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University of North Carolina Asheville

Reconstructing an Identity:

A Critical Reexamination of the Historical Legacy of John Walter Stephens

An Advocate for Social Equality During Reconstruction

Who Was Assassinated By the Ku Klux Klan

A Senior Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the Department of History

In Candidacy for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in History

By

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FOREWARD

This work has its roots in an identity crisis and a search for self that began over five years ago. In this journey to discover my paternal ancestry, which is rooted in Caswell County, I found a new appreciation for the past and a calling. This new career path and life-change led me back into academia, and a commitment to complete the task I started in late 1995. This paper is the culmination of nearly two decades of struggle against adversity to achieve the goal of a college education and be an inspiration and better role model for my kids.

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This paper would not have been possible without the information collected by the Caswell County Historical Association (CCHA). I am gracious for access to their archives, their time and hospitality. The astounding record-keeping and collection of transcribed personal narratives that was undertaken by the founding members of the CCHA over the last half century, and their diligence to collect their local family narratives' and histories' was not only an academic boon, but I learned much about my own genealogy and ancestral ties in the process. Paula Seamstress, my impromptu courthouse tour guide, the volunteers of the Richmond-Miles Museum in Yanceyville, NC as well as the random citizens of Caswell County who I encountered while wandering the streets of court square; backpacks, folders and papers haphazardly in tow were all wonderful; engaging, friendly and more than happy to share their rich, and detailed knowledge of local and family history.

A number of professors as well as their classroom readings and discussions had a profound effect on me over these last two years and heavily influenced ideas presented in this paper. They have helped me to better understand, channel and refine this passion and formulate more concise criticisms on the nature of humanity, civilization and the interpretation of historical events. Most notably, these friends and mentors are: Dr. Dwight Mullen, *The Great Bird of the Galaxy*; Dr. Alvis Dunn, my career-model; Dr. Daniel Pierce, my patient advisor and mentor; Dr. Eric Roubinek, my sounding-board; the Dr. Darin Waters for his patience with me as I navigated the direction and significance of this county and paper; and Dr. Brian Butler for having me read Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*; the ideas of how we conceptualize identity played strongly into this thesis.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge my friends, colleagues and family who provided tremendous support in some form or another along the way. Thank you William Murdock, Jason Rudge, Melany Gartz, Tiffany Key, Matt Saffer, John Greene, Kendall Sapp for your own contributions over these last few years. Montana Eck and Kayla Cable, as well as Katherine Cutshall, Melissa Peel, Benjamin Jarrell and Laura Engel, I found friends and kindred spirits in all of you and your suggestions, multiple edits, time, patience and friendship was invaluable to this paper. My Mom, Raye Marie, my numerous siblings and their significant others as well as my Aunt Donna all chipped in to help me get here. Most all my thanks and appreciation go to my my partner and better-half, Taisir, and our daughter Elena who stuck by me these last six years and this crazy idea of moving four hundred miles away and starting life over in the mountains.

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This work is dedicated to:

My Dad, Robert Brence Peck & my Puppa, Dr. Ray Hampton

They taught me so much in our short time together,
Including the importance of an education and that it is never too late to go back to school.

ABSTRACT

Many of the individuals that featured prominently in the events surrounding Reconstruction have long been vilified in the public and academic spheres. The long-held worldviews, belief systems and behaviors of a slave society, ingrained over generations, did not immediately cease after the Civil War. The prejudices of the era were perpetuated and given credence by early twentieth century historians who interpreted the events of Reconstruction using the Dunning Method, an inherently biased and overtly racist interpretation. It has only been in the recent past that scholarly historical revisionism deconstructed the overall narrative and demonstrated the fallacies of these early interpretations.

John Walter Stephens, a Republican Senator from Caswell County, North Carolina, has maintained a legacy that is indicative of the ramifications of the Dunning School interpretation. For nearly one hundred and fifty years Stephens's narrative has been one analogous with debasement and corruption; never shifting too far from the public image he had fought against in life. This paper seeks to deconstruct and critique the established biography of John W. Stephens using contemporary scholarship to present a more objective and contextual depiction of the late senator.

To fairly present in this form the history and spirit of the period referred to, is a task neither light nor grateful. It is onerous because of the superabundance of material from which selection must be made to bring the result within proper bounds, and unpleasant because in its performance many a kind and charitable illusion must be torn aside. The subject is one which every right-minded and right-hearted man must approach with something of reluctance, but which nevertheless is a duty not to be shirked. – Albion Winegar Tourgee, 1880¹

In the early morning of Sunday, May 22, 1870 the lifeless body of John Walter Stephens, a Republican state senator and local Justice of the Peace representing Caswell County, North Carolina, was discovered by his brother in a storeroom in the Caswell County Courthouse after an intensive search.² A truly vicious scene had occurred in the small room the day before. According to the coroner's report, Stephens's death was "done by the hands of some unknown person, or persons." The methods of execution were twofold; strangulation from a hangman's noose, pulled so tight the rope was embedded into his neck, and three stab wounds; two to the throat and one to the heart.³ Sixty-five years after Stephens's assassination the posthumously released confession of powerful Caswell tobacco farmer John G. Lea admitted complicity in one of the most notorious crimes in North Carolina's history. "Stevens was tried by the Ku Klux Klan and sentenced to death."⁴

Stephens's death was but only one of the many acts of violence attributed to the Klan in North Carolina. The high-profile assassinations were divisive acts that caused Governor William Woods Holden to deploy military force and suspend the *writ of habeas corpus* in several counties, Caswell included, to quell Klan violence. These actions led into what has been

¹ Albion W. Tourgee, "Part II: The Invisible Empire. Reasons for This Work," *A Fool's Errand. By One of the Fools*, 2nd ed. (New York: Fords, Howard & Hulber, 1880), 386-387.

² Record of the Coroner's Court of Inquest. May 26, 1870. Reprinted in Andrew Jackson Stedman, *Murder and Mystery: History of the Life and Death of John W. Stephens, State Senator of North Carolina, from Caswell County*, (Greensboro, NC: "Patriot" Print, 1870), 14, 31.

³ Record of the Coroner's Court of Inquest. May 26, 1870. Reprinted in A.J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 27.

⁴ John G. Lea, "John G. Lea's Confession to the Ku Klux Klan Murder of John W. Stephens, 2 July 1919. *Civil War Era NC*. Accessed 10 February 2015. <http://history.ncsu.edu/projects/cwnc/items/show/22>.

historically referred to as the “Kirk-Holden War.” The political events dramatically concluded with the impeachment and removal of Governor William Holden, a reinstatement of the Democratic Party and a general amnesty given to the Klan, namely, the participants in Stephens’s death.⁵

Reexamination has brought divisive and historically dismissed figures of the past back into the public eye, but in an entirely new light. Individuals such as Holden, once reassessed in the new scholarly paradigm, are being vindicated in the academic and public spheres. “Today, we correct a 140-year-old wrong,” declared Republican state Senator Neal Hunt,⁶ a Republican assemblyman who initiated the 2011 resolution to officially pardon Governor Holden’s 1870 conviction which was, what Senator Floyd B. McKissick, Jr., Democrat and poignantly, son of the first African-American to be admitted in UNC Chapel Hill’s Law School called “repugnant in every respect.”⁷

Historically speaking, the scholastic interpretations of John Walter Stephens have not always been objective, and furthermore, were inherently biased based on the prevailing school of study at the time, the Dunning School. Eric Foner, award-winning author of *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*,⁸ elaborates on the derogatory implications of the

⁵ Benson J. Lossing and Woodrow Wilson. *Harpers Encyclopedia of United States History from 458 A.D. to 1905*, Volume 9, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1905), 483. On August 7, 1873 the “Amnesty Act” was passed the NC legislature. This act pardoned members in the supremacy organizations known as the Heroes of America, Loyal Union League, Red Strings, Constitutional Union Guards, Whitebrother, Invisible Empire and the Ku Klux Klan.

⁶ General Assembly of North Carolina, Session 2011, Senate Joint Resolution 256, *A Joint Resolution To Pardon William W. Holden From The Judgment 1 Imposed Upon Him By The Senate On March 22, 1871, On Conviction Of 2 Articles Of Impeachment*. In a 48-0 vote, Governor William Woods Holden (1865, 1868-1870) was pardoned by the state legislature.

⁷ Ned Barnett, “N.C. State Senate Pardons Governor Who Stood up to Klan.” *Reuters*, 12 April 2011. Accessed 13 October 2015. www.reuters.com.

⁸ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

method: “for a long time it was an intellectual straitjacket for much of the white South, and historians have a lot to answer for in helping to propagate a racist system in this country.”⁹

The historical interpretations of John W. Stephens can be delineated into the two paradigms of study over the last century; the Lost Cause-Dunning narrative where Stephens is the villain, and the Revisionist interpretation where Stephens is a victim of the times. In spite of scholastic revisionism of Reconstruction, however, the perpetuating regional narrative of Stephens follows a characterization and perspective still seemingly rooted in 1870. The common narrative mirrors the abridged biography recounted by Martha Goins, then editor of the *Danville Register*, a Virginia city that shares a border with Caswell County. In 1977 she wrote:

Stephens, forever dubbed “Chicken” after stealing a hen, did not make himself popular. He was appointed after the Civil War by a Yankee army officer to be justice of the peace. He “kept the peace” by burning the Yanceyville Hotel, a row of stores and Gen. William Lee’s entire crop of tobacco. These actions provoked the Caswell County citizens to organize into the Ku Klux Klan. Stephens was tried and sentenced to death by the Klan. His murder took place in the Yanceyville Court House. It was deemed a ‘fitting end’ for the man whose elderly mother died of ‘mysterious circumstances’... The final result of the Kirk-Holden War was the restoration of reputation of the Leasburg and Yanceyville men.¹⁰

A scholarly reexamination of the life, historiography and regional myth of John Walter Stephens is long overdue. This reexamination is presented with emphasis on the deconstruction and criticism of the biases that contributed to the cementing of the odious legacy of “Chicken” Stephens. Many of the source materials presented to audiences in the public and academic mediums have been very one-sided and exclusionary. Though there have been contextual updates and reference of John Walter Stephens in contemporary academia, there has not been an

⁹ Mike Konczal, “How Radical Change Occurs: An Interview with Historian Eric Foner,” *The Nation*, 3 February 2015. Accessed 27 February 2015. www.thenation.com.

