

Tyson, Bryan ^[1]

Tyson, Bryan

by Larry E. Tise and William T. Auman, 1996

1830–1909

Bryan Tyson, controversialist and Unionist, was born in the Brower's Mill community of southeastern [Randolph County](#) ^[2], the son of Aaron Tyson, a relatively prominent farmer, enslaver, and Quaker expatriot. Tyson claimed that his controversial actions during the [Civil War](#) ^[3] resulted from a divine revelation that occurred in 1848 on his eighteenth birthday and a series of visions and visitations he experienced thereafter. In 1860 he owned a farm implement manufacturing firm located on his farm in the "Gold Region" of [Moore County](#) ^[4] and four enslaved people.

Animated by a series of visions and his inherited favoritism for what he called the "yeoman class," Tyson decided in March 1862 to wage a one-man war against the twin threats of abolitionism and secessionism. He saw both as the major moral and political menaces to the existence of the United States. By summer he had written a lengthy book that he entitled *[A Ray of Light: or, A Treatise on the Sectional Troubles Religiously and Morally Considered](#)* ^[5], which came off the press in August as deriving from Brower's Mills and as being published by the author; actually, the book was clandestinely printed in [Raleigh](#) ^[6] by F. K. Strother. The volume was a vicious attack on Abolitionists in the North and on the secessionist leadership of the Confederacy. It also contained the argument that the problem of union greatly overshadowed in importance the problem of slavery; therefore, all agitation on the latter issue should cease, with the institution of slavery left intact until the Union could be permanently and safely reestablished. Southerners were urged to end their war and return immediately to the Union to avoid inevitable defeat.

A Ray of Light was proscribed by Confederate and state authorities before it could be widely distributed; yet among the North Carolinians who received copies, it became an instant object of debate between those favorable to the Union and those inclined to support the Confederacy. It articulated the views of a vast number of North Carolinians from the Piedmont region who opposed the war and resisted the efforts of Governor [Zebulon B. Vance](#) ^[7] to prosecute it. In mid-September Tyson was arrested at [Carthage](#) ^[8] (the county seat of Moore County) for expressing incendiary views and was marched off to Raleigh as a Confederate conscript. Due to the timely intervention of powerful friends, he was granted an exemption from the army on the grounds that he would be more valuable to the Confederacy as a manufacturer of farm implements. While in Raleigh he had a circular printed defending his views. The circular and copies of his book were mailed to Jefferson Davis and other Confederate leaders. He then boarded a train for Richmond and began distributing his book by hand to the passengers and was soon arrested. After a brief confinement in Raleigh he was brought before Governor Vance, who agreed to his release on the condition that he not further circulate or promote his inflammatory views.

Tyson did not long desist. Back in his own county, he joined the militant Unionist underground and wrote letters to Confederate soldiers urging them to desert and return home. When the General Assembly convened in the winter of 1863, he sent a copy of his book and circular to each member urging them to take steps to end the war. Following this act he fled to Snow Camp, in [Chatham County](#) ^[9], where he received assistance in making his way through the Confederate lines in eastern North Carolina to [New Bern](#) ^[10] and thence to New York. By 14 April he was in Washington, D.C., where, as a reward for his efforts on behalf of the Union cause in the South, he was given a job in the Treasury Department.

Soon after his arrival in Washington, Tyson advertised widely through the news media the existence of a strong Unionist element in the South, especially in North Carolina. He wrote Abraham Lincoln urging the president to assist him in fortifying and spreading the Union cause in the South and among captured Confederate soldiers. He later suggested to Lincoln that it would be wise for the administration to reject its radical abolitionist wing in favor of cooperating with Northern Democrats and Southern Unionists.

Snubbed by Lincoln, Tyson gradually made contacts with the Democratic party leadership, and by the end of 1863 he was corresponding with such copperhead notables as Charles Mason and Samuel F. B. Morse, both leaders of the Democratic propaganda organization called the Society for the Diffusion of Political Knowledge.

In the summer of 1863 [William Woods Holden](#) ^[11], editor of the Raleigh *North Carolina Standard*, launched the [peace movement](#) ^[12], an unsuccessful effort on the part of militant and covert Unionists to lead the state out of the Confederacy and back into the Union. Tyson played a role in this movement by issuing a broadside to be clandestinely distributed calling for North Carolina to be the first in a succession of Southern states to secede from the Confederacy and return to the Union. He also issued in the North a sixty-page pamphlet, entitled *[The Institution of Slavery in the Southern States, Religiously and Morally Considered in Connection with Our Sectional Troubles](#)* ^[13], which urged Northern readers to reject the abolitionist element in the current administration—thereby encouraging and strengthening Southern Unionists in their struggle against the Confederacy—and Southern readers to stop all support of the Confederacy and let the secessionist ship of state sink.

