

Russell, Daniel Lindsay ^[1]

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by William McKee Evans, 1994

7 Aug. 1845–14 May 1908

See also: [Daniel Lindsay Russell, Jr.](#) ^[2], [Research Branch, NC Office of Archives and History](#), [Sarah Russell](#) ^[3]



Photograph of Daniel Lindsay Russell, Jr. Image from the North Carolina Museum of History.

^[4]Daniel Lindsay Russell, judge, congressman, and governor, was born at Winnabow plantation, in [Brunswick County](#) ^[5] near [Wilmington](#) ^[6], the son of Daniel Lindsay and Carolina Sanders Russell. Both the Russell and Sanders families were wealthy and owned large numbers of enslaved people. Few people in North Carolina were such ardent [Democrats](#) ^[7] or more enthusiastic about the cause of [secession](#) ^[8] than the planters of the [Lower Cape Fear](#) ^[9]. Yet in this respect Russell's immediate background was different. His father and his maternal grandfather, David W. Sanders, were active [Whigs](#) ^[10], and in 1860 the fifteen-year-old Russell and his father took the highly unpopular course of opposing secession.

The following spring, however, when war became a reality, young Russell, then a student at [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[11], left Chapel Hill and returned home, where he and his father each organized a Confederate company and was commissioned captain. If the two Russells had been converted to the cause of secession, neither of them showed the slightest inclination to give up his established habit of quarreling with those gentlemen who were now the chief Confederate leaders. First, the Russells objected to the nature of their military assignments and applied to have their companies transferred to combat duty with the Army of Northern Virginia. Yet each was assigned to routine garrison duties around the forts of the Lower Cape Fear.

Next, they took exception to the Confederate [conscription](#) ^[12] acts, which exempted from military service enslavers with a large number of enslaved people as well as persons who could afford to hire a substitute. Both of them were comfortably exempt on either of these grounds. The younger Russell was still further exempted because he was not old enough to be in the army. Nevertheless, they added their protests to the hue and cry that rose from the white poor. A colonel called them "Political Demagogues" who obstructed his efforts at a muster of conscripts, "mixing with the crowd and freely speaking of the injustices and oppression of the conscription law."



Photograph of the Winnabow Plantation house, circa 1900-1915, the birthplace of Daniel Lindsay Russell, Jr. Image from the North Carolina Museum of History.

^[13]Young Russell's difficulties with the Confederacy culminated in January 1864, when he walked into the office of the chief enrolling officer and "did then and there violently assault" him. When called upon to explain the sound beating that he had given a superior officer, the eighteen-year-old captain angrily replied, "I should not have done [so] had I not been provoked by his unparalleled mendacity." Russell was saved from the consequences of his rash deed by powerful civilian friends, especially a neighboring planter, George Davis ^[14], who was Confederate attorney general, and Zebulon Vance ^[15], Whig governor of North Carolina. Vance appointed him a commissioner of Brunswick County and declared him "necessary to the civil administration of the State Government." This in effect not only removed him from the jurisdiction of the army but also put him beyond the reach of the government in Richmond.

At the time Russell was catapulted from the army into politics, a political reaction against secession and war was gaining ground in the piney woods of Brunswick County, a movement that he was not slow in turning to his own advantage. Shortly after his nineteenth birthday, Russell stood for election to the North Carolina House of Commons and won. He served until the end of the war and for more than a year afterwards. While in the legislature, he began to study law. Upon the completion of his term in 1866, he was admitted to the North Carolina bar and, at age twenty-one, began a practice in Wilmington.

With the establishment of the Republican ^[16] regime in 1868, Russell announced that he would run for judge of the superior court. The Wilmington Star ^[17] was willing to concede his ability but, in view of his youth, found preposterous "the idea of Dan Russell being a judge of anything except groundpeas or persimmon beer!" Nevertheless, he won the election and served until 1874.

Meanwhile, on 16 Aug. 1869, Russell married Sarah Amanda Sanders ^[3], a cousin from Onslow County ^[18]. They made their home mostly in Wilmington, though Russell traveled a good deal on his circuit as judge as well as to his scattered family plantations, which he was attempting, with only limited success, to restore to normal production using free labor.

