpetual advance toward better things for our land and for our people.

Certainly such an interpretation would be in keeping with the declared aims and purposes of these young North Carolinians just three score and ten years ago. Their preamble declared that "there is in our community a serious lack of accurate and practical information upon the most common economic questions which arise for our consider-

ation" and their constitution said: "Our main object is to promote the material interests of this community, and as far as lies in our power of the whole people of North Carolina." The creed of the club, says Dr. Charles W. Dabney, is found in three paragraphs of Walter Page's which he later reprinted in his book as follows:

"I believe in this land—our land—whose infinite variety of beauty and riches we do not yet know. Wake up, old Land!

"I believe in these people—our people—whose development may be illimitable. Wake up, my People!

"I believe in the continuous improvement of human society, in the immortality of our democracy, in the right-mindedness of the masses. Wake up, old Commonwealth!"

Another revealing illustration of the spirit and mood of the Watauga Club is found in a paragraph from a speech its founder, Wm. J. Peele, made in an address to his classmates at a Chapel Hill reunion. He quoted Bill Arp as saying that there is advice enough lying round loose in this world to run three the same size and have some left over for a future life. But with this apology he offered this advice to every father of a son: "Teach him to hate shams; they are walking the highways of this life 'in ghastly affectation' of greatness. Teach him to be content with nothing less than genuine success; for as I go further and further along life's highway I find it strewn thicker and thicker with the wrecks of men who were almost successful—just a little more faith, a little more courage, a little more charac-

ter, and all would have been well. . . . Teach him to be in love with some great truth, tenderly to woo it, bravely to marry it for better or for worse, and then faithfully to guard it as long as life shall last."

Some day this paragraph of exalted ideals might well be put on a tablet in Peele Hall named in his honor at State College.

REMINISCENCES OF DR. DABNEY

Just twenty years ago when the Watauga Club celebrated its 50th anniversary,



Col. L. L. Polk

sary, I, as its perennial President, asked its two most distinguished surviving original members, Hon. Josephus Dan-

iels and Dr. Charles W. Dabney, to give us their reminiscences, which they did.

Dr. Dabney began by commenting on the general mood of North Carolina at the time the Club was organized and continued:

"In the political fields the old Confederate soldiers filled most of the offices. With the survivors of the war it was a period of intense reaction. Nothing new was good. Reformers were suspected and everything the Yankees proposed was anathema. As I look back it seems to me the first decided movement for improving the state of things was due to Governor Vance. In 1876 he was elected Governor for a third time with Thomas J. Jarvis, another distinguished soldier, as Lieutenant Governor. North Carolina owes it largely to these two men of hard-headed common sense and patriotic purpose that she made the right start in a new era. While careful to do nothing to offend the old reactionaries, they supported every sound proposal for the development of education, agriculture and industry. . . . Another man of this period who must be mentioned as a champion of the new era was Colonel Leonidas L. Polk, the first Commissioner of Agriculture. He was a man of great enthusiasm and energy and labored to organize the farmers and educate them after new methods. . . .

"About this time a Club of young men was formed at Raleigh which exerted great influence during the next few years in promoting the educational, agricultural and industrial development of the State. Such was the prejudice against anybody who proposed a change in the old order that it was decided

the Club would avoid everything that might suggest that it represented a new political movement. . . . It was because of this desire to avoid partisanship and prejudice that the Club was named the Watauga Club, a name which suggested nothing in particular to the public. To have called it 'The Progressive Club' would have been like waving a red flag in the face of the old political bulls.

"The Club usually met once every two or three weeks or at any time the members wanted to talk over something. It met when I knew it in a bare room over the Holleman store on Main Street, Raleigh. The only furniture in the room was a large deal table and some split-bottom chairs. The only entertainment was talk—and what 'talkfests' those were! No man was elected because he belonged to any particular business but just because he was young, intelligent, devoted to the development of the State and had some ideas about how this might be accomplished. Office seekers, men with personal axes to grind, cranks, or hobby-riders were excluded. The Club kept out of politics and devoted itself to advocating various measures for the development of the State's resources, improved agriculture, no-fence laws, good roads, and—above everything else—better public schools and industrial education. No branches of the Club were organized but men were found in different sections of the State who were anxious and competent to help. In this way they became active supporters of the various causes undertaken. When a new movement was started it was kept before the public by newspaper articles, circulars, speeches and correspondence. Page's State Chronicle was the chief

organ of the Club. Hardly a number of that paper appeared without articles on subjects advocated by the Club."