¹⁰ Martha Goins, “Leasburg Will Celebrate Fourth of July Quietly,” *Danville Register*, 3 July 1977.

undertaking of reconstructing the overall narrative since his first biography was written one hundred and forty-five years ago.

The multiple political scandals and power shifts, general social instability and the terrorist acts of the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacy groups during Reconstruction were a nationwide spectacle replete with sensationalist headlines splayed across the front pages of periodicals across the country for several years and lingered for decades in North Carolina. Stephens appeared visibly in the public record in the *Raleigh Sentinel*, the newspaper that reflected the views and options of the Democratic Party, also known as the Conservative Party at this time. Stephens was usually mentioned in the form of blanket commentary in op-eds of partisan vitriol. The *Sentinel's* Republican counterpart, the *Standard*, took a much more defensive stance of Stephens's character and attacked the below the belt tactics and mudslinging being perpetuated by the opposing paper's editor. Following Stephens's assassination, op-eds and reporting from dozens of papers heavily covered his murder as well as the ensuing murder trial of the suspects, which factored heavily into the political war that occurred statewide during the 1870's, lasting well into the end of the nineteenth century.¹¹ The sensationalism of the murder remained in the public consciousness well into the early decades of the twentieth century

¹¹ "Read! Everybody. Strange Conduct for a Judge -Yea! Even for Canby's Judge?" *Wilmington Journal*, 17 July 1874; "State Constitutional Convention, Twenty-Ninth Day" *Raleigh News*, 9 October 1875; "Who Was John W. Stephens?" *Pee Dee Herald* (Wadesboro, NC), 18 October 1876; *Wilmington Morning Star*, 14 November 1879; "The Statement Denounced - Dr. Roan's Brother Says the Report is False., The Stephens Murder" *State Chronicle* (Raleigh, NC), 5 December 1891; "Murder Will Out" *Asheville Citizen*, 5 December 1891.; "The Reported Confession was a Matter of Common Report. Dr. Kingsbury, Then On The Staff Of The Sentinel, Writes Interestingly Of The Stephens Murder." *State Chronicle*, 8 December 1891; "Sheriff Wiley and the Stephens Murder." *News and Observer*, 29 December 1891; "One of the Ku-Klux Crimes. The Assassination of Stephens." *Charlotte Observer*, 24 January 1897.

as witnesses, assumed participants and those with any type of tangential connection to the senator's murder passed away from old age.¹²

Shortly after the murder of Stephens a unique forty page bound pamphlet was written by Andrew Jackson Stedman, a former Confederate officer, attorney, editor and literary publisher.¹³ Titled *Murder and Mystery! History of the Life and Death of J.W. Stephens of Caswell County, State Senator of North Carolina*, it was published shortly after the senator's murder in the summer of 1870 and distributed through *The Patriot*, a Greensboro-based newspaper of Conservative leaning. *Murder and Mystery* was the first posthumous biography of Stephens. This text remains the primary, and most comprehensive work on gathering biographical details on Stephens outside of what can be collected from sources such as census materials and newspapers of the era. *Murder and Mystery* contained numerous sources which included the coroner's report on Stephens's mother's death, the coroner's report on Stephens himself, as well as witness statements of all parties at the Caswell County Courthouse on May 21, 1870.¹⁴ Though this text was not attributed in the early works, the information available in it can only lead to a definitive conclusion that this document was one of the primary source materials used by historians.

One of the most powerful political voices and social critics of Reconstruction that was generally relegated to derogatory carpetbagger status in the early works was Albion Tourgee, author of *A Fool's Errand. By One of the Fools*, originally published in 1879.¹⁵ A federal judge during his time in Caswell, Tourgee had hoped to help reform the social justice disparities in the

¹² "Reminiscence of Capt. Ball of Local Interest" *Reidsville Review* (Reidsville, NC), 7 February 1911; "Peter Williamson Dies in Reidsville" *The Bee* (Danville, VA), 14 February 1922.

¹³ David W. Gaddy, "Andrew Jackson Stedman," NCpedia, accessed November 8, 2015, <http://ncpedia.org/biography/stedman-andrew-jackson>.

¹⁴ Andrew Jackson Stedman, *Murder and Mystery! History of the Life and Death of J.W. Stephens of Caswell County, State Senator of North Carolina*, (Greensboro, NC: "Patriot" Print, 1870).

¹⁵ Albion Winegar Tourgee, *A Fool's Errand. By One of the Fools*, (New York: Fords, Howard & Hulbert, 1879).

South. Tourgee eventually left North Carolina and returned north, disillusioned with the failures of Reconstruction. He delivered a very scathing criticism of Southern Culture in his critically acclaimed book that was based on the events surrounding the assassination of Stephens. Tourgee's prose is personal and bitter in *A Fool's Errand*. Tourgee and John W. Stephens were close personal friends. In many ways, the circumstances of the day made them brothers-in-arms; allies in dangerous and unique circumstance.

When J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton published the 1914 work, *Reconstruction in North Carolina*, it was considered the authoritative interpretation of the post-war events, and by extension, John W. Stephens, for over half a century. In this work Stephens was presented as an instigator of "incendiary politics," a tool of Union League organizer Judge Albion Tourgee and an overall "man of bad reputation and of evil political life."¹⁶

In 1935 following the death of John G. Lea at age ninety-two, and sixty-five years after the murder of Stephens took place, Lea's deathbed confession confirmed his status of Klan leader, the participants and his rationale for the murder of Stephens. Lea gave as just cause for execution a confession from an individual who was apparently a witness to Stephens's "incendiary politics." "Ed Slade, a darky, told [Lea] that he burned the barn of tobacco by an order of Stevens and another darky told about his burning the hotel, also by an order."¹⁷

Allen Trelease, in his seminal 1971 work *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* was one of the first scholarly examinations that deviated from the Dunning approach. Trelease examined the ideologies of white supremacy groups like the Klan that arose in the wake of the South's loss of the Civil War, but also made great note of their

¹⁶ J Joseph Grégoire de Roulhac Hamilton, *Reconstruction in North Carolina* (New York: Columbia University, 1914), 473, 487.

¹⁷ John G. Lea, "John G Lea's Confession to the Ku Klux Klan Murder of John W. Stephens."

highly intertwined political connections in local governments. Trelease documented in great detail the violent acts perpetrated against blacks and whites in Caswell along with neighboring Alamance, Rockingham and Orange Counties, who were, by late 1869, also the locations of some of the most prolific Klan violence in the state.¹⁸ Trelease devoted a number of pages to the murder of John Walter Stephens and depicted one of the first contemporary interpretations of the late senator. Trelease illustrated a very different portrait of the man that Hamilton painted. His work presented the most objective study of Stephens thus far, and portrayed him as a man of “humble antecedents and barely literate;” a wartime Unionist and a moderate Republican who tried in vain to quell racial violence without retaliatory measures.¹⁹

Though the 1970’s started to see an interpretive shift of Reconstruction and its players, the Dunning approach was still quite pervasive. Stuart McIver, in his 1973 article, “The Murder of a Scalawag,” also maintained a depiction of Stephens that was indicative of the established narrative, labeling Stephens as a villain who deserved death.²⁰ The article mirrored Hamilton’s words with little deviation. The article was significant because it reproduced the first purported photograph of Stephens, and was subsequently used by other historians. This photograph is now known, however, to be incorrect.²¹

Historian William S. Powell compiled the most extensive history of Caswell County as yet in his book *When the Past Refused to Die: A History of Caswell County North Carolina*

¹⁸ Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 192-193, 195-197, 198-207.

¹⁹ Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror*, 212.

²⁰ Stuart McIver, “The Murder of a Scalawag,” *American History Illustrated* (April 1973): 12-18.

²¹ Paula Seamster, interviewed by the author, Caswell County Courthouse, Yanceyville, NC, 4 September, 2015. According to Seamster, descendants of one of J.W. Stephens’s siblings have indicated that the photograph is actually one of his brothers, and taken much later in life.

1777-1977.²² Powell was known for the many books related to North Carolina history that he authored personally or edited and has been the only author to write about Caswell County in detail. His writings are considered authoritative and ironclad in the region. Powell devoted a number of pages to the Kirk-Holden War. Like Stedman and Hamilton, Powell also presented a very unflattering portrait of Stephens in the *When the Past Refused to Die*, parroting Hamilton's description of the late senator.

Edgar Folk and Bynum Shaw briefly discussed Stephens in their 1982 biography of William W. Holden titled, *W.W. Holden: A Political Biography*, which examined the rise and fall of Holden's political career prior to and after the Kirk-Holden War. What is of note are some of the more sensational inaccuracies in this text detailing the senator's death, listed as occurring in broad daylight, in view of numerous witnesses (inferring that the murder took place in view of the public, not just in view of the accomplices), and that Stephens was shot to death.²³ Horace Raper also discussed Stephens in his 1985 biography titled *William W. Holden: North Carolina's Political Enigma*. Raper detailed to some extent what has been generally lacking in the historical record, but yet is also the source of such animosity, namely Stephens's actions as a politician.²⁴

Richard Nelson Current's revisionist narrative of the oft-maligned carpetbaggers in his ironically titled 1988 work, *Those Terrible Carpetbaggers: A Reinterpretation*, profiled a select few of the most prominent individuals that relocated to the South during Reconstruction, Tourgee being one of them. His work goes into minor, but important detail about Stephens's relationship with Tourgee, and discusses in detail the sensationalism at the time of Stephens's

²² William S. Powell, *When the Past Refused to Die: A History of Caswell County, 1777-1977* (Durham: Moore Publishing Co., 1977).