Russell, on the other hand, enjoyed considerably more success in politics. As he matured he was becoming an increasingly influential member of a small circle of men whom their Democratic opponents called the "Wilmington Ring." The Republican party in southeastern North Carolina was composed overwhelmingly of people who were poor, uneducated, and politically inexperienced; about 90 percent of them were Black. It was easy, therefore, for the well-to-do and educated businessmen who composed the Wilmington Ring to control the party rather completely in the counties of the Cape Fear region.

The chief threat to Russell's political ambitions was the ardent racism of the Democratic party. If the Democrats could convince enough people to vote their skin color, the Republicans could not carry more than two counties in the whole Cape Fear region. In 1876 Russell was reelected to the North Carolina House of Commons from his native Brunswick County, but Brunswick had a white majority of scarcely 60 percent. If Russell were ever to rise any higher in politics, he would have to be able to carry a series of counties with large white majorities.

A lucky break occurred for Russell as a result of the depression of 1873 and the rise of the Greenback party ^[19]. Thousands of desperate farmers abandoned the Democratic for the Greenback party, which put a greater stress on the alleviation of debt than on the celebration of the white skin. In 1878 he received the endorsement of both the Republican and Greenback parties and was elected to Congress. But the national Greenback party collapsed as the depression of the mid-1870s gave way to the relative prosperity of the 1880s, when white farmers could once again afford the luxury of color loyalty and racial politics. In 1880 Russell did not stand for reelection.

All doors to political advancement seemed closed to Russell. So he withdrew to Belville plantation and devoted his energies towards trying to achieve with free labor some of the prosperity that his and Sarah's families had once enjoyed from the labor of enslaved people. He did not succeed, though at one time he was reported to have been the largest cotton planter on the Lower Cape Fear. The soil of the area was poorly suited to cotton.

The soil was well suited for high-quality Carolina rice, but free labor balked at a return to the rice paddies. Planters complained that, with the inducements that they had to offer, free labor was far more expensive but only slightly more productive than labor from enslaved people. Even during the comparative prosperity of the 1880s, the revival of plantation production on the Lower Cape Fear was weak and full of uncertainties.

Although Russell was enjoying little success as a planter, something in the routine of life at Belville seemed to tame the fiercely rebellious spirit of his youth. As a Greenback congressman he had thundered that the restoration of control in the South by "Bourbon" Democrats ^[20] was "a menace to free institutions. It means retrogression and reaction." But by the late eighties Russell was capable of making statements that one might more normally expect from a planter of the Lower Cape Fear. In an article he wrote in 1888, he reiterated that the Democrats had gained power by catering to racial antipathy and by terror, that the Black citizens had been "by most monstrous wrong degraded" ^[21]. "Yet degraded they were: "The negroes of the South are largely savages. . . . They are no more fit to govern than are their brethren in African swamps."

Russell would come to regret those words as political opportunity began to beckon again. The farmers had been in economic trouble all along. But with the arrival of the depression of 1893, which affected all parts of the economy, smoldering unrest blazed into agrarian revolt. It presented Russell with his supreme opportunity to help pull down the pillars of "Bourbon" North Carolina. Yet for the rest of his life his enemies would never let him forget that he had once called his Black supporters "savages."

In 1896 Russell received the Republican nomination and was elected governor of North Carolina in a three-party race that saw thousands of desperate farmers abandon the Democrats, who called themselves "the white man's party," for the Populists ^[22], who claimed to be the poor man's party. An important achievement of his administration was winning "home rule" for a series of eastern counties. A previous Democratic administration had abolished local self-government in a number of counties having Republican minorities. Local officials in these counties had been appointed by the Democratic majority in the legislature.

When Russell challenged the North Carolina retainers of the railroad titan, J. P. Morgan, he was less successful. Morgan's Southern Railroad, by means that are not entirely clear, had been able to persuade the Democratic administration of Governor Elias Carr ^[23] to grant it a ninety-nine-year lease on the state-controlled North Carolina Railroad ^[24]. Many people, especially Populists, but including some Bryan Democrats such as Josephus Daniels ^[25], raised the cry of scandal. Russell pledged himself to recover the railroad for the state. But in this fight he faced not only the opposition of many Democrats but also a large number of Republicans. The governor and his allies went down in defeat before the Morgan interests.



Governor Daniel Lindsay Russell with the 2nd North Carolina Infantry Regiment of U.S. Volunteers, 1898. Image from the North Carolina Museum of History.

