

A Recently Acquired Disfranchisement Document, Greensboro, circa 1890

J. Stephen Catlett,
Archivist, Greensboro Historical Museum
October 2011

Brief Facts

| | |
|--|--|
| <i>What Is It?</i> | <p>This is a unique and extremely valuable historical document. Undated, it lists over 600 names of African American voters in Guilford County who were to be prevented from voting in an upcoming election. That this list was printed is surprising although not from a logistical perspective, since creating a hand-written version at least four times would have been extremely tedious.¹ This was certainly a Democratic party production, although not necessarily officially sanctioned or produced.</p> <p>From the perspective of the politics of that time the document is not unusual. It is well known by historians that African American men were challenged/denied their right to vote, well before the legally sanctioned “Jim Crow” laws were passed in N.C. following the turbulent 1898 election. It was this election that saw the Republican-Progressive “fusion” political alliance – which had taken over the state, more or less, in the 1894 election – finally defeated for good.</p> |
| <i>Is the document authentic?</i> | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The paper, type style, and internal information (i.e. Greensboro names) are consistent with the period and with contemporary sources checked to date.2. Correspondence with several noted historians in the area and beyond did not suggest any reason to doubt the document’s authenticity.² |
| <i>Do we know the year it was printed?</i> | <p>Dating this document is difficult to determine with precision. The following information is based on printed sources and historical investigations of names/information within the document. This research definitely suggests a date prior to 1895.³</p> <p>1. Internal evidence from the document suggesting pre-1895.</p> <p>A. Harmon Unthank, who we know died in 1894, is listed on the document as one of the colored voters to be challenged or removed.</p> |

¹ There were 23 townships during this time period. Gilmer and Morehead were divided into a north and south precincts, so this disfranchisement document was distributed to at least 4 polling places, or officials thereof, and more likely to the Democrat registrars at those polling places, which means probably more than 4 copies were needed, which is why handwritten lists would have been prohibitive.

² Local/Regional Historians consulted were: Dr. Allen Trelease, former head of the UNCG History Dept, and an expert on 19th century N.C. (Dr. Trelease recently died, a few months after my phone and email conversations with him.); Dr. William Link, currently at the Univ. of Florida, and formerly head of the History Dept. at UNCG; Dr. Paul Escott, noted historian of the South at Wake Forest University; Dr. Michael Perman, an expert on the history of disfranchisement in the South, author of *Struggle for Mastery, Disfranchisement in the South 1888-1908*.

³ To date, no names of people who can be verified as dying after 1894 have been documented, but the available resources, especially from online resources, are very limited. It is hoped that in the future – especially when this document becomes more widely publicized – that family or public genealogists/researchers will be able to provide more information about these men, especially accurate death dates. Here is one online source of cemetery records:

<http://greensborolibrary.wordpress.com/2010/05/30/an-alphabetical-list-of-marked-burials-in-greensboros-union-cemetery-with-hyperlinks-to-tombstone-images/>

B. The text at the top of the document states that the men listed below should be challenged on the “day of election”. This almost certainly means it was printed prior to the election law changes of 1895, which occurred after the historic 1894 election.⁴

2. Internal evidence from the list of names suggesting pre-1892.⁵

A. Henry Booker appears as a colored “plasterer” in the 1887 City Directory, living in College Hill. He does not, however, appear in the 1890-91 or 1892-93 directories. His wife Maggie, however, is listed that year as being in College Hill. It seems highly likely that Henry Booker was dead when the 1890-91 directory was printed in 1890.⁶

B. Hezekiah Edwell is listed in the 1887 City Directory as a colored “tobacco roller”, living on east Gaston (current Friendly Ave.) near Forbes (current Church St.). He does not appear in the 1890-91 directory. There is, however, a listing for a Leanna Edwell, living at 339 East Gaston, which was near Forbes and thus very likely the same house. Although they could have been separated, Hezekiah does not appear in a separate entry. It is impossible to know of course if they separated, and he moved out of town. Overall the evidence suggests that he was dead when the 1890-91 directory was printed.

