

Bragg Committee ^[1]

Bragg Committee

by William C. Harris, 2006

See also: [Western North Carolina Railroad](#) ^[2]



Photograph of Thomas Bragg.
Image from the State Archives
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In 1868-69 North Carolina's [Reconstruction](#) ^[3] government extended \$27.83 million in the form of bonds and stocks to 18 [railroad](#) ^[4] companies in the state. Although it was mainly zeal for [internal improvements](#) ^[5] that accounted for the state's generosity, some of the more extravagant and ill-advised aid measures resulted from the activities of a railroad "ring" operating primarily through the Republican-controlled [General Assembly](#) ^[6]. The ringleaders were lobbyist [Milton S. Littlefield](#) ^[7], a suave transplanted northerner, and [George W. Swepson](#) ^[8], an erstwhile North Carolina [banker](#) ^[9]. Swepson had gained the confidence of Republican governor [William W. Holden](#) ^[10], who foolishly believed that tax revenues would be adequate to meet the interest on the bonds.

By 1870 the bond market had virtually collapsed, leaving North Carolina with a heavy debt and few new railroad miles to show for it. With the state's credit standing deteriorating, both reform Republicans and [Conservatives](#) ^[11] (Democrats) in the General Assembly demanded an investigation of the railroad scandal. The Senate [appointed](#) ^[12] a three-member investigating committee headed by former governor [Thomas Bragg](#) ^[13], a respected Conservative. Influenced by Holden, who believed that the fraud charges were politically motivated, [Republicans](#) ^[14] in the Senate limited the scope of the committee's work and thus prevented a thorough inquiry into the scandal. The Bragg Committee did reveal the need for an extended, unrestricted investigation of the charges. When the Conservatives assumed power later in 1870, they appointed a committee known as the [Shipp Commission](#) ^[15], which subsequently uncovered numerous incidents of fraud and bribery-some involving Conservatives-in the issuance of railroad bonds and stocks. Neither Swepson nor Littlefield, the chief perpetrators of the corruption, were brought to justice.

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Charles L. Price, "Railroads and Reconstruction in North Carolina, 1865-1871" (Ph.D. diss., UNC-Chapel Hill, 1959).

Additional Resources:

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