²³ Edgar E. Folk and Bynum Shaw, *W.W. Holden: A Political Biography*. (Winston-Salem, NC: J.F. Blair, 1982), 213.

²⁴ Horace Raper, *William W. Holden: North Carolina's Political Enigma* (The James Sprunt Studies in History and Political Science; v. 59) (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 128, 131, 165-166.

murder and documented the attempts of the Conservatives to place the blame of murder on the disaffected African-American community.²⁵ Stephens is depicted in Current's context as sympathetic; someone who shared many qualities and opinions with the yeoman farmer class and African-American community who, like many, were highly critical of the plantation elite, who were perceived as being responsible for the war and the current economic plight.²⁶

Jim Wise's 2010 self-published work *Murder in the Courthouse: Reconstruction and Redemption in the North Carolina* was written in a "true crime" prose and illustrated Stephens in a manner using the Hamilton-Powell biography as a basis. Wise does reference a number of notable historians such as Eric Foner and Paul Escott in the attempts to contextualize Stephens, but perpetuated the vilified persona.²⁷

The most recent examinations that tangentially involved John W. Stephens were two books published in 2014. Drew Swanson's *A Golden Weed: Tobacco and Environment in the Piedmont South* examined the highly interwoven social, agricultural, and cultural history of tobacco in the Piedmont region. Swanson briefly discussed the death of Stephens under a larger narrative framework of the dramatic shift in labor dynamics and economic disparity in the rural, agrarian North Carolina and Virginia Piedmont during Reconstruction. Since its founding a century prior, Caswell County, birthplace of Bright Leaf Tobacco (in 1839) was, like the surrounding Piedmont counties of Rockingham, Orange and Alamance, dependent on the tobacco economy, a crop that for all the other technological innovations in agriculture, requires a large labor force to cultivate. The loss of slave labor, coupled with the enormous losses of the

²⁵ Richard N. Current, *Those Terrible Carpetbaggers*, 204.

²⁶ Richard N. Current, *Those Terrible Carpetbaggers*, 203.

²⁷ Jim Wise. *Murder in the Courthouse: Reconstruction and Redemption in the North Carolina Piedmont* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2010).

working age, white yeoman farmer class during the war created a perfect storm of contributing forces that only fanned the flames of Federal resentment.²⁸

Rebels Against the Confederacy: North Carolina's Unionists, by Barton Myers, briefly discussed Stephens as he dictated the struggles of Southern Unionists who were forced to endure and live in the Confederate South after the Civil War broke out. Myers also detailed the enormous persecution and violent backlash that was felt by Unionists like Stephens in the public and political spheres as they attempted to rebuild the South; their control over labor and resources always tenuous and in flux.²⁹ Demonstrative of the Revisionist approach, both of these texts sourced A.J. Stedman's 1870 work, *Murder and Mystery* for biographical detail, completely ignoring the narratives compiled by Hamilton and Powell.

What is known of John Walter Stephens is that he was the first of six children, four sons and two daughters to parents Absalom, a twenty-four year old tailor,³⁰ and Letitia, his sixteen-year-old bride. The couple wed in late 1833³¹ and John was born on October 14, 1834 near Bruce's Crossroads in Guilford County, North Carolina.³² By all accounts the family was of humble and meager means and had, by at least 1840, relocated to the township of Wentworth, in neighboring Rockingham County.³³ The earliest posthumous accounts depict young John as being "sympathetic in his nature, and liberal" and of a "strong native intellect." Stephens

²⁸ Drew Swanson, *A Golden Weed: Tobacco and Environment in the Piedmont South* (Yale Agrarian Studies Series), (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 173-175.

²⁹ Barton A. Myers, *Rebels Against the Confederacy: North Carolina's Unionists* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 49-50.

³⁰ *1840 U.S. Census*, Rockingham County, North Carolina, Roll: 369, Page: 138, Image: 282, Family History Library Film: 0018097

³¹ North Carolina Marriage Index, 1741-2004.

³² A.J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 6. No records of John's birth have been found, however it is generally assumed that this information is accurate based on anecdotal evidence and the NC Marriage Index indicating his parents were married in Guilford County.

³³ *1840 U.S. Census*, Rockingham County, North Carolina, Roll: 369, Page: 138, Image: 282, Family History Library Film: 0018097; *1850 U.S. Census*, Western District, Rockingham County, North Carolina.

received very limited, if at all, any, formal schooling, having “only education sufficient to transact the ordinary business of life of a man in his sphere,” and “not prepossessing in manners or appearance; illiterate and unpolished, but very earnest; belonging to the plain classes of the South.”³⁴ Absalom died prematurely in 1852 at the age of forty-three.³⁵ Absalom’s Masonic brothers purchased a home and property for the widow and her family in nearby Leaksville, leaving an eighteen-year-old John as the family patriarch.³⁶

Stephens was making his living as a harness maker and farrier in his early twenties in Wentworth. At some point, he either left or continued the trade while working for a year as a salesman for the American Bible and Tract Society in Rockingham and Caswell. He was also noted as being a member of the Methodist Church.³⁷ Stephens married his first wife Nancy “Nannie” Edwards Waters of Rockingham County at age twenty-three. Stephens wed the orphaned sixteen-year-old in Wentworth on July 16, 1857.³⁸ Nancy bore one daughter, Lenora “Nannie” in 1858 before dying in 1859 at the age of nineteen.³⁹ John later married twenty-six year old Martha Frances Groom a year later on August 25, 1860 in Rockingham County,⁴⁰ likely in Wentworth.

Establishing timeframes for Stephens is difficult as little to no primary and secondary source documentation exists for the years of 1860 through 1865 that list exact dates, however, reasonable conjecture can be made. A.J. Stedman’s account placed Stephens as a tobacco trader

³⁴ "Captain Ball on the Stephens Murder," *Daily Record* (Greensboro, North Carolina), February 2 & 3, 1911.

³⁵ Headstone of Absalom Stephens, Lawson Cemetery, Eden, Rockingham County, North Carolina.

³⁶ A.J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 6.

³⁷ A.J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 8.

³⁸ North Carolina Marriage Index, 1741-2004.

³⁹ A.J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 8; See also: “Caswell County Historical Association (CCHA),” Caswell County Family Tree, last modified September 12, 2015, Accessed 10 November 2015, <http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=caswellcounty&id=I11208>.

⁴⁰ North Carolina Marriage Index, 1741-2004.

in the “more Southern States,” and in Yorkville (now York), South Carolina at the onset of the Civil War.⁴¹ One account placed him in Greensboro commandeering horses for the Confederacy near the end of the war,⁴² and Stedman stated that Stephens worked as a recruiter for the Confederate Army.⁴³ Confederate muster rolls do confirm a John W. Stephens served in the North Carolina Infantry,⁴⁴ when and in what capacity is unknown but it is a general consensus in all versions of the narrative that Stephens did not see actual battle during his service. Sometime prior to the end of the War in 1865 Stephens returned to Wentworth and resumed tobacco trading for a year.⁴⁵

Stephens was involved in a seemingly innocuous incident with a neighbor, Thomas A. Ratliff in early 1865. What is known, according to an excerpt of the subsequent indictment for larceny reprinted in A.J. Stedman’s work, was by Stephens’s account, a misunderstanding. Stephens admitted to killing two chickens after finding them on his property, which was adjacent to Ratliff’s. Stephens apologized and attempted to alieve the situation and offered to return the chickens.⁴⁶ Ratliff filed charges and had Stephens arrested and charged with larceny. Stephens bonded out on a five hundred dollar bail. This incident escalated in intensity and violence for over a year. Stephens and Ratliff again had an altercation in downtown Wentworth in or outside a storefront around May of 1866, with Stedman naming Stephens as the instigator. The incident quickly escalated from a physical assault into gunfire, with Stedman’s account stating that

⁴¹ A.J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 8.

⁴² “Senator John Walter Stephens,” Rootsweb, Accessed 10 February 2015.
<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ncccha/biographies/senatorjohnstephens.html>.

⁴³ A.J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 8, 9.

⁴⁴ Armed Services Muster Roll, Confederate States of America, Private John W. Stephens, Company L, 4 North Carolina Infantry; Corporal John W. Stephens. Company G [possibly C], 18 North Carolina Infantry (Formerly 8 North Carolina Infantry, Vols.); Corporal John W. Stevens, Company G [possibly C], 18 North Carolina Infantry; Private John W. Stephens. Company F, 27 North Carolina Infantry.

⁴⁵ A.J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 8.

⁴⁶ *STATE vs. John W. Stephens*, August Term, 1866. Partially reprinted in A.J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 10.