C. In addition to the names above there are several men researched to date who appear in the 1890-1891 or 1892-93 directory (published in 1890 & 1892 respectively), but who do not appear in post 1892 directories. It is possible these men were just missed in the next directories, or moved out of town, but it is also possible or likely that they died sometime between 1890 and 1892.⁷

3. Evidence found in voting records at the State Archives suggesting pre-1892.

A. A total of about sixteen names on this disfranchisement document show up in voting records at the State Archives. These “Challenge” records date to 1892 and 1894.⁸ Some have the exact spelling of a name, just as it appears on the list, and some have a longer name (which could obviously be a different person), e.g. “Joseph Wharton” on the list, and “Joseph W. Wharton” in the 1892 State Archives documents.

B. The fact that there are historical records verifying that individuals appeared in person before a registration official is solid documentation that at least these 16 individuals, who also appear on the disfranchisement document, were alive in either 1892 or 1894.

C. Furthermore, the documents at the State Archives are dated in October 1892 or 1894 – the elections in 1892 and 1894 were held, respectively, on November 8 and November

⁴ The “fusion” legislature of 1895 passed new election laws – overturning over 15 years of the Democrats’ imposed laws – stating that, among other things, names could not be challenged on the day of the election, but could be challenged two Saturdays before the election. See: William Mabry, “Negro Suffrage & Fusion Rule in N.C.,” *NC Historical Review*, XII, #2 (April 1935): 86. See also: <http://www.northcarolinahistory.org/commentary/58/entry>. See also, the section below: “What was happening in North Carolina politics prior to 1900?”

⁵ The 1890-91 directory was actually published in 1890 according to the title page. The 1887 directory was published in 1887, according to a note from the publisher on the “Introductory” page, which states “April 1887.” The 1892-93 directory was published in June 1892 according to the “Introductory” note by the publisher.

⁶ She is not actually listed as his “wife” in 1887 or even as his “deceased” wife in the 1890-91 directory, since those designations were not given in 1887 or 1890-91. However, a search of the 1880 census found Henry listed as father (age 57), Maggie as his wife (age 37), and Nathan as his son (age 22). Nathan also appears in the 1892-93 directory as a plasterer, which is the occupation listed for both father & son in the 1880 census. Wife Maggie, and a Julia, are also listed in the 1892-93 directory.

⁷ Names in this category include: Alex Bain, Henry Clark, Frank Garrett, James Jones, George Mendenhall

⁸ There are a couple of groups of voting records for Guilford County in the State Archives in Raleigh (See: Boxes/Group 246.87.2, at the State Archives), one of which includes several folders. Two of the folders are titled: “Registrations Challenged – 1892”, and “Registration Books, Names of Persons Removed From – 1894”. Included are original slips of paper documenting that the person has been removed from voting registration books.

| | |
|--|--|
| | <p>6 – which means that the challenges documented at the State Archives were not carried out on election day (as the disfranchisement document strongly urges) but several weeks earlier. Thus it is likely that the disfranchisement document was printed before 1892.</p> |
| <p><i>So, what is the best guess of the document's date?</i></p> | <p>Based on the evidence presented above in sections 1, 2 and 3, the best guess based on the information currently available is that this document was printed for the election of 1890, or perhaps 1888.</p> <p>Although the statewide elections of 1892 and 1894 were particularly virulent and contested, as the next section suggests, local documentation relating to the elections of 1888 and 1890 (as described below in “What was happening in Greensboro politics prior to 1895?”) show that those years were just as harsh if not more so, with detailed charges of voting fraud being hurled in competing party newspapers between Democrats and Republicans.</p> <p>Any definitive dating requires being able to more accurately pinpoint more death dates of men on the list. It is possible that African-American families or genealogists might be able to fill in more such dates in the future, and through a more precise process of elimination, we might be able to determine its exact date.</p> <p>The GHM Archives welcomes any information that you may have about anyone listed on this document. You can contact the Archives or leave a message at: 336-373-2976. You can also send information via email to Elise.Allison@greensboro-nc.gov.</p> |
| <p><i>What is the documents significance?</i></p> | <p>Ultimately knowing the exact date is not crucial to understanding the importance of this document. Its very existence – some 110 years after it was printed – is stark historical proof of the cold, calculated, even vicious politics of that era, which witnessed a determined political party using any and all means, legal or not, to prevent the newest American citizens from their guaranteed constitutional privileges and rights.</p> |

