

Primary Source: Vance's Proclamation Against Deserters ^[1]

As the second year of the Civil War drew to a close, the Confederate army was hamstrung by desertion from its ranks. North Carolina had supplied more troops than any other state in the Confederacy, but its soldiers were also deserting at a rate higher than other states. According to some estimates, more than 23,000 North Carolinians -- 20 percent of all who enlisted -- eventually deserted.

In May of 1863, just over a year after the Conscription Act, Governor Zebulon Vance, issued this proclamation regarding desertion. He called upon the people of North Carolina to capture or shoot deserters, and he recommended that anyone who aided or helped deserters should also be punished.

The first several lines of the published proclamation are headlines designed to grab people's attention. The formatting in the transcription below has been kept as close as possible to the original.

VANCE'S PROCLAMATION.

The "Hideous Mark" to be fixed
on Cowards and Traitors to
the Confederacy.

THE FRIENDS OF THE UNION TO BE
MADE INFAMOUS

Woe to the Men who Refuse
to Fight for the South.

THE FATHER OR THE BROTHER WHO
HARBORS OR ENCOURAGES A
DESERTER TO BE SHOT.

Union Men not to be believed
on oath when the "South"
is independent

Union Men to be "Hustled"
from the Polls.

THE PEOPLE CALLED UPON TO ARREST

AND SHOOT DESERTERS.

BY THE GOVERNOR OF NORTH-CAROLINA,

A PROCLAMATION.

WHEREAS, I HAVE LEARNED WITH great pain that there have been lately numerous desertions from the ranks of our gallant [2] army and that there are many persons in the country who incite [3] and encourage these desertions and harbor and conceal [4] these misguided men at home, instead of encouraging them to return to duty:

Now therefore, I ZEBULON B. VANCE, Governor of the State of North-Carolina, do issue this my proclamation, commanding all such evil disposed persons to desist from such base, cowardly and treasonable conduct, and warning them that they will subject themselves to indictment [5] and punishment in the civil courts of the Confederacy, as well as to the everlasting contempt [6] and detestation of all good and honorable men.

Certainly no crime could be greater, no cowardice more abject, no treason more base, than for a citizen of the State, enjoying its privileges and protection without sharing its dangers, to persuade those who have had the courage to go forth in defence of their country, vilely to desert the colors which they have sworn to uphold, when a miserable death or a vile and ignominious [7] existence must be the inevitable [8] consequences. No plea can excuse it. The father or the brother who does it should be shot instead of his deluded victim, for he deliberately destroys the soul and manhood of his own flesh and blood. -- And the same is done by him who harbors [sic] and conceals the deserter. For who can respect either the one or the other? What honest man will ever wish or permit his own brave sons or patriotic daughters, who bore their parts with credit in this great struggle for independence, to associate even to the third and fourth generations, with the vile wretch who skulked in the woods, or the still viler coward who aided him, while his bleeding country was calling in vain for his help? Both are enemies -- dangerous enemies to their country, before whom our open foes will be infinitely preferred. Both are foes to their own kindred and noble countrymen who are electrifying the world by their gallant deeds, and pouring out their blood upon the field of battle to protect those very men who are sapping the vitals of our strength. And woe unto you, deserters, and your aiders and abettors, when peace being made and independence secured, these brave comrades whom ye have deserted in the hour of their trial shall return honored and triumphant to their homes! Ye that hide your guilty faces by day, and prowl like outlaws about by night, robbing the wives and mothers of your noble defenders of their little means, while they are far away facing the enemy, do you think ye can escape a just and damning vengeance when the day of reconning [sic] comes? And ye that shelter[,] conceal, and feed these miserable depredators and stimulate them to their deeds, think you that ye will be spared? Nay! rest assured, observing and never failing eyes have marked you, every one. And when the overjoyed wife welcomes once more her brave and honored husband to his home, and tells him how in the long years of his absence, in the lonely [sic] hours of the night, ye who had been his comrades [9] rudely entered her house, robbed her and her children of their bread, and heaped insults and indignities upon her defenceless head, the wrath [10] of that heroic husband will make you regret in the bitterness [sic] of your cowardly terror that you were ever born. Instead of a few scattered militia [11], the land will be full of veteran soldiers, before whose honest faces you will not have courage to raise your eyes from the earth. If permitted to live in the State at all you will be infamous. You will be hustled from the polls, insulted in the streets, a jury of your countrymen will not believe you on oath, and honest men everywhere will shun you as a pestilence [12]; for he who lacks courage and patriotism can have no other good quality or redeeming [13] virtue. Though many of you rejected the pardon heretofore offered you, and I am now not authorized to promise it, yet I am assured that no man will be shot who shall voluntarily return to duty. This is the only chance to redeem yourselves from the disgrace and ignominy which you are incurring [14].