Upon the publication in August 1864 of his pamphlet, *Object of the Administration in Prosecuting the War*^[14]—which was marked "Approved by the National Democratic Resident Executive Committee"—Tyson resigned his position as clerk at the Treasury Department to campaign full-time for George B. McClellan's election. In this pamphlet, he charged that Lincoln and the radicals had perverted the true purpose of the war from a crusade to save the Union into an unconstitutional social revolution to free enslaved people. To accomplish this end, he argued, they had pursued a deliberate policy of sabotaging all efforts made by Southern Unionists to overthrow the Confederacy and reestablish the Union because of the fear that this action would receive support from Northern Democrats^[15] and moderate Republicans^[16], thereby jeopardizing the radicals' plan for emancipation. As examples of this negative policy, Tyson cited the Emancipation Proclamation^[17], the dismissal of General McClellan, a Democrat, and the selection of General Benjamin F. Butler, who was hated in the South for his harsh administration of occupied Louisiana, to take charge of the Union Army Department of North Carolina and Virginia at the time of the peace movement of 1863, thus alienating the masses in North Carolina from the Union cause and dampening their enthusiasm for the peace movement. Tyson claimed that had the war been prosecuted strictly on constitutional principles, it would have ended long before in favor of the Union with the saving of thousands of lives. He declared that the "deluded, fanatical, and suicidal" Lincoln administration—which had made war on Southern Unionists—was "nothing but a John Brown raid upon a large scale" and should be "hurled from power."

On the reelection of Lincoln in November 1864, Tyson's career as a political agitator largely came to an end. He had failed in his single-minded mission to unseat the Secessionists in the South and the Radical Republicans (or Abolitionists, as he generally called them) in the North. His chief significance lay in his ability to articulate the views of thousands of North Carolinians and other Southerners who opposed secession and who, through resistance to Confederate authorities and desertion from the Confederate army, effectively hampered the Southern cause. Until his flight from North Carolina, he was the best-known proponent of their perspective. Following his flight, from his governmental post in Washington and as a result of his acceptance by Unionists in the North, he was able to assist many like-minded North Carolinians in finding their way from the South or occasionally from Federal detention camps into the Union army or to relatives in Indiana and other northwestern states. He is also important for the light his writings and letters shed on the activities and goals of the peace movement in North Carolina and on the interplay between Southern Unionists, Northern Democrats, the Radical Republicans, and the Lincoln administration.

After the war, Tyson gradually built up a profitable mail contract business. By the mid-1870s he had numerous mail routes in most of the southern and southwestern states including Texas, Nevada, and California. At the same time, he operated a "pension agency" in Washington that serviced war pension and mail claims against the government. While in the West, he became interested in inventing a device that would profitably extract silver and gold from the discarded ore piled about the mines. In all, Tyson received fourteen patents on his inventions, but, due to a disastrous law suit related to his mail contract business, he had to declare bankruptcy in 1883 and largely give up his dreams of being a successful inventor. Until 1894, when he returned permanently to North Carolina, he made a bare subsistence servicing soldiers' pension claims against the government.

During the postwar years, Tyson retained a lively interest in politics. He supported Andrew Johnson^[18] against the radicals, wrote a political tract for the Democrats in the 1872 campaign, and worked for the election of Grover Cleveland in 1884. Reflecting a progressive temperament, he championed woman suffrage^[19], adoption of the Fourteenth Amendment^[20], Black suffrage, higher wages for labor, and equal rights before the law for Black citizens.

On Cleveland's election in 1884, Tyson hoped to overcome his poverty through appointment to a government post as a reward for his long and extraordinary service to the Democratic party. To his dismay and anger, a reward was never forthcoming because Cleveland feared offending his southern Democratic allies, almost all of whom were ex-Confederates, by allowing a "traitor" like Tyson to benefit from Democratic munificence.

Tyson's spent his last fifteen years in Carthage and nearby communities where he busied himself writing articles and essays in support of the new People's party, about his experiments in agriculture, and about economic issues. To the end, he never received aid or recompense from the federal government for his sacrifice on behalf of the Union cause during the Civil War.

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