What is the Historical Context of this document?

| | |
|--|---|
| <p><i>What was happening in North Carolina politics prior to 1900?</i></p> | <p>North Carolina Politics: 1875-1894</p> <p>As brief background for understanding the historical context and relevant politics for this era, following are extensive quotes from Hugh Lefler and Albert Newsome’s acclaimed history, <i>North Carolina: The History of a Southern State</i>:</p> <p>By virtue of the constitutional amendments of 1875 and a legislative act of 1876, the victorious Democratic party abolished the choice of county commissioners by popular vote and vested their election in the hands of justices of the peace who were chosen by the legislature, always safely Democratic. ... Even in Democratic counties, the voters lost control of their county government which generally fell into the hands of ‘court-house rings’ composed of local Democratic leaders.⁹</p> <p>The new county government law assured Democratic control of the county governments. Democratic legislatures elected Democratic justices of the peace, who chose Democratic election officials, and these were able to disqualify some Republican voters by using technical requirements as to name, age, or residence, or enforcing legal regulations for the challenging of voters, or employing other devices. Open threats, or even a show of violence, deterred many Negroes from the polls. If it seemed necessary to party victory, party workers and election officials used their skill in corrupt practices such as ballot-box stuffing and fraudulent counting of votes. The end of Democratic victory justified any means. Conditions were conducive to party control in local and state affairs by small groups of leaders. Only the loyal and faithful received appointments; a doubtful party man was a traitor and renegade who must suffer ruthless political destruction. It was an age of low political morality when election laws were</p> |
|--|---|

⁹ See: Hugh T. Lefler & Albert R. Newsome, *The History of a Southern State: North Carolina*, revised ed. (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1963), 507.

| | |
|--|---|
| | <p>framed for their violability, when upright men engaged in political corruption as a necessary means toward what they considered the holy end of saving the state from the Republicans.¹⁰</p> <p>According to NCA&T history professor Frenise Logan’s research, during the election of 1892 the Democratic party was particularly desperate to prevent the possible fusion of the Republicans with the Progressives or People’s Party into one large voting block. The “Democrats resorted to any and all devices that might bring them victory...”¹¹</p> <p>They Democrats continued to fight the possibility of a large black-white voting block in North Carolina up to 1894, however the tide slowly but steadily rose against them, resulting in a “Fusion” victory in the elections of 1894. This was a key historical moment in North Carolina politics, and provides an important clue as to the <u>latest date</u> that this disfranchisement document could have been printed.</p> <p>Soon after the 1894 state-wide election, which saw the “Fusion” party emerge victorious, the Fusion legislature dismantled the Democratic election and voting laws that had allowed the Democrats to control local elections since 1876.¹²</p> <p>The old system had provided for election officers appointed by Justices of the Peace, with no balance or safe guards in place. The new law of 1895, titled “<i>Revising, amending, and consolidating the election laws of the state</i>”, created a new procedure in which the elected Clerk of Court in each county named the election registrars and judges. Furthermore, each political party was to have one representative on the Board of Registration, and one of three judges of elections, in each precinct. Another change was that there was to be no challenging names on voting lists on the actual election day, except for those voters who had qualified to vote since the registration books were closed.</p> <p>Understanding these 1895 laws is very helpful in narrowing the latest date this disfranchisement document could have been printed.</p> |
| <p><i>What was happening in Greensboro politics prior to 1895?</i></p> | <p>What was the local historical context for this document?</p> <p>The political turmoil in Guilford County during this time, and as early as the 1888 election, was as volatile as anywhere else in North Carolina. It was even more the case in Gilmer and Morehead townships, which make up the actual city limits of the city of Greensboro and thus contain the most voters.</p> <p>The fact that this disfranchisement document was drawn up specifically for the registrars in these two townships is, therefore, not surprising.</p> <p>The importance of these townships comes across clearly during the November 1888 election. The <i>Daily Evening Patriot</i> newspaper made a direct appeal that year to the Democrats in two townships to come out to vote. The <i>Evening Patriot</i>, like their sister publication the <i>Greensboro Patriot</i>, was rabidly pro Democrat, anti-Republican. They expressed alarm that the voters favoring the prohibition of alcohol – which voting group would normally vote Democratic but had formed a separate Prohibition party in N.C. – would deny votes to the Democratic candidates, producing a Republican victory. Wrote the editors:</p> <p>... Therefore, what we want to urge upon our people is the importance of a united effort in Morehead and Gilmer townships at the polls to-morrow. ... We once more appeal to the former Democrats who have seen fit to cast their lot with another organization, to open their eyes to these facts and take an</p> |