Stephens took aim at Ratliff and missed, and instead wounded two (possibly intervening) bystanders, a former Confederate Officer from Virginia and a Wentworth resident.⁴⁷ Another account has the bystanders injured due to an accidental discharge of Stephens's revolver.⁴⁸ Stephens spent two days in solitary confinement over the incident, posting on a two thousand dollar bail. Following the assault, and with the events of February 1865 taken into account into the overall larceny hearing, Stephens submitted himself to judgement, pled no contest, and was fined twenty five dollars and fourteen dollars in court costs.⁴⁹ Shortly after these legal issues, Stephens sold the home in Wentworth and relocated to the Caswell County township of Yanceyville with his wife, daughter, mother and two of his siblings and continued his work as a tobacco trader.⁵⁰

The Caswell County that Stephens arrived to in 1866 was devastated on all socioeconomic levels in the aftermath of the Civil War and several years of poor harvests. A diary excerpt from Caswell resident John F. Flintoff on August 17, 1865 read: "The people have had scarcely bread to supply them till harvest fall...we have had 3 bad crops-years 1862-3-4...I am feeble as to health and only weigh 136 lost 12 lbs. in 4 months..." Flintoff noted that he fared better than his neighbors with the civil upheaval as "my negroes all stay with me while the most of others are running about from home to home believing they are free - many of them are killed and dying for

⁴⁷ A.J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 9.

⁴⁸ "Senator John Walter Stephens," Rootsweb.

⁴⁹ A.J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 9, 10.

⁵⁰ A.J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 12, 14. There is a pervasive belief in the narrative that Stephens abandoned his "old and afflicted mother" in Rockingham, having left town and giving his mother no knowledge of his whereabouts. The established narrative seems a bit embellished as his mother was only forty-nine years old at this time. It is also very unlikely that Stephens could have slipped away seemingly undetected due to the large number of siblings he maintained contact with as well as his burgeoning public recognition.

want of money and protection.” Flintoff’s diary entry in January 1868, however, indicated the dramatic change in those three years, “all my negroes have left me-I hired 3 hands this year...”⁵¹

Also in 1866, Superior Court Judge Albion Tourgee organized the first Union League in Alamance County (adjacent to Caswell) and the surrounding counties. Founded four years prior in Philadelphia, the League’s mission was to support Union patriotism among whites and blacks, “raise money for soldiers’ and veterans’ reliefs” as well as “publicize Southern outrages.”⁵²

While no documentation exists that details when Stephens joined the League or what his function was, Stephens became affiliated with them very early on, likely in late 1866 or early 1867.⁵³ It was in the employ of the Union League that Stephens met Tourgee and they began their friendship and political alliance. Unfortunately, affiliation with the League was seen as tantamount to treason in the eyes of locals and did not help to secure a positive reputation for Stephens. It was his participation in the League that locals later recalled as rationale for his execution. It was Stephens’s “rebellious conduct” in the form of membership in the Union League that sparked the ire and contempt of the congregation, leading to his ejection from the Methodist Church in Yanceyville, as quoted by church member Dr. Allen Gunn for failing “to forsake the error of his way.”⁵⁴ As with the Union League, no documentation exists that confirm or deny Stephen’s involvement with the Freedmen’s Bureau during this time, but it is generally accepted that he worked in some capacity as an agent.⁵⁵

Having had the support of Republican political allies such as Wilson Carey, famous for his “archives of gravity” speech and Tourgee, Stephens ran as a candidate for the senate seat of

⁵¹ William S. Powell, *When The Past Refused To Die*, 229.

⁵² “The Union League,” The Albion W. Tourgee Papers Online Exhibit. Accessed 1 March 1 2015. <http://tourgee.wnylrc.org/>.

⁵³ A.J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 13.

⁵⁴ A.J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 13.

⁵⁵ Horace Raper, *William W. Holden: North Carolina’s Political Enigma*, 165.

the Twenty-Fourth District against Bedford Brown in 1868. Brown won the election but the result was contested and later invalidated by the Republican Party as Brown was deemed ineligible to hold office under the Reconstruction Articles.⁵⁶ After a subsequent special election, Stephens won out over opponent Thomas J. Brown and took the oath of office on November 17, 1868, his majority carried largely by the African-American voters. It was also in 1868 that Stephens was selected by Tourgee to take the office of Justice of the Peace for Caswell County. Stephens was tutored in the law and administered the bar exam by Tourgee. The appointment was fiercely contested by locals then and again in 1869, however Stephens's appointment as a magistrate was upheld.⁵⁷

In June of 1869 the body of John's mother was discovered in her second floor bedroom in the Stephens home in Yanceyville. According to the family, Stephens's mother suffered from spasms and it was surmised that during one of these attacks she fell onto a chamber pot, breaking it in the fall and sustained a deep laceration to the throat and broke her neck. It is not known who discovered the body, but documented as being at the residence were Stephens's wife Martha, his sister, two children, a boarder and a black couple--Stephens was not home at the time.⁵⁸ The coroner, Dr. A.G. Yancey and a subsequent jury of inquest comprised of twelve individuals found no individual complicit in her death.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ *Constitution of the United States of America*, Amendment XIV, Article 3: "No person shall be a Senator or Representative in Congress, or elector of President and Vice President, or hold any office, civil or military, under the United States, or under any state, who, having previously taken an oath, as a member of Congress, or as an officer of the United States, or as a member of any state legislature, or as an executive or judicial officer of any state, to support the Constitution of the United States, shall have engaged in insurrection or rebellion against the same, or given aid or comfort to the enemies thereof. But Congress may by a vote of two-thirds of each House, remove such disability." See Also: Horace Raper, *William W. Holden: North Carolina's Political Enigma*, 165; A.J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 14.

⁵⁷ A.J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 15.

⁵⁸ A.J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 15.

⁵⁹ *Copy of the Record of the Coroner's Court of Inquest in the Matter of the Death of Mrs. Catherine [Letitia] Stephens, Caswell County, North Carolina*, reprinted in A.J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 16-17.

By late 1869, Klan violence had increased exponentially in the Piedmont and in other parts of the state. Threats on Stephens were common and Stedman wrote that the senator was going so far as to lock himself in a steel cage at night for protection. At one point Tourgee went as far as to arm himself and hide in the bushes with John to protect the Stephens home from Klan attack.⁶⁰ By early 1870 Stephens was armed with three personal revolvers and had taken out a \$10,000 life insurance policy on himself. By early April Stephens had Albion Tourgee author his last will and testament with Stephens's wife Martha and his two daughters, Nannie and Ella as the beneficiaries.⁶¹

On the morning of May 21, John W. Stephens made his way to the Caswell County Courthouse to discuss with former sheriff Frank Wiley, a Democrat, a run for the office under the Republican ticket. Later in the afternoon, Wiley asked the senator to discuss the issue with him downstairs in the mezzanine, luring him into the prearranged trap. Stephens was surrounded by a dozen Klan members, forcefully led into a vacated storeroom and disarmed. A noose was then placed around his neck and he was advised of his death sentence by the decree of the Klan. He was to have been held and lynched on the courthouse lawn that evening, but in the chaos of the moment, he was murdered on the spot.⁶²

Tourgee immediately implicated the Klan in his letter to Senator Abbott written a few days after the senator's murder and chastised the Republican Party for its lack of inaction on the hundreds of acts of racial violence that have occurred in the surrounding counties. It was in response to the assassination and Tourgee's communications with Senators Joseph Abbott and

⁶⁰ Richard N. Current, *Those Terrible Carpetbaggers: A Reinterpretation*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 204.

⁶¹ North Carolina Probate Records, Caswell County Wills, 1868-1889, *Familysearch.org*, Accessed 15 October 2015, <https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.3.1/TH-1-19423-100345-91?cc=1867501>.

⁶² J.G. Hamilton, *Reconstruction in North Carolina*, 474.

John Pool that led to the enactment of the Enforcement Acts.⁶³ Eerily prophetic in his correspondence with Senator Abbott, he warned that these events would ultimately bring about the end of the Republican Party and Reconstruction in the State. His words in that letter make for a most fitting eulogy for his fallen friend:

It is my mournful duty to inform you that our friend John W. Stephens, State Senator from Caswell, is dead... Another brave, honest Republican citizen has met his fate at the hands of these fiends... Warned of his danger, and fully cognizant of the terrible risk which surrounded him, he still manfully refused to quit the field. Against the advice of his friends, against the entreaties of his family, he constantly refused to leave those who had stood by him in the day of his disgrace and peril. He was accustomed to say that 3,000 poor, ignorant, colored Republican voters in that county had stood by him and elected him, at the risk of persecution and starvation, and that he had no idea of abandoning them to the Ku-Klux. He was determined to stay with them, and either put an end to these outrages, or die with the other victims of Rebel hate and national apathy.⁶⁴

Of the thirty-five witness statements taken during the Coroner's Record of Inquest, at least five of those individuals listed gave false statements.⁶⁵ Many of the conspirators later faced trial; none of the conspirators implicated each other and ultimately none were prosecuted due to limitations of the Enforcement Acts. In 1873 after the return of the Conservative ruling party, amnesties precluded future prosecution for the murder of Stephens.⁶⁶ Official acknowledgement of the identities of the ringleaders remained a closely held secret for decades.

Like many other Southern Unionists, Republicans dealt with an enormous amount of scrutiny and debasement statewide, both in the public forum, the media and in their own

⁶³ Richard N. Current, *Those Terrible Carpetbaggers: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 205

⁶⁴ Albion W. Tourgee, Judge Tourgee to Senator Abbott, May 24, 1870, *Civil War Era NC*. Accessed March 3, 2015. www.history.ncsu.edu/projects/cwnc/items/show/34.

⁶⁵ Record of the Coroner's Court of Inquest. May 26, 1870. Reprinted in A.J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 20-27.

