

Scalawag ^[1]

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by Gordon B. McKinney, 2006



"Portrait of William Woods Holden, governor of North Carolina in 1865 and from 1868 to 1871." Photo courtesy of LeanNC.

^[2]"Scalawag" was the derogatory nickname used by conservative southern whites to describe other southern whites who were active members of the Republican Party during [Reconstruction](#) ^[3]. In North Carolina, the latter group was quite large and contained a significant number of outstanding leaders. The native-born white Republicans were primarily concentrated in two parts of the state: the "Quaker belt" in the [Piedmont](#) ^[4], including [Randolph](#) ^[5], [Moore](#) ^[6], and [Guilford](#) ^[7] Counties; and the [Mountain](#) ^[8] areas of the west, especially [Mitchell](#) ^[9] and [Wilkes](#) ^[10] Counties.

Most native white Republicans had come to oppose the Confederacy at some point during the [Civil War](#) ^[11]. *Raleigh Standard* editor [William W. Holden](#) ^[12] became their leader during the last stages of the conflict and the early part of [Reconstruction](#) ^[3], when [President Andrew Johnson](#) ^[13] appointed him provisional governor of the state. After he was defeated for a full term by Conservative Party candidate [Jonathan Worth](#) ^[14] in 1865, Holden and many other white Republicans endorsed the congressional Republicans and African American male suffrage. In 1868 the native white Republicans dominated a constitutional convention that created the most democratic state charter in North Carolina's history. Under the new document, Holden was elected governor and [Tod R. Caldwell](#) ^[15], of [Burke County](#) ^[16], lieutenant governor. Other white Republicans, including Alexander H. Jones of [Henderson County](#) ^[17], were sent to Congress.

When white supporters of the Conservative Party resorted to violence during the 1870 legislative campaign, Holden created and used a state militia composed of partisans from western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee. This so-called [Kirk-Holden War](#) ^[18] dominated the 1870 elections, which the Conservatives won decisively. When the General Assembly impeached and turned Holden out of office, Caldwell became governor. Caldwell was elected to a full term in 1872; he died in 1874 and was succeeded in office by [Curtis Brogden](#) ^[19].

The revived and renamed Conservatives-now calling themselves Democrats-nominated [Zebulon B. Vance](#) ^[20] for governor in 1876 and defeated the Republicans despite a strong run by [Thomas Settle](#) ^[21] Jr. of [Rockingham](#) ^[22] County. Settle, a former [North Carolina Supreme Court](#) ^[23] justice and U.S. ambassador to Peru, was widely respected by opponents and allies alike. His aggressive campaign provided the impetus for a strong white presence in the North Carolina Republican Party throughout the post-Reconstruction period, when whites deserted the party in many other states of the former Confederacy.

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"Portrait of William Woods Holden, governor of North Carolina in 1865 and from 1868 to 1871." Photo courtesy of LeanNC. Available from <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/multimedia/12771> [2] (accessed May 3, 2012).

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