¹⁰ See: Hugh T. Lefler & Albert R. Newsome, *The History of a Southern State: North Carolina*, revised ed. (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1963), 510.

¹¹ See: Frenise A. Logan, *The Negro in North Carolina, 1876-1894* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1964), 23-24.

¹² See: Jeffrey J. Crow, “Cracking the Solid South: Populism and the Fusionist Interlude,” in *The North Carolina Experience: An Interpretive and Documentary History*, ed. Lindley S. Butler and Alan D. Watson (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1984), 337.

unprejudiced view of the situation. By persisting in their course they can accomplish nothing for the great cause of prohibition. On the contrary [*sic*], they may be the means of turning over the county to the Radicals. This may mean a Radical legislature, and a Radical legislature means negro aldermen, negro policemen and constables and possibly judges. As white men, we appeal to white men in the third party to reflect seriously now, while there is yet time to avert the terrible consequences which threaten the best interests of all honest and upright citizens, because of Democratic accessions to ranks of the third party.¹³

In the election of 1890 the Republican and Democratic press hurled charges back and forth regarding voting trickery, especially in Gilmer and Morehead. In the October 23, 1890 issue of the *Greensboro North State*, this pro-Republican newspaper editor reprinted an article titled "A Serious Charge" which had first appeared in the Democrat *Daily Evening Patriot* on the 8th. That article had attacked the purported voting subterfuge by Republicans. Wrote the pro-Democratic *Patriot*:

It is a notorious fact that some 200 or more fraudulent votes were cast in Morehead and Gilmer townships at the last election. Negroes were brought up and voted in place of negroes who had been dead for years. You ask why this was allowed? But what are the facts? The board of county commissioners appointed registrars and holders of election. They appointed in Gilmer township two democrats, two republicans and one prohibitionist and in nearly every case the prohibitionist decided in favor of the republicans, which gave them a majority in all contested cases.¹⁴

The *North State* blasted this assertion as false, stating that the "poll holders" in Gilmer were actually four in number, not five:

The poll holders in Gilmer were W. R. Murray, democrat, J. A. Pritchett, republican, A. G. Newell, prohibitionist and Dr. W. H. Wakefield, republican, with James R. Pearce, democrat registrar.

This election was highly contentious, with many more examples than cited here of harsh, hateful, inflammatory language hurled back and forth in print. Whether there was civil conversation on the streets in Greensboro is not known.

Supplemental Information or Links

The following links are useful for understanding the 1890s politics in North Carolina.

<http://www.northcarolinahistory.org/commentary/58/entry>

http://www.frederickdouglassfoundation.com/files/Republican_20Party_20NCarolina.pdf

¹³ See: "To the Democrats of Gilmer and Morehead Townships," *The Daily Patriot*, November 5, 1888, 1. This was not an irrational fear expressed by the *Patriot*. The political ferment in NC during these years saw the rise of a populist "People's Party", as well as those favoring prohibition of alcohol. This eventually led to the 1894 "fusion" of the Republican and Populists, which swept most state and local elections, until the Democrats swamped them in bitter race-bated elections in 1898, signaling the beginning of Democratic rule in NC and the start of the "Jim Crow" era of laws against African-American's citizenship and rights. In Guilford County, in this 1888 election, the split vote did happen with the result that the Democrats lost all the major races in the county.

¹⁴ See: *Greensboro North State*, October 23, 1890. Original issue, Weatherly Newspaper Collection, GHM Archives.