Again our troops have met the enemy and a great and glorious victory has been won. But several thousand of our soldiers fell in achieving it for us. Every man is needed to replace the gallant dead, and preserve an unbroken front to our still powerful enemy. Unless desertion [15] is prevented our strength must depart from our armies, and desertion can never be stopped while either through a false [sic] and mistaken sympathy or downright disloyalty, they receive any countenance [16] or protection at home. I therefore appeal to all good citizens and true patriots in the State to assist my officers in arresting deserters, and to frown down all those who aid and assist them. Place the brand upon them and make them feel the scorn and contempt of an outraged people. Unless the good and patriotic all over the land arise as one man to arrest this dangerous evil, it may grow until our army is well nigh ruined. The danger of starvation having happily passed away -- the approaching and apparently bounteous harvest giving evidence of ample supplies for the coming year -- our great army in Virginia again jubilant over a mighty victory -- I am well assured that our danger now lies in the disorganization produced by desertion. You can arrest it, my countrymen, if you will but make a vigorous [sic] effort, if you will but bring to bear the weight of a great, a patriotic and united community in aid of our authorities.

In witness whereof, ZEBULON B. VANCE, Governor, Captain General and Commander-in-Chief, hath signed these presents and caused the great seal of the State to be affixed.

Done at the City of Raleigh, this 11th day of May, A. D., 1863.

Z. B. VANCE.

By the Governor:

R. H. BATTLE, Jr,

Private Secretary.

Vance's Proclamation, May 11 1863. Published online by Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/ims/vance/vance.html> ^[17].

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Civil War ^[18]

history ^[19]

North Carolina ^[20]

North Carolina History ^[21]

Page ^[22]

soldiers ^[23]

Students ^[24]

Teachers ^[25]

Zebulon Vance ^[26]

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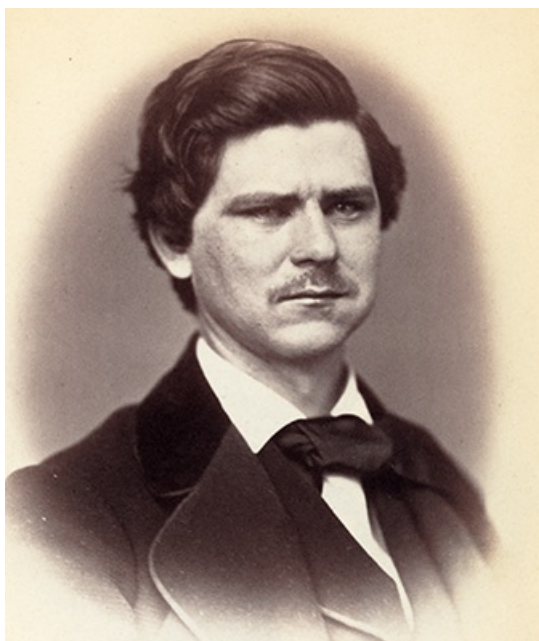
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- [Desertion, Civil War](#) ^[32]
- [Conscription](#) ^[33]
- [The Raleigh Standard Protests Conscription](#) ^[34]

Artifacts:

By the Governor of North Carolina
A PROCLAMATION.

WHEREAS, I HAVE LEARNED WITH PAIN THAT there have been lately numerous desertions from the ranks of our gallant army, and that there are many persons in the country who incite and encourage these desertions and harbor and conceal these misguided men at home, instead of encouraging them to return to duty:

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IN WITNESS WHEREOF, ZEBULON B. VANCE, Governor, Captain General and Commander-in-Chief, hath signed these presents and caused the great seal of the State to be affixed. Done at the city of Raleigh, this 11th day of May, A. D. 1863.

By the Governor: Z. B. VANCE.
H. H. BATTLE, Jr., Private Secretary.

May 13—WAS 2w

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