A Man of Bad Reputation: The Murder of John Stephens and the Contested Landscape of North Carolina Reconstruction

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A Man of Bad Reputation opens with John G. Lea’s confession that he had assassinated North Carolina State Senator John Walter Stephens in 1870. Lea gave his confession in 1919, nearly half a century after the murder. Stephens’s death, Drew A. Swanson contends, had profound repercussions. On the one hand, it “featured prominently in the US Congress’s investigation of Klan activities in the South” (3), which eventually led for the Enforcements Acts and the end of the first Ku Klux Klan. On the other hand, it sparked the Kirk-Holden War, which led to the impeachment of Governor William Woods Holden, his removal from office, the death of Reconstruction, and the rise of Jim Crow in North Carolina, “a new and even more effective form of white supremacy that used ‘soft’ terrorism in place of the Klan’s overt violence” (3).

Swanson, currently Jack N. and Addie D. Averitt Distinguished Professor of Southern History at Georgia State University, offers a fascinating discussion of the life and death of Stephens, which also becomes a story about the North Carolina Piedmont, Reconstruction in North Carolina, and the ways in which people have remembered and misremembered this important period.

Who was John Walter Stephens? Stephens, Swanson contends, was a “man on the make whose world was transformed by the outcomes of the Civil War” (38). Stephens probably avoided serving in the rebel military, but he may have served as an impressment agent. He and his family likely relocated to Yanceyville at the end of the U.S. Civil War, probably motivated by the region’s tobacco economy (40). Swanson includes an extended discussion of tobacco
cultivation in the Piedmont, which will be helpful for readers who are not well versed in the agricultural history of this region. After moving to Yanceyville, Stephens won an appointment as a justice of the peace, likely due to his relationship with Albion W. Tourgée, whom he came to know through his participation in the Union League. Stephens may also have worked for the Freedmen’s Bureau. In 1868, Stephens ran for Caswell County’s State Senate Seat. His opponent, Bedford Brown, won the election, but Stephens and other Republicans levied charges of voter fraud and Republicans in the North Carolina General Assembly refused to seat Brown. Charges and countercharges flew thick and fast, but the General Assembly eventually declared Stephens the victor. In a short period of time, Stephens “had gone from a small tobacco buyer new to the county to a state senator and acquaintance of the political figures who governed North Carolina” (48).

Reputation, Swanson argues, mattered a great deal during this period. Many people considered Stephens a man of bad reputation. They derided him as “chicken” Stephens, in reference to a convoluted episode where Stephens and another man named Ratliff competed for an appointment as a rebel impressment agent. Stephens got the job, but the competition for the position had made the men bitter enemies. When Ratliff’s chickens raided Stephens’s garden, Stephens killed two of the chickens. Ratliff filed theft charges, Stephens was jailed overnight, and he assaulted Ratliff the following day. Stephens shot two bystanders when they tried to intervene. Both men survived, the charges were dropped, and Stephens paid court costs. However, the “chicken” label stuck. Stephens’s opponents also accused him of killing his mother so that he would not have to care for her and so that he could inherit her house. Few people seemed to believe these accusations, but “the scurrilous gossip served as another weapon with which to assassinate Stephens’s character” (61).
Stephens’s political opponents also frequently commented that he was associated with another man of alleged bad reputation, Governor William Woods Holden. Holden, who had been a fiery Democrat before the U.S. Civil War, grew disillusioned with the war and became one of the leading voices for peace in the so-called Confederacy. Stephens and Holden, both regarded as untrustworthy by Conservatives correctly believed that “violence across the state was increasingly being organized by a conspiracy in the form of the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist secret societies” (57). Stephens became one of Holden’s detectives, which was supposed to remain secret, but quickly became common knowledge. On May 21, 1870, Stephens attended a political meeting held by Caswell County’s Conservatives in the Yanceyville courthouse. He was discovered the following morning with a rope around his neck. He had been stabbed twice in the neck and once in the heart. After the murder, Governor Holden issued a proclamation that Caswell County was in insurrection. In what became known as the Kirk-Holden War, Holden sent in the state militia under George Kirk. Kirk and his soldiers arrested many people and set in motion a chain of events that led to court cases, Conservative victory at the polls in 1870, and Holden’s impeachment and removal from office. Stephens’s death, in other words, had a profound impact on North Carolina politics. It also had an impact at the national level, because of Congressional hearing about Ku Klux Klan violence that led to the Enforcement Acts.

“The memory of the event,” Swanson observes, “shaped and reshaped in the decades that followed, became over time at least as important as the deed itself” (4). Indeed, Swanson follows how Stephens’s assassination was remembered and misremembered in many different formats. Albion Tourgée included a character in A Fool’s Errand named John Walter, modeled on Stephens. Tourgée depicted Walter as a pure and honorable man who chose death rather than
dishonor. Other writers took a very different approach and derided “chicken” Stephens as venal and corrupt. Lea was not the only man to confess that he killed Stephens. Frank Wiley had been arrested by Kirk and tried in a preliminary hearing before the North Carolina Supreme Court in 1870. Chief Justice Richmond Pearson found sufficient evidence to send Wiley’s case to trial in the Caswell superior court, but the charges were dropped. Wiley, later in life, moved to Catawba County and, shortly before his death, may have spoken about his complicity in the murder and his guilt. Felix Roan confessed to killing Stephens in 1891. John Lea did so in 1919. Nobody was ever prosecuted for Stephens’s murder.

Swanson also considers how academic historians have dealt with Stephens’s assassination. Dunningites like J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, similar to Stephens’s political opponents, disparaged him as a corrupt, venal, and dangerous man. Later generations of historians adjusted assessments of Stephens and Reconstruction. Even though the Dunningite ideas embodied by men like Hamilton are no longer accepted by the scholarly community, they have tremendous staying power among popular audiences. Thus, “academic historians at the national level may have enshrined Stephens in the pantheon of Reconstruction martyrs, but their narratives hardly made a dent in more general state histories” (147). Indeed, Swanson soberly concludes, “the Conservative portrayal of Stephens remains largely in place locally today” (148).

Stephens’s death, Swanson asserts, deserves a much more prominent place in histories of Reconstruction. Readers are hard-pressed to disagree with this assessment. In writing about Stephens, a man who was a North Carolina State Senator for less than two years, Swanson shines light on an episode that has been forgotten, misunderstood, or misremembered by too many people—an episode that reveals a great deal about the events of Reconstruction and the history of the U.S. more broadly.