^[26]If the depression of 1893 had opened the way for Russell's return to political life, the Spanish-American War ^[27] and the return of prosperity signaled his final demise. In the summer and fall of 1898 the Democrats staged the Red Shirt ^[28] campaign, the most impassioned crusade for white supremacy and Democratic rule in North Carolina history. All other issues were swallowed up. The Populists and the Republicans suffered a crushing defeat.

This time, however, the Democrats had no intention of allowing Russell to return to a secure local stronghold on the Lower Cape Fear, controlled by his friends in the Wilmington Ring and supported by Black majorities in New Hanover ^[29] and Pender ^[30] counties. Immediately after the election, the Red Shirt political crusade was transformed into a quasi-military campaign directed against the Republican-Populist municipal administration of North Carolina's principal city, Wilmington. In a proceeding that some writers have described as a "race riot" ^[31], as it entailed the destruction of Black lives and property, bands of armed men, led by prominent Democrats, seized control of Wilmington. The city officials were forced to resign, the Ring was broken up, and such a reign of terror was directed against the Black citizens that by 1900 New Hanover County ^[29] had a white majority. Russell dispatched state troops to Wilmington. But, commanded by officers who were Democrats, they only served to help consolidate the new regime.

Russell's political ruin was now complete. He had suffered defeats before, but now he had no organized constituency to return home to. He considered resigning as governor. Persuaded by his friends, however, including the tobacco magnate, Benjamin N. Duke ^[32], he decided to continue in office until the end of his term in 1901.

While serving as governor, Russell had also suffered financial ruin. In part this was due to the final eclipse of the North Carolina rice industry that followed the rise of large-scale rice production on the Gulf coast, based on mechanized

techniques, especially the combine harvester, which could not be used on the soft soils of the Lower Cape Fear. But Russell had also been ruined by the expenses that he had entailed as governor. He and other governors had faced an unhappy dilemma: on one hand, their salary—\$3,000 a year—was comparatively low. Yet they were expected to sustain a variety of activities and maintain a grand style of living, which could not possibly be paid for out of their salary. Russell estimated that he had spent \$12,000 more than he had been paid during his four years in office.



The gravestone of Daniel Lindsay Russell in Brunswick County. Image from the North Carolina Museum of History.

^[33]He therefore spent the seven years of life remaining to him, after his return to Belville plantation, trying to repair his financial situation. He pinned his chief hope on a scheme for speculating on repudiated North Carolina state bonds. When the Democrats had regained control of the legislature after Reconstruction ^[34], they had refused to honor at full value the bonds floated by Reconstruction legislatures on the grounds that the passage of these bond issues had been due to corrupt practices and that much of the money made from the sale of the bonds had been improperly used. Russell, and a number of other lawyers, believed that, if the validity of these bonds could be tested in the courts, the courts would reject the legislature's argument for repudiation and uphold the bonds. Nevertheless, individual bondholders considered their property virtually worthless because, according to the Eleventh Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, an individual could not sue a state.

Russell devised a scheme ^[35] for virtually bypassing the limitations imposed against suing a state. He and some associates arranged for the New York owners of a certain class of North Carolina bonds—bonds that had not been totally but only partially repudiated—to give some of the bonds to the state of South Dakota. South Dakota could and did sue the state of North Carolina for the value of these bonds and won in the U.S. Supreme Court ^[36]. Russell and his associates then said in effect to the North Carolina legislature: We cannot sue you, of course. But before we allow ourselves to be robbed we will donate these bonds to a state that will obtain full value for them. You will find it cheaper if you meet us in a reasonable compromise, which Governor Robert Glenn ^[37] and his Democratic legislature finally felt compelled to do.

Russell's bond scheme required years of expensive litigation, and he was in failing health. He had to curtail his law practice and could not take a very active part. Shortly before his death he received about \$12,000 as his share of the scheme. If this settlement gave him the satisfaction of having struck a last blow at his "Bourbon" enemies, it hardly solved his financial problems. When he died, his assets were only about \$1,000 more than his debts. Sarah Sanders Russell had to spend her last years managing a small dairy farm. They had no children.

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Additional Resources:

"D. L. Russell." N.C. Highway Historical Marker C-29, N.C. Office of Archives & History.

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[Biographies](#) [44]

[Governors](#) [45]

[Judges](#) [46]

[Lawyers](#) [47]

[Military personnel](#) [48]

[Public officials](#) [49]

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Origin - location:

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[Wilmington](#) [52]

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