

W. Kerr Scott: From Dairy Farmer to Transforming North Carolina Business and Politics ^[1]

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By Eric Medlin, 2020

W. Kerr Scott occupies a unique place and time in North Carolina politics and economic development. What factors do you think influenced his success in government and politics? How did he contribute to economic change in North Carolina? What contradictions, if any, do you see in his politics and personal beliefs?

W. Kerr Scott, the “Squire from Haw River,” was one of North Carolina’s most influential governors. He was born in Haw River, North Carolina, on April 17, 1896. Scott began his life on his family’s farm and worked as a dairy farmer throughout his life. He graduated from North Carolina State University, went on to join the army, and later started a political career. Entering state government, he quickly rose up the ranks and became Commissioner of Agriculture in 1937. He held that position for eleven years and fought to bring farmers electricity and cure cattle diseases.

1948 Gubernatorial Election: One of the greatest electoral upsets in state history

In 1948, Kerr Scott ran for governor of North Carolina on a liberal platform of increased government programs and support for the poor. In the Democratic primary, he faced Charles Johnson. Johnson was a member of the Shelby Dynasty that had ruled state politics for decades. Johnson was also the state treasurer and a former deputy state auditor. In both positions, Johnson stood for big business and low state spending. Scott attacked Johnson’s ties to the state’s political machine and his conduct as state treasurer. And he attacked Johnson’s refusal to collect interest from North Carolina banks that held state funds. Scott argued that the refusal to collect interest was a giveaway to banks that took money from taxpayers.

Scott appealed to rural voters across the state. And his supporters became known as Branchhead Boys. This was as a reference to rural people who lived at the head of a creek branch. Johnson had more votes in the first primary but not a majority. Scott forced a runoff election, which he won by more than 36,000 votes. It was one of the state’s greatest electoral upsets. The editors of the *Greensboro Daily News* wrote that Scott was “a man upon whom the dissenters and protesters, the wishers of a new regime, could unite, and unite they did.” A headline in the *Raleigh News and Observer* on Scott’s victory simply read, “The People Won.”

Scott’s Legacy as Governor

Scott became governor in January 1949 after defeating the Republican Party’s candidate by a wide margin. Once in office, he helped the rural North Carolinians who voted for him. Scott initiated what became known as the Go Forward program. This program secured funding for schools, rural roads, and electricity and telephones for farms. He faced pushback from the state’s conservative legislators and business interests. They did not believe the state should spend funds on these priorities. In spite of the opposition, Scott’s efforts were fairly successful. In 1949 alone, he secured \$200 million in funding for roads and \$25 million for school construction. And more than 83,000 telephones were brought to the homes of rural North Carolinians.

One of Scott’s most important legacies as governor was his appointments. He appointed two key firsts to state positions. In 1949, Scott appointed Dr. Harold Trigg to the State Board of Education, making him the first African American to serve on that board. Scott also appointed the first female superior court judge in the state’s history, Susie Sharp of Rocky Mount. His most controversial appointment, however, was that of Frank Porter Graham. He appointed Graham to the United States Senate in 1949. Graham, the president of the University of North Carolina system, was one of the country’s most famous liberals. He was later defeated in his own bid for the Senate in 1950 by conservative businessman Willis Smith. Smith based his campaign on racist and anti-Communist attacks. Graham’s defeat was a significant blow for Scott and limited the Governor’s agenda for the last three years of his term.

Scott as U.S. Senator

Scott left the governor’s office in 1953 and decided to run for the United States Senate the next year. He was guided by his campaign manager Terry Sanford, a rising star in the Democratic Party. Sanford helped Scott appeal to both rural voters and liberals in the state’s growing cities. Sanford also helped to fend off attacks from Scott’s primary opponent, interim senator Alton Lennon. Scott won the primary election by over 25,000 votes, thanks to the Branchhead Boys and his successes as governor. And he defeated the Republican candidate to become U.S. Senator in 1954.

Scott had some noteworthy moments in the Senate. They included his support for a world food bank and his criticism of President Dwight Eisenhower’s angry tone when dealing with other countries. His tenure was negatively dominated by the

issue of civil rights. Scott disappointed his liberal supporters when he came out against many civil rights laws and reforms. Notably, he opposed school integration and the 1957 Civil Rights Act. After the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision desegregating schools in 1954, Scott said, "I have always been opposed, and I am still opposed to Negro and white children going to school together."

The stresses of national office, combined with heart disease and smoking, took their toll on Scott's health. He died on April 16, 1958 from a heart attack. Fellow North Carolina Senator Sam Ervin wrote of Scott, "I could work with any person who loved North Carolina, and I know of no one that loved our State more than Kerr Scott." Scott's son, Bob Scott, carried on the family legacy when he was elected governor of North Carolina in 1968.

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