⁶⁶ Benson J. Lossing and Woodrow Wilson. *Harpers Encyclopedia of United States History from 458 A.D. to 1905*, Volume 9, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1905), 483. On August 7, 1873 the "Amnesty Act" was passed the NC legislature. This act pardoned members in the supremacy organizations known as the Heroes of America, Loyal Union League, Red Strings, Constitutional Union Guards, Whitebrother, Invisible Empire and the Ku Klux Klan.

communities. This divisiveness was extremely polarizing, exacerbated by the dehumanizing nature of these public attacks. Public intimidation, character assassination and rumor as truth, conceived and perpetuated in the partisan periodicals were popular political tactics in Reconstruction North Carolina. There is no doubt that Stephens, simply for his party affiliation, was the personification of all that was seen as “wrong” in the eyes of the Conservatives. Richard Current’s position was that Tourgee’s political presence in many ways had, for a time, offered a measure of protection to Stephens alongside the public condemnation that he, along with other whites and blacks in the community suffered due to their political affiliation.⁶⁷ The social stigmatization that Stephens suffered as a Republican in Caswell was apparent, and in a letter to Governor Holden in June 1868 he wrote:

I wish to call your particular attention to the condition I have placed myself in by coming out & standing up for the Republican party in this Co. & ask your support & protection in the matter. Before I taken this stand (whitch I did becaus I thought it was rite & have never Regretted and hope I never Shall.) I had many friends & credit for any thing I wanted but now I have neither[.] [T]he trouth is that I have not means to buy what I actualy kneed for the support of my family. My creditors have pushed on me and taken every thing that the law would allow & I can look to know source but the Republican party[.] [I]f thaire is any thing that you can do for me in this hour of kneed pleas let me know what it is.⁶⁸

The fallacies surrounding Stephens in life and death are numerable. John G. Lea’s confession only presents more questions. There is an enormous amount of conjecture and reasonable doubt to be had in Lea’s statement. Allen Trelease asserted that Stephens “consistently advised blacks against physical retaliation following white terrorist attacks” and that in areas like Caswell, some black Republicans “took the law into their own hands.”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Richard N. Current, *Those Terrible Carpetbaggers*, 204.

⁶⁸ Horace W. Raper, ed., *The Papers of Williams Woods Holden*, Volume 1, 1841-1868, (Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 2000), 314-315.

⁶⁹ Allen W. Trelease, “John Walter Stephens,” *NCpedia*, 1994, Accessed 27 October 2015, <http://ncpedia.org/biography/stephens-john-walter>.

Stephens would have been very aware that any attacks against the Klan were just going to incite even more reactionary violence. There are also no records, arrests or other testimonies that implicate Stephens in the arson attacks. The only “proof” is the testimony of Ed Slade. What Lea obviously does not speak of in his letter are the known patterns of violence used by the Klan. It cannot be helped but to question as to exactly how Lea exacted a confession from Slade. It can be reasonably assured that the confession implicating Stephens was given under extreme duress, possibly even torture; which leads to extreme doubt as to the validity of what was most likely a forced confession.

Much has been made in the historical record of Stephens’s acts as a politician, however, as a state senator, Stephens’s record appeared unexceptional during his two years in office and this was also noted by A.J. Stedman in 1870, saying that “nothing of interest marked his political career,” and that “he might have been called a silent member of the body.”⁷⁰ Allen Trelease also illustrated Stephens’s moderate political stance, contradicting previous historical points of view of Stephens as a political firebrand.⁷¹ Trelease asserted that it was Stephens’s willingness to work with and support the black community through his work with the Union League and as senator made that made him an anathema to the Conservatives of the county, who saw him as a personification of all that was wrong in Caswell. Trelease also noted it was this anomalous nature (as a white man supporting the rights of blacks) that led to his targeting and eventual assassination by the Ku Klux Klan.⁷² Horace Raper also recognized what generally lacked in early works, a recognition of the attitudes and resentment of the local populace due to the federally mandated removal of long-serving Senator Bedford Brown, a moderate Democrat who

⁷⁰ A.J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 15.

⁷¹ Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 212.

⁷² Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror*, 212.

had held bi-partisan respect. Brown's ouster played into the growing, negative reputation of the Republican Party, and by extension, Stephens.⁷³

The *Sentinel* was a pulpit of propaganda and political warfare for the Conservative Party during Reconstruction and is the primary source responsible for the creation of John W. Stephens's negative image and his ubiquitous nickname. The editor, Josiah Turner, conducted vicious campaigns of insurrectionist threat and calls for mob violence against the Republican Party, the Union League and Freedmen's Bureau. Turner, a true political firebrand, was an ardent opponent of Holden and the Republican regime. Famous for his erratic behavior, Turner held nothing back when it came to his opinions of the carpetbaggers and scalawags, and was especially critical of Stephens, even after his death. Mean-spirited colloquial nicknames were given to nearly every member of the party under Holden in libelous attempts to deface and discredit reputations-- nicknames such as "Windy Billy" [William] Henderson and "Greasy" Sam Watts. Hence the branding and reinforcement of the sobriquet, "Chicken" Stephens.⁷⁴

In the days shortly after Stephens's assassination, a "Letter from Yanceyville, Incidents Connected with the Death of John W. Stephens," appeared first in the *Raleigh Sentinel* and was addressed to the Honorable Josiah Turner. Written by an anonymous citizen of Caswell County, the letter was published in several newspapers throughout the state. The writer spoke of the investigation thus far and mentioned the rumors that a "secret organization" had Stephens killed and denied any culpability by these groups. The characterization of Stephens is brutal; his general character described as "odious". The anonymous writer was very adamant that the Klan had nothing to do with this act. The writer also mentioned that Stephens was the alleged

⁷³ Horace W. Raper, *William W. Holden: North Carolina's Political Enigma*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 165.

⁷⁴ J.G. Hamilton, *Reconstruction in North Carolina*, 388-389.

perpetrator in a number of barn burnings, that he had lost the support of the black community and that it may have even been the African-American community or his own party who had him murdered.⁷⁵

The writings in the *North Carolina Standard*, the newspaper championed by Governor Holden were also ignored in the early scholarly works. The *Standard* took a much more defensive stand for Stephens, and addressed the “Chicken” moniker and Stephens’s “odious” image. The paper outright decried the *Sentinel’s* reporting and countered that Stephens was considered odious only to the white, Conservative minority of Caswell because he was a Republican. Multiple articles and op-eds in the *Standard* discussed how the inflammatory politics and dissension in Caswell, Alamance and Orange Counties, and ultimately the murder of John Stephens were the result of the *Sentinel’s* editor-in-chief fanning the flames of insurrection.⁷⁶

Public sympathy was had for Stephens, if not at home at least, then abroad. The public spectacle of the KKK assassinations were not limited to North Carolina. In stark contrast to his local reputation Stephens was seen as a stoic and martyr in the North. A *New York Times* article titled “The Murder of Senator John W. Stephens; A Terrible Scene; Shall His Assassins Be Amnestied?” appeared nearly three years after the murder, shortly after the North Carolina State Senate passed an amnesty bill in 1873 that released a number of KKK members from jail. The

⁷⁵ “Letter from Yanceyville, Incidents Connected with the Death of John W. Stephens,” *Daily Journal* (Wilmington, NC), 29 May 1870.

⁷⁶ “The Murder of Senator Stephens Confirmed,” *The Weekly Standard* (Raleigh, NC), 1 June 1870; “A Proclamation, By His Excellency, the Governor of North Carolina” *The Daily Standard* (Raleigh, NC), 23 June 1870; *The Weekly Standard*, 27 July 1870.

letter was a public appeal to not allow the heinous crimes of a corrupt government subvert Reconstruction and the rule of law.⁷⁷

For many years, J.G. Hamilton's *Reconstruction in North Carolina* was considered the *de facto* source for many authors. A 1914 scholarly review of *Reconstruction in North Carolina* by the College of William and Mary noted that "Mr. Hamilton has shown great industry in sifting the facts and has divested himself of all prejudices in the matter. His work is a luminous one and there will be no occasion for anyone to attempt a second study".⁷⁸ These words reflect true irony as it is Hamilton's that has faced the most academic scrutiny over the last half century. Hamilton, a student of Yale's William Archibald Dunning, cast Reconstruction in a very different light than modern thought. To date, the persona that Hamilton presented, echoing the voice of Turner, is the most prominent and persistent depiction of John W. Stephens. In *Reconstruction*, Hamilton clearly implied that the Republicans, specifically black Republicans, were responsible for Stephens's death; that Klan activity and violence was almost nonexistent, blown out of proportion, and as a whole, had very little impact on North Carolina.⁷⁹ Much of what Hamilton had to say about Stephens relied heavily on the "Letter from Yanceyville" and the *Sentinel's* reporting.

William S. Powell devoted a number of pages to Caswell's place in the Kirk-Holden War. Powell used a number of quotes from various individuals when he discussed Stephens, however, they were not always named; his sources not so easily verified since Powell did not use footnotes, nor did he keep a citation list in this six hundred page tome. While Powell did not follow Hamilton's position of endorsement of the Ku Klux Klan, Powell used the established

⁷⁷ "Life in North Carolina: The Murder of Senator John W. Stephens; A Terrible Scene; Shall His Assassins Be Amnestied?" *New York Times*, 26 February 1873. Accessed 17 February 2015. www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-civilwar/4815.

⁷⁸ "Review: Reconstruction in North Carolina," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (Oct 1914), 150.

⁷⁹ J.G. Hamilton, *Reconstruction in North Carolina*, 473-474, 488.

Dunning perspective in his depiction of Stephens, citing directly (though unattributed) from Hamilton.⁸⁰ Powell was fairly critical of Stephens and portrayed him as a locally reviled individual and spy for Holden, and as a perpetrator of “incendiary politics,”⁸¹ a term that Hamilton also used in his work, even listed in a *Reconstruction* index entry when referencing Stephens.⁸² Later works by Powell did reference Stephens in brief and portrayed him much more objectively and as a moderate politician, acknowledging his difficult status as a Republican who bore the ire of local townsfolk for his association with African-Americans.⁸³ Though Powell did attempt to alter the narrative, albeit minimally in the decades since its 1977 publication, the stigma from *When the Past Refused to Die* has remained.