MR. DANIELS REMINISCES

On the same occasion for which Dr. Dabney wrote these reminiscences on the 50th anniversary of the Club's founding, Josephus Daniels, then United States Ambassador to Mexico, expressed his keen regret at not being able to attend in person but sent his recollections, much like those of Dr. Dabney, but with numerous other important side-



Hon. Josephus Daniels

"Shortly after I became editor of the State Chronicle in the fall of 1885, I was asked to become a member of the

quainted through the articles in the State Chronicle with the efforts of that organization to advance industrial education in North Carolina. Mr. Page had sent me a brochure, the best I have ever read in favor of the education of the hand. At that time the Watauga Club had in mind only, or Watauga Club. I had become chiefly, a school of technology, something like those which were operated in New England, prototypes of the Massachusetts School of Technology and the Worcester Polytechnic Institute.

"Not long after I became a member of the Watauga Club it was decided to hold a statewide mass meeting in Raleigh to create strong public sentiment for industrial education. The best address at the meeting was made by Col. Robert Bingham, head of the Bingham School, who had lately returned from Europe. He declared his regret that the South had neglected the education of the hand. He pointed out that Germany was becoming prosperous because of its technically trained men, and declared that the South's future prosperity was dependent upon the education of every faculty of man. 'We have seen to the education of the heart,' he said, 'by Christian leaders; we have done important things in the education of the head in the classical courses at colleges and the University; but we have wholly neglected the imperative duty of training leaders in the new industrial day that confronts North Carolina.' Few meetings have been held in the history of the state which have done so much to create public sentiment . . .

"Under the leadership of Col. L. L. Polk, who afterwards won national

leadership of the agricultural forces of the country, the farmers mobilized powerful strength to enlarge and carry to victory the purposes long cherished by the Watauga Club. Indeed, so influential and so important was this new farm organization and so enthusiastically in favor of agricultural and industrial education, that it soon took the lead in the movement, assured of the cooperation of the well organized forces brought into being by the Watauga Club. The farmers' clubs united the agricultural and industrial forces in the state for the first time in a great movement. They declared that the first need of the state was agricultural education and experiment, and coupled that position with the support of the Watauga Club's insistence on a school in which 'instruction should be in woodwork, mining, metallurgy, mechanics, agriculture, and such other branches of industrial education as may be deemed expedient.' When both ideas were merged, success was assured. Watauga Club members gladly joined forces in the movement which was accelerated under the leadership of Colonel Polk. It was no new idea with him. In the first issue of his paper, *The Progressive Farmer*—February 10, 1886—Colonel Polk declared for the establishment of an agricultural college, and said: 'We propose to continue this subject and follow it up until justice is done the people, or they know why it is not done.' Often pioneers have been forgotten, but in recognition of some of the men who secured its creation, the trustees of the State College of Agricultural and Mechanical Arts have done distinguished honor to Col. L. L. Polk, W. J. Peele,

W. S. Primrose and Augustus Leazer, who, at critical periods, rendered efficient service in creating the institution."

Triple Success

So ends Mr. Daniels's letter.

