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Reid, James Wesley [1]

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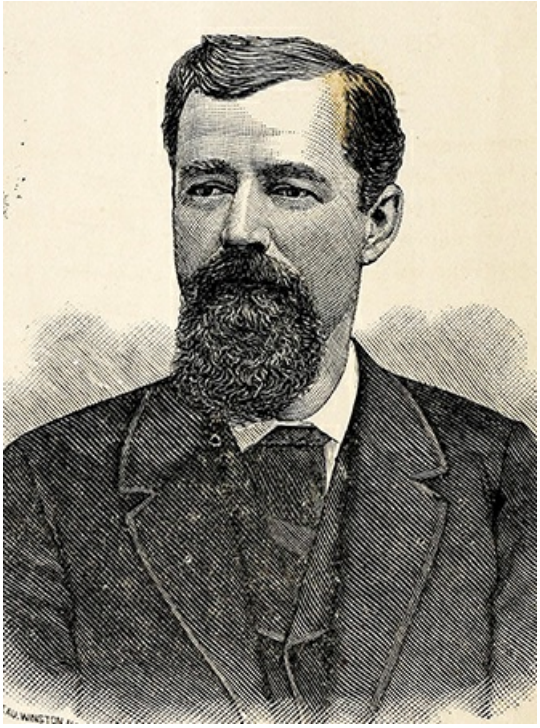
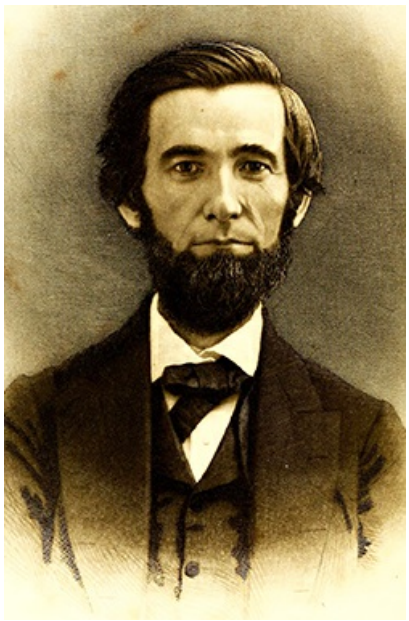
by Lindley S. Butler, 1994

11 June 1849–1 Jan. 1902



An 1885 engraving of James Wesley Reid. Image from Archive.org. [2]James Wesley Reid, U.S. congressman, was the son of Numa F., a Methodist [3]minister, and Ann E. Wright Reid of Wentworth and the brother of Frank L. Reid [4], Methodist minister and educator. James Reid was reared in Wentworth and educated in the local academy. He attended Trinity College [5] (1866–67), where he was an honor student, and was graduated from Emory and Henry College in 1869. He returned home to a position as a teacher and then principal of the Wentworth Male Academy. Reid studied law and was admitted to the bar in 1873, opening his practice in Wentworth with Andrew J. Boyd as a partner. Excelling in debate in college, Reid was soon in demand in both North Carolina and Virginia as a speaker at political rallies, reunions, and college commencements. Several contemporaries described his eloquent but florid speaking style, and he was known in his day as "the silver-tongued orator."

Reid married, on 19 Dec. 1872, Mary Frances Ellington (1851–1906) of Wentworth, and they had two daughters, Ann and Lucile. A Mason [6]and an active lay member of the Methodist church, he addressed church conferences and served as a lay delegate in district and general conferences. He was appointed a lay member of the Conference Board of Missions. With his brother, Reid coedited *Life, Sermons, and Speeches of Rev. Numa F. Reid Late of the North Carolina Conference* [7] (1874). In addition to his law practice Reid helped his grandfather, James Wright (d. 1876), run the family enterprise, Wright Tavern [8]. Reid was responsible for extensive remodeling of the famed hostelry in the 1870s, and after



Methodist Minister Numa Fletcher Reid (1825-1873), father of Frank Lewis Reid and James Wesley Reid. Image from Archive.org.

the death of his grandfather the tavern became known as the Reid House. [9]In 1880 he was an agent for Home Insurance Company.

James Reid's political career began with his election as the county treasurer in 1874, a position he held until 3 Nov. 1884, when he resigned to run for the U.S. House of Representatives. While serving as county treasurer Reid was secretary to the Rockingham County Democratic Executive Committee, and in 1884 he was elected county chairman. Reid was in the Forty-eighth and Forty-ninth Congresses from 1884 to 31 Dec. 1886, when he resigned. His most notable stand on Capitol Hill was his strong support of the Blair Education Bill, which would have provided federal aid to public education.

In the 1870s Reid amassed considerable property by borrowing heavily. Eventually overextending himself, he had to declare bankruptcy, and by 1887 his property was auctioned to cover his debts. At the same time a scandal surfaced over Reid's alleged mishandling of public funds during his term as county treasurer. Although he was exonerated by a committee appointed by the county commissioners, his political opponents continued to agitate the issue. The emerging scandal and his impending personal financial ruin caused Reid to leave his home and family and settle in Lewiston, Idaho, in 1887.

In Idaho Reid resumed the practice of law and became active in the statehood movement. He was elected to the state constitution convention and served as convention vice-president. In the convention he chaired the committee that wrote the statehood resolution. He was appointed to the board of trustees of Lewiston State Normal College in 1893 and later served on the board of regents of the University of Idaho. Reid was a delegate to the Democratic National Conventions of 1896 and 1900. He died and was buried in Lewiston.

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