In the present-day the Caswell County Courthouse mezzanine mainly functions as offices for a small handful of county support staff. The Human Resources Manager’s office, purportedly the same office that once housed the local Freedmen’s Bureau nearly one hundred and fifty years prior, is indiscernible from the other small offices, other than an unassuming plaque that adorns the wall outside. The plaque highlights the room’s historical significance; it was the site of what

⁸⁰ At the time of publication (1977), Powell indicated his manuscript notes, along with a rough and final draft were left in the care of the Yanceyville Public Library (p. 541). It was told to this author by several local sources of great tenure in the Yanceyville Library that Powell’s notes have not been accessed since he left them in the county’s care nearly forty years ago. In the time since, however, the manuscripts have disappeared and the manuscript notes and files were disassembled, merged and filed with the historical and genealogical records of the Caswell County Historical Association (CCHA), a volunteer organization that manages the Richmond-Miles Museum in downtown Yanceyville. The entire archive contains approximately 40 cubic feet of documents of various degree, the bulk of which is data collected by two prominent local historians and founding members of the CCHA in the 1950s-70s. It is known through correspondence between them that they assisted in data collection for Powell. The only file regarding any mention of Stephens, the Klan or anything of related significance was a small manila folder labeled “Kirk-Holden War”. Based on reasonable conjecture of the stapled annotation being written in scholarly format this is the source material for *When the Past Refused to Die* and Powell’s file. The file presented no primary sources and only one secondary source, copies of selected pages of Hamilton’s *Reconstruction in North Carolina*, Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen. The typed notation stapled to the folder stated “No author given, but this is a standard work.” It is curious that Powell would not attribute this to Hamilton, whose work Powell would have been very familiar with. It is also of great note that a comparison of the selected pages of *Reconstruction* and *When the Past Refused to Die* bear striking similarity and verbiage.

⁸¹ William S. Powell, *When the Past Refused to Die*, 237.

⁸² J.G. Hamilton, *Reconstruction in North Carolina*, 681.

⁸³ William S. Powell *North Carolina Through Four Centuries*, Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 398-399.

is referenced on the state historical marker outside, tucked into a corner of the front courthouse lawn that reads, *Caswell Courthouse, Erected about 1861. Murder of Sen. J. W. Stephens here in 1870 led to martial law and Kirk-Holden 'War'*.⁸⁴ The plaque features a condensed biography of John Walter Stephens and answers for visitors the question of “Who was J.W. Stephens?” The biography and photograph of Stephens, adapted from Powell’s *When the Past Refused to Die: A History of Caswell County, 1777-1977* explains, “For his many dastardly deeds Stephens was tried in absentia by the Ku Klux Klan.”⁸⁵

Though there has been an incorporation of the general acceptance of the goals of Reconstruction into the present-day social paradigm, the vilification and the *justification* of the assassination of John Walter Stephens has remained unchanged since 1870. Local Piedmont schoolchildren are taught that “Stephens came here to do a good thing, but that he was not a good man.”⁸⁶ The story is still told with the implication that Stephens was single-handedly responsible for the failure of Reconstruction in Caswell. Moreover, that it was the acts of Stephens personally that forced the victimized locals to organize and join the Klan because of the failure of the rule of law.

It can be said based on the long-held perception of John Walter Stephens in present-day Caswell and Rockingham, the tactics of Josiah Turner worked. The nefarious and toxic persona of Stephens, created by Turner, validated by J.G. Hamilton and perpetuated by others like William S. Powell have carried on into the modern era as historical fact. Unfortunately legend, rumor, sensationalism and historical bias have long dominated the narrative of John Walter

⁸⁴ North Carolina Historical Marker G-6, *North Carolina Highway Historical Marker Program*, 2015, Caswell County Courthouse, Caswell County, North Carolina, accessed October 1, 2015, <http://www.ncmarkers.com/Markers.aspx?MarkerId=G-6>.

⁸⁵ William S. Powell, *When the Past Refused to Die*, 237-239.

⁸⁶ Paula Seamster, interviewed by author, Caswell County Courthouse, Yanceyville, NC, September 4, 2015.

Stephens. In John Walter Stephens's case the past does, and does not, have to define him.

Stephens's political career was short and unremarkable and the tremendous amount of agency attributed to him during his short tenure has largely been misplaced and unfounded. A narrative was built using inference and implication to create a dehumanized symbol of resentment and effigy in the sociopolitical forum during a period of severe instability. The myth of "Chicken" Stephens, the murderous villain and scalawag who deserved death, is a contrived and aggrandized one. Attitudes, political punditry as well as social and historical prejudice clearly altered the public perception, memory and interpretation of John W. Stephens. Stephens's nefarious persona was one of conjecture and hearsay. The most sensational acts attributed to this man, such as killing his mother, or ordering the burning of barns and tobacco crops were factually unsubstantiated or taken from confessions that were highly circumspect.

One hundred and fifty years after Emancipation, there is a moral responsibility to reassess responsibility and the absolution given to the parties involved in the murder of John Walter Stephens. The presentation of this new material documents a historical bias that has long been present and highly intertwined in the formation of the collective memory of Stephens. This reexamination allows for new conversations on the late senator, and the possibility to see John Walter Stephens vindicated and seen as being on the right side of history. The people of the Piedmont can instead celebrate a local son and father who came from very humble beginnings who worked his way upward to being a state senator; a man who fought for his country and social justice during a time when all men were not created equal. Perhaps, in time, the biography in the Caswell County Courthouse will reflect a different, and more favorable opinion of John Walter Stephens.

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This muster roll indicated that cards were filed under “Stevens, John W.”

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Armed Services Muster Roll. Confederate States of America. Private John W. Stephens. Company F, 27 North Carolina Infantry. Accessed 1 March 2015. <http://www.fold3.com/image/#45322305>.

The duty muster rolls from fold3.com, a military records database, confirm that a John W. Stephens served in the CSA. The handwriting on the rolls are from two separate individuals, however, they overlap with company and infantry division allowing for reasonable conclusion that all these rolls pertain to only one individual.

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The last will and testament of John W. Stephens recorded in the Caswell County Courthouse ledger in April 1870.

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There is no documentation of a death record or burial plot for Nancy E. Stephens, however, multiple narratives establishing dates before and after her death substantiate her year of death being accurate.

Sixth Census of the United States. Year: 1840; Census Place: *Rockingham, North Carolina*; Roll 369; Page: 138; Image: 282; Family Library Film: 0018097. Original data: Sixth Census of the United States, 1840. (NARA microfilm publication M704, 580 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives and Records, Washington, D.C. Accessed 27 February 2015. <http://www.ancestry.com>

Seventh Census of the United States. Year: 1850; Census Place: *Western District, Rockingham, North Carolina*; Roll: M432_643; Page: 68B; Image 143. Original data: Seventh Census of the United States, 1850; (National Archives Microfilm Publication M432, 1009 rolls); Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29; National Archives and Records, Washington, D.C. Accessed 27 February 2015. <http://www.ancestry.com>

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Census records have helped to confirm identity as well as verifying age, residency, occupation, family members and timeframes.

Constitution of the United States of America. Amendment XIV. Article 3.

This article was used to nullify the election of Senator Bedford Brown in 1868, which resulted in a subsequent election which Stephens won.

General Assembly of North Carolina, Session 2011, Senate Joint Resolution 256, *A Joint Resolution To Pardon William W. Holden From The Judgment Imposed Upon Him By The Senate On March 22, 1871, On Conviction Of 2 Articles Of Impeachment*.

This resolution officially pardoned former North Carolina Governor William Woods Holden. Holden was the first governor in United States history to be impeached, convicted and removed from office. This pardon, issued one hundred and forty years after his impeachment was an acknowledgment and proclamation that essentially put Holden on the right side of history.

Goins, Martha. "Leasburg Will Celebrate Fourth of July Quietly" *Danville Register*, 3 July 1977. Accessed 17 February 2015. <http://www.newspapers.com>.

This reflection piece touches on the historical significance of Caswell County, infamous for two "Chickens" in history, "Chicken" George of *Roots* fame, and "Chicken" Stephens. Both of these legacies do not cast a positive light on the county's legacy. Even with that acknowledgment in the author's piece, however, Goins displayed a narrative that indicated the pervasive sentiment of Stephens and more importantly, illustrated very clearly the political viewpoints of the region and the pattern of absolving the conspirators by comparison.

Lea, John G. "John G. Lea's Confession to the Ku Klux Klan Murder of John W. Stephens, 2 July 1919. *Civil War Era NC*. Accessed 10 February 2015. <http://history.ncsu.edu/projects/cwnc/items/show/22>.

The leader of the Caswell Branch of the Ku Klux Klan, John G. Lea was the last surviving member of the conspirators involved in Stephens's death. Were it not at the behest of the North Carolina Historical Commission, Lea would have taken the secret to his death. In 1919 Lea transcribed the events that took place in the Caswell County Courthouse on May 21, 1870 as well as recollections of his arrest and trial. Lea discussed why the execution of Stephens was

called for and who the participants in the murder were. This confession was kept sealed until after Lea's death in 1935, sixty-five years after Stephens was murdered.

"Letter from Yanceyville, Incidents Connected with the Death of John W. Stephens" *Daily Journal* (Wilmington, NC), 29 May 1870. Accessed 2 March 2015. <http://www.newspapers.com>.