At this point we may well turn back to Dr. Dabney's own reminiscences and quote his own story of the final triple success of (1) the Watauga Club's movement for an industrial school by merging it with (2) the farmer-demand for a distinct "land-grant college" which had been seething for years in agricultural circles, and (3) the protection of the University at Chapel Hill by giving it a State appropriation to offset the Federal Land script transferred upon it to the new Land Grant college. Says Dr. Dabney:

"The act to establish the Industrial School of North Carolina was passed March 7, 1885, and a small appropriation made from the funds of the Board of Agriculture. The City of Raleigh made an appropriation of \$8,000 and the directors of the State Fair donated 20 acres and a building. The school had not been opened before an agitation sprang up to enlarge its plans and make it the Agricultural and Mechanical College of North Carolina which was afterwards done. Colonel Polk, champion of the farmers, had most to do with this. The bill was passed March 3, 1887, giving the income from the Land Grant Fund to the new college and the same amount was appropriated to the University of North Carolina by the same legislature from the State treasury. This was the first considerable appropriation to the University, which was largely increased in fu-

ture years. Thus was established the Agricultural and Mechanical College of North Carolina. The University lost nothing by this act but really gained a great deal as it was the beginning of regular appropriations to that institution. It was the first move toward industrial education in the State. The Agricultural and Mechanical College, now called State College, has become one of the greatest and most helpful institutions in the State and has been a great example to other states."

About the first great purpose of the Watauga Club therefore there is glory enough to go around. The young leaders of the Watauga Club realized that North Carolina had a disastrously unbalanced economy—that it needed industry to balance this economy and needed trained labor both to insure a decent standard of living for labor and to insure prosperous customers for its industry. The farmers of North Carolina went further and demanded that North Carolina take "the Land Script Fund" from the University as a starter and build here in North Carolina a great independent land grant college or "College of Agricultural and Mechanic Arts" as the official title then read. As Mr. Peele once said to me, "Some of us University alumni would not join Colonel Polk in this fight, but we were something like Paul at the stoning of Stephen—we were willing to hold his garments while he and others waged the fight."

A Look to the Future

So ended the first great fight of the Watauga Club of the 1880's. In the years since then the Club has continued to make its first concern the upbuilding of North Carolina in all its aspects—agriculture, industry, education, health, statesmanship, art, literature, moral and spiritual values. Just as far as possible each host speaker at its semi-monthly supper meeting leads a discussion that fits into this general purpose. Its meetings are never publicized but it does bring together leading men in all the major phases of North Carolina life, and these men carry on through their individual activities the influence, information and inspiration received through fellowship in the organization which now embraces outstanding men not only from Raleigh but from four or five other cities.

And so I conclude, as I began, with this inquiry directed to all thoughtful and patriotic young North Carolinians—
young in years or young in heart: "I wonder what would happen in every North Carolina town or city if a dozen or more of its most progressive and congenial spirits should meet together twice a month to help encourage and promote all forms of wholesome progress?" And the creed of Page, Daniels, Dabney, Peele and Polk could well serve any such group of patriotic young North Carolinians in the years ahead.

MEMBERS OF THE WATAUGA CLUB, 1955

- R. Mayne Albright, Attorney, Raleigh.
William H. Bobbitt, Associate Justice, Supreme Court of North Carolina, Raleigh.
Carey H. Bostian, Chancellor, North Carolina State College, Raleigh.
Henry Brandis, Dean, School of Law, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
T. E. Browne, Murfreesboro.
Charles F. Carroll, Superintendent of Public Instruction, Raleigh.
D. W. Colvard, Dean, School of Agriculture, North Carolina State College, Raleigh.
Christopher Crittenden, Director, State Department of Archives and History, Raleigh.
Jonathan Daniels, Editor, *News and Observer*, Raleigh.
W. C. Davison, Dean, Medical School, Duke University, Durham.
E. B. Denny, Associate Justice, Supreme Court of North Carolina, Raleigh.
Edwin M. Gill, State Treasurer, Raleigh.
Luther H. Hodges, Governor, State of North Carolina, Raleigh.
*Calvin B. Hoover, Duke University, Durham.
R. B. House, Chancellor, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
Robert Lee Humber, Attorney, Greenville.
R. L. McMillan, Attorney, Raleigh.
Clarence Poe, Editor, *The Progressive Farmer*, Raleigh.
Gilbert T. Stephenson, Attorney and Law Teacher, Pendleton.
Richard Walser, Professor, North Carolina State College, Raleigh.

*On leave of absence.