Ray, John Robert [1]

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by William S. Powell, 1994

1852–post-1891

John Robert Ray, labor organizer, printer, and newspaperman, a native of North Carolina, was probably born in Raleigh [2]. Since his mother, Mrs. Rachel T. Ray, was identified in Raleigh city directories as a widow, his father may have died when the son was young. The 1870 census identifies Ray as an eighteen-year-old printer residing in the household of his mother. On 23 Oct. 1873 Ray married Lucetta J. Dollar at the residence of the Reverend D. P. Meacham, minister of the Central Methodist Church.

In Raleigh on 6 Apr. 1876 Ray began publishing a triweekly Republican newspaper, the *Constitution*. The North Carolina State Republican Convention met in Raleigh on 12 and adjourned on 17 July 1876, the day on which the *Constitution* ceased publication; therefore, it appears that Ray's venture into journalism was likely to have been at the behest of the Republican party [3]. Various Raleigh city directories between 1875 and 1891 indicate that Ray continued to work as a printer and, in 1888 and 1891, as a compositor, while his wife was a dressmaker. For much of his working life he was employed in Raleigh by the Edwards and Broughton Company, printers and publishers, but in 1883 he was employed by Uzzell and Gatling, printers. In 1879 he was also identified as corresponding secretary of the Raleigh typographical union.

On two unspecified occasions Ray reportedly was in Massachusetts, perhaps in search of employment, but it was in 1884 after his return from Philadelphia to attend the eighth annual general assembly of the Knights of Labor that he became active as state organizer of the Noble Order of Knights of Labor in America. At the Philadelphia meeting Ray suggested that paid organizers be sent to every southern state.

The first local assembly of the Knights in North Carolina, composed of workers in a variety of occupations, was organized by Ray in Raleigh on 18 June 1884; later that year he also organized a local for blacks. A convention held on 11 Aug. 1886 formed a state assembly. By 1886 there were four assemblies in Raleigh and two years later Durham [4] had five. Other active groups existed in Guilford County [5] and in the towns of Asheville [6], Charlotte [7], Salisbury [8], Statesville [9], and Wilmington [10]. Ray also went to South Carolina, the last southern state to have an assembly, and there he not only organized a local group but also left a capable member to extend the order.

In North Carolina blacks expressed dissatisfaction with their treatment as members of the Knights, and Ray took steps to meet their complaints. Efforts were made to see that job opportunities were available to both races, and Ray insisted that black organizers receive commissions equal to those paid to whites.

In Wilmington the *Daily Index* was established, apparently in 1886, as "the organ of the Knights of Labor in this state," but since no copies have survived, it is not known whether Ray played a role in its publication. By 1887 assemblies had been organized in more than half of the counties in the state, although most of them were small and ineffective.

The Raleigh assembly of which Ray was an active member agitated for a ten-hour day, participated in a national boycott, brought speakers on labor subjects to address the members, encouraged self-improvement for work advancement, visited the sick, and provided financial assistance for distressed members. It also studied proposals for and supported cooperative production; the Raleigh local had a tobacco factory and its products were sold in nearly all of the city's stores. Members were encouraged to contact their representatives in the General Assembly [11] in support of beneficial legislation. On occasion the local assembly also sent funds to aid strikers outside the state.

During at least a part of the time while Ray was peacefully organizing labor, "roving agitators" passed through the state. Labor unrest in other parts of the nation produced claims of "anarchism," and shouts of "Vive la Commune" were heard. A bomb exploded in Haymarket Square, Chicago, on 4 May 1886, and a futile attempt was made to associate Ray with some of the events there. Investigation revealed, however, that he had been falsely accused and he was exonerated. A Durham tobacco worker, under duress, had been forced to implicate Ray. Ray had been aware of the activity in opposition to him and had warned workers to use caution in associating with outsiders.

The North Carolina General Assembly in 1887 created the Bureau of Labor Statistics [12]. Its first annual report issued later in the year contained a number of letters concerning the state policy of leasing convicts to private businesses as laborers and construction workers. One of these, dated 25 July 1887, was written by Ray; it advocated "abolition of the penitentiary system and a return to corporal punishment for certain offences." In a well-reasoned and clearly stated argument, he proposed the use of prison labor for work on public roads and waterways and in producing the necessities of prison life. He also favored abolishing capital punishment and substituting solitary confinement. His objective, of course, was the elimination of prison labor in competition with free labor.

Leaving his wife and mother in Raleigh, Ray in August 1887 took a job for a brief time as telegraph editor of a daily

newspaper in Wilmington, perhaps the *Daily Index*. Evidence of considerable labor organizing activity in Wilmington during the period 1886–88, including that among telegraph operators, suggests that Ray was hard at work in that field as well. After 1887 he appears to have ended his involvement with the Knights of Labor and to have been involved only in the typographical union, an organization dating from before the Civil War [13] in the state.

In a letter to a national officer of the Knights, Ray in 1886 recounted some of the hardships of his work. He noted that he had "walked over a greater portion of this State" and sometimes had gone nearly two days and nights without food. He had been obliged to sleep in the woods and had had to face mobs gathered to take his life. Now, at the time he was writing, "I have not a penny in the world and no work, while my family are suffering for the necessaries of life."

By 1890 labor activity had virtually ceased in North Carolina. The American Federation of Labor had been organized in 1886, and such activity as occurred involved workers in skilled industry. Mrs. Rachel Ray died on 18 Nov. 1892. John R. Ray and his wife ceased to appear in city directories after that date, although the 1891 city directory identified him as a compositor with Edwards and Broughton. There is nothing to suggest that they had any children.

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Biographies [19]
Newspapers and magazines [20]
Political leaders [21]
Publishers and Printers [22]
Writers, journalists, and editors [23]
Authors:
Powell, William S. [24]
Origin - location:
New Hanover County [25]
Wilmington [26]
Buncombe County [27]
Asheville [28]
Durham County [29]
Durham [30]
Guilford County [31]
Iredell County [32]
Statesville [33]
Mecklenburg County [34]
Charlotte [35]
Rowan County [36]
Salisbury [37]
Wake County [38]
Raleigh [39]
From:
Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press.[40]

1 January 1994 | Powell, William S.

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location/coastal--7 [26] https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/coastal-39 [27] https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/mountain-8 [28]
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location/piedmont/m [35] https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmon-24 [36] https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmon-13 [37]
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