Addressed to the Honorable Josiah Turner and written by an anonymous citizen of Caswell County, this article was written shortly after JWS death. Published in several newspapers throughout the state, (the article first appeared in the Raleigh Sentinel on May 24, 1870) the writer speaks of the investigation thus far and mentions the rumors that a "secret organization" had him killed and denies it. The writer goes on to say that Stephens was "odious" and was the alleged perpetrator in a number of barn burnings, had lost the support of the African-American community and that it may have even been blacks or his own party who had him murdered. The anonymous writer is also very adamant that the KKK had nothing to do with this act.

"Life in North Carolina: The Murder of Senator John W. Stephens; A Terrible Scene; Shall His Assassins Be Amnestied?" *New York Times*, 26 February 1873. Accessed 17 February 2015. <http://learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-civilwar/4815>.

This article appeared shortly after the North Carolina State Senate passed an amnesty bill in 1873 releasing a number of KKK members from jail. The article was a plea to readers to keep in mind the brutal nature of John W. Stephens's murder by the Klan. The article embellishes certain aspects, but it is a public appeal to not allow the heinous crimes of a Conservative-led, corrupt government subvert Reconstruction and the rule of law.

"The Murder of Senator Stephens Confirmed" *The Weekly Standard* (Raleigh, NC), 1 June 1870. Accessed 2 March 2015. <http://www.newspapers.com>.

This article, written by the editor of The Standard takes a more defensive stand for JWS, addressing the "chicken" moniker and his "odious" image as well as confirming, publicly JWS death and the details known at the time. The paper outright decried the Sentinel's reporting and countered that Stephens was considered odious only to the white, Democrat minority of Caswell because he was a white Republican. The article went on to say how the inflammatory politics and dissension in Caswell, Alamance and Orange Counties, and ultimately the murder of JWS were the result of the Sentinel's editor-in-chief, Josiah Turner seeking to fan flames of insurrection by means of mud-slinging. This is also one of the first periodicals to label Stephens's death as an assassination, not a murder.

North Carolina, Marriage Index, 1741-2004 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2007. Original data: North Carolina County Marriage Indexes. North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, North Carolina. Accessed 28 February 2015. <http://www.ancestry.com>.

Marriage of Absalom Stephens and Letitia Johnson. 18 December 1833. Place: Guilford County, North Carolina.

Marriage of John Walter Stephens and Nancy Edwards. 16 July 1857. Place: Wentworth, Rockingham County, North Carolina.

Marriage of John Walter Stephens and Martha Frances Groom. 25 August 1860. Place: Rockingham County, North Carolina.

Record of the Coroner's Court of Inquest in the Matter of the Death of Mrs. Catherine [Letitia] Stephens. Reprinted in A.J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery! History of the Life and Death of John W. Stephens, State Senator of North Carolina, from Caswell County*. Greensboro, N.C.: "Patriot" Print, 1870. 16-17.

A copy of the coroner's report in regard to the death of the mother of John Walter Stephens. It should be noted that the name "Catherine" has never appeared in the historical record, and this inconsistency was also noted by A.J. Stedman.

Record of the Coroner's Court of Inquest. May 26, 1870. Reprinted in Andrew Jackson Stedman, *Murder and Mystery!: History of the Life and Death of John W. Stephens, State Senator of North Carolina, from Caswell County*. Greensboro, NC: "Patriot" Print, 1870. 20-27.

Murder and Mystery contains a copy of the coroner's report on John Walter Stephens as well as witness statements of the thirty-five individuals that were present at the Caswell County Courthouse on May 21, 1870. Among the statements collected, a number of these statements were later shown to be falsified as they were participants in the murder of Stephens.

Seamster, Paula. Interviewed by the author, Caswell County Courthouse, Yanceyville, NC, 4 September, 2015.

Seamster, a lifelong resident, is the Clerk to the Board for Caswell County, North Carolina. Her office is located in the courthouse and she acts in an informal capacity as a tour guide for schoolchildren and other visitors to the Caswell County Courthouse.

STATE vs. John W. Stephens, August Term, 1866. Partially reprinted in A.J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery!: History of the Life and Death of John W. Stephens, State Senator of North Carolina, from Caswell County*, (Greensboro, NC: "Patriot" Print, 1870) 10.

Documents the larceny case against JWS that was brought by Thomas Ratliff. The 1865 dispute that escalated into violence began with two chickens that had wandered onto Stephens's property in Wentworth. This incident was the source of his nickname, "Chicken", that Josiah Turner used to smear Stephens in the public forum.

Stedman, A.J. *Murder and Mystery!: History of the Life and Death of John W. Stephens, State Senator of North Carolina, from Caswell County*. Greensboro, N.C.: "Patriot" Print, 1870.

Constructing a biography of Stephens without A.J. Stedman's 1870 work would be impossible. This unique publication has been a primary source for a majority of academics for over a century. *Murder and Mystery* contained numerous sources which included the coroner's report on Stephens's mother's death, the coroner's report on Stephens himself, as well as witness statements of all parties at the Caswell County Courthouse on May 21, 1870.

Stephens, John Walter. John W. Stephens to Governor W.W. Holden, 20 June 1868, in the William Woods Holden Papers, North Carolina Dept. of Archives and History.

This correspondence is one of the few primary sources that allows the reader to hear Stephens in his own words. What is apparent in this letter is the limited education of Stephens. There is also great concern and worry in his tone. Stephens indicated to Holden that he is loyal, but his political stance and lack of party support in Caswell made him a social pariah and is destroying his reputation.

Tourgee, Albion W. Letter of Judge Tourgee to Senator Abbott, 24, May 1870, *Civil War Era NC*. Accessed March 3, 2015. <http://history.ncsu.edu/projects/cwnc/items/show/34>.

Tourgee, Albion W. *A Fool's Errand. By One of the Fools*. New York: Fords, Howard & Hulbert, 1879.

The Albion W. Tourgee Papers Online Exhibit. "The Union League." Accessed March 1, 2015. <http://tourgee.wnylrc.org/>.

Albion Tourgee's voice, largely ignored, demands to be heard in the narrative of Stephens. Tourgee occupied many roles in the life of Stephens as a mentor, colleague and friend. For several years, he fought tirelessly to bring the murderers of Stephens to justice, unfortunately to no avail once the Conservative Party assumed control of the legislature. As a judge, social advocate and later, author and social critic, he heavily influenced public and political opinion on the Republican and Conservative parties, bringing great attention the atrocities being enacted by the Klan.

Secondary Sources:

There are several citations that have fulfilled a dual role as both a secondary and primary source. Whenever applicable, reference to the Primary Source annotation will be made.

Barnett, Ned. "N.C. State Senate Pardons Governor Who Stood up to Klan," *Reuters*, April 12, 2011, accessed October 13, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/12/us-northcarolina-pardon-idUSTRE73B80V20110412>.

This article reflects on the growing social acceptance of political figures like Governor Holden, an individual during Reconstruction that was historically portrayed as corrupt and villainous. Revisionist scholarship has begun to reevaluate these individuals, shedding new light and new perspectives on the events of the nineteenth century.

Current, Richard Nelson. *Those Terrible Carpetbaggers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Current's research goes into minor, but important detail about Stephens's relationship with Albion Tourgee. Current also discussed in detail the sensationalism at the time of Stephens's murder and documented the attempts of the Conservatives to place the blame of murder on the disaffected African-American community. Stephens is depicted in Current's context as sympathetic; someone who shared many qualities and opinions with the yeoman farmer class and African-American community.

Foner, Eric. *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988.

Foner's seminal work is now considered the scholastic standard in understanding Reconstruction. Highly indicative of the Revisionist method, Foner is also an outspoken critic of the Dunning approach to history.

Folk, Edgar E. and Bynum Shaw. *W.W. Holden: A Political Biography*. Winston-Salem, NC: J.F. Blair, 1982.

Folk and Shaw's work examined the rise and fall of Holden's political career prior to and after the Kirk-Holden War. Stephens has a passing mention in this work, however, the work is filled with multiple inaccuracies regarding the Stephens murder seemingly having fallen prey to the more sensational aspects of his death.

Gaddy, David W. "Andrew Jackson Stedman." NCpedia. Accessed November 8, 2015. <http://ncpedia.org/biography/stedman-andrew-jackson>.

This detailed entry gives a great deal of biographical information on A.J. Stedman.

Hamilton, Joseph Grégoire de Roulhac. *Reconstruction In North Carolina*. New York: Columbia University, 1914.

Hamilton is responsible for cementing “Chicken” in the historical record. Hamilton was one of the first historians to write in depth on Reconstruction in North Carolina and Stephens is featured prominently during the early events of the Kirk-Holden War. Hamilton, a product of the Dunning School of History wrote with an extremely biased, if not racist perspective that has largely been deconstructed over the last half century. This work would also be used as source material for William S. Powell’s portrayal of John W. Stephens sixty years later.

Konczal, Mike. “How Radical Change Occurs: An Interview with Historian Eric Foner.” *The Nation*, February 3, 2015. Accessed February 27, 2015.
<http://www.thenation.com/article/how-radical-change-occurs-interview-historian-eric-foner/>.

This article discussed contemporary scholarship and the recognition of a sociological and ideological bias that has been pervasive in the field of history. One of the preeminent scholars in the field of U.S. Civil War and Reconstruction social history, Foner not only spoke critically of the Dunning School and how the “old” approach presented an incredibly biased perspective, but also how those interpretations have had enormous negative social implications.

Lossing, Benson J. and Woodrow Wilson. *Harpers Encyclopedia of United States History from 458 A.D. to 1905*. Volume 9. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1905.

On August 7, 1873 the “Amnesty Act” was passed the NC legislature. This act pardoned members in the supremacy organizations known as the Heroes of America, Loyal Union League, Red Strings, Constitutional Union Guards, Whitebrother, Invisible Empire and the Ku Klux Klan.

McIver, Stuart. “The Murder of a Scalawag.” *American History Illustrated* (April 1973): 12-18.

This short magazine article follows the biography established by J.G. Hamilton. What is of significance in this text was that the article included a photograph of John W. Stephens and chronologically is the first printed source to do so. It would be later established by the descendants of one of Stephen’s siblings that the picture is, in fact, not of Stephens, but one of his brothers and taken at least a decade after Stephens’s death.

Myers, Barton A. *Rebels Against the Confederacy: North Carolina's Unionists*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Myers work brings context and highlight to the internal struggles of Southern Unionists who were forced to endure and live in the new Confederate South after war broke out. Myers also detailed the enormous persecution and violent backlash that was felt by Unionists like Stephens in the public and political spheres as they attempted to rebuild the South; their control over labor and resources always tenuous and in flux.

Powell, William S. *When the Past Refused to Die: A History of Caswell County North Carolina 1777-1977*. Durham, NC: Moore Publishing Co., 1977.

Powell, William S. Manuscript notes for *When the Past Refused to Die: A History of Caswell County North Carolina 1777-1977*. Caswell County Historical Association. File: Kirk Holden War. Richmond-Miles Museum. Yanceyville, Caswell County, North Carolina.

William S. Powell could be considered North Carolina's unofficial historian. His works, accessible by readers of all types has provided the author with a level of celebrity and status in mainstream culture. His biography of Stephens has long been considered authoritative, however it is inherently flawed and carried on the Dunning School interpretation. Sources Powell used pertaining to Stephens and the Kirk-Holden War were limited to J.G. Hamilton's *Reconstruction in North Carolina*. Also of note, the photograph featured in Powell's work of Stephens, which also accompanies the Powell adapted biography in the Caswell County Courthouse is purportedly of on Stephens's younger brothers that was taken much later in life.

Raper, Horace W. *William W. Holden: North Carolina's Political Enigma* (The James Sprunt Studies in History and Political Science; v. 59). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.

Raper's nearly four hundred page personal and political biography is heavily cited and heavily sourced. Raper examined Holden's rise to Governor as well as his life after impeachment. Raper examined in great detail the railroad scandals of the late 1860's, which Stephens played a limited role in. Stephens is also mentioned in relation to the governor's continual battle with the Josiah Turner of the *Sentinel* and the Klan.

"Review: Reconstruction in North Carolina," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (Oct 1914), 150.

A scholarly review that applauded the scholarship of Hamilton's publication *Reconstruction in North Carolina*.

Rootsweb. "Senator John Walter Stephens." Accessed February 10, 2015.
<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ncccha/biographies/senatorjohnstephens.html>.

Stedman, A.J. *Murder and Mystery: History of the Life and Death of John W. Stephens, State Senator of North Carolina, from Caswell County*. Greensboro, N.C.: "Patriot" Print, 1870.

Though Stedman's work is largely considered the primary source for many of the works associated with Stephens, it is also mildly opinionated and biased, having painted a very unflattering portrait of Stephens. Stedman used much inference to establish causality in affirming a negative persona of Stephens, leading readers to draw their own conclusions as to why he was murdered.

Swanson, Drew A. *A Golden Weed: Tobacco and Environment in the Piedmont South* (Yale Agrarian Studies Series). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014.

Swanson examined the highly interwoven social, agricultural, and cultural history of tobacco in the Piedmont region. Swanson briefly discussed the death of Stephens under a larger narrative framework of the dramatic shift in labor dynamics and economic disparity in the rural, agrarian North Carolina and Virginia Piedmont during Reconstruction.

Tourgee, Albion W. *A Fool's Errand. By One of the Fools*. New York: Fords, Howard & Hulbert, 1879.

Tourgee, Albion W. *A Fool's Errand. by One of the Fools*. 2nd ed. New York: Fords, Howard & Hulbert, 1880.

See Primary Source entry.

Trelease, Allen W. *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

Trelease, Allen W. "John Walter Stephens." NCPedia. 1994. Accessed October 27, 2015. <http://ncpedia.org/biography/stephens-john-walter>.

Trelease was one of the first Revisionist scholars to deviate from the Dunning narrative and portrayed a radically different John W. Stephens than depicted previously. Stephens was contextualized in a much more critical assessment of sociopolitical frameworks and the white supremacy movements that attempted to reclaim their lost power.

Wise, Jim. *Murder in the Courthouse: Reconstruction and Redemption in the North Carolina Piedmont*. Charleston, SC: History Press, 2010.

This self-published book by Wise, a journalist, used a biography established by Dunning School historians, but also uses contemporary scholarship. The text itself is presented in a "true crime" format, beginning with a rhetorical monologue of Stephens on May 21, 1870, the last day of his life.

Newspaper Archives:

The overwhelming majority of these articles originate from the scans of periodicals housed in the Southern Historical Collection at UNC Chapel Hill.

All articles sourced 2015: <http://www.newspapers.com>, unless otherwise noted.

“Letter from Yanceyville, Incidents Connected with the Death of John W. Stephens” *Daily Journal* (Wilmington, NC), 29 May 1870. Accessed March 2, 2015.

See Primary Source entry.

“The Murder of Senator Stephens Confirmed” *The Weekly Standard* (Raleigh, NC), 1 June 1870. Accessed 2 March 2015.

This article, written by the editor of *The Standard* took a more defensive stand for JWS, addressing the “chicken” moniker and his “odious” image as well as confirming, publicly JWS death and the details known at the time. The paper outright decried the Sentinel’s reporting and countered that Stephens was only considered odious to the white, Democrat minority of Caswell because he was a white Republican. The article goes on to say how the inflammatory politics and dissension in Caswell, Alamance and Orange Counties, and ultimately the murder of JWS were the result of the Sentinel’s editor-in-chief seeking to fan flames of insurrection by means of mud-slinging. This is also one of the first periodicals to label Stephens’s death as an assassination, not a murder.

“A Proclamation, By His Excellency, the Governor of North Carolina” *The Daily Standard* (Raleigh, NC), 23 June 1870; *The Weekly Standard*, 27 July 1870. Accessed 2 March 2015.

This proclamation, dated June 6, 1870 by Governor Holden appeared in newspapers over a period of two months in June and July 1870. The proclamation lists, in graphic detail the vicious attacks, murders and rapes of blacks and whites by the KKK. What is significant is a reward of five hundred dollars offered to those who bring each of the murderers of Daniel Blue, Wyatt Outlaw, Robin Jacobs, Puryear, Daniel and Neill McLeod and JWS to justice.

“Some of the Outrages-Letter From Judge Tourgee to Senator Abbott” *The North Carolinian* (Elizabeth City, NC), 18 August 1870. Accessed 3 March 2015.

A reprint of Albion W. Tourgee’s letter on KKK activities in Caswell and Alamance counties demonstrates the enormity of the correspondence between the two senators, so much that it began being reprinted in newspapers across the state. He opened his letter with the solemn news of the assassination of Stephens, his political ally and friend; eulogizing him in a way that has not been duplicated in the historical record. The letter chastised the Republican Party and its failure to mobilize against the Klan as well as in-party scandal.

Wilmington Journal, 26 August 1870. Accessed 3 March 2015.

A number of short articles described the arrest and transport of individuals suspected in the JWS murder, the actions of Kirk and the perception that Holden’s arrest of the suspected perpetrators was without legal merit. The articles are very scathing of Holden and gave support to those who have been impeding Kirk in the piedmont.

People's Press (Winston-Salem, NC), 26 August 1870. Accessed 3 March 2015.

The paper lists a number of habeas corpus cases being brought forth in the courtroom. Among these are individuals involved in the murder of JWS. In the case of State vs. F.A. Wiley, Democratic Sheriff of Caswell County and (suspected) accomplice to the murder. What is of note are some of the witnesses for the State: Martha Stephens, the wife of JWS as well as his youngest brother, William Henry Stephens.

Daily Journal (Wilmington, NC), August 28, 1870. Accessed March 3, 2015.

Transcripts of the sixth day of testimony related to the case of the State vs F.A. Wiley, T.J. Mitchell and Felix Roane. Wiley and others gave testimony regarding the day of Stephens murder. This is also one of the first times that statements are provided indicating that Stephens was “in the pocket” of the Republican government as a “detective”. Testimonies also provided vehemently deny any actions of a “secret organization” or a Democratic organization operating in the county and that the violence on blacks was minimal and just hearsay. While much of the witness testimony is a breakdown of events leading up to the senator’s murder, it should also be noted that much of this testimony during cross-examination is leading and allowed a number of personal opinions on JWS into the record.

“Life in North Carolina: The Murder of Senator John W. Stephens; A Terrible Scene; Shall His Assassins Be Amnestied?” *New York Times*, 26 February 1873. Accessed 17 February 2015. <http://learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-civilwar/4815>.

“Read! Everybody. Strange Conduct for a Judge -Yea! Even for Canby’s Judge?” *Wilmington Journal*, 17 July 1874. Accessed 19 February 2015.

“State Constitutional Convention, Twenty-Ninth Day” *Raleigh News*, 9 Oct. 1875. Accessed 19 February 2015.

“Who Was John W. Stephens?” *Pee Dee Herald* (Wadesboro, NC), 18 Oct. 1876. Accessed 19 February 2015.

Wilmington Morning Star, 14 Nov 1879. Accessed 19 February 2015.

“The Statement Denounced - Dr. Roan’s Brother Says the Report is False. The Stephens Murder” *State Chronicle* (Raleigh, NC), 5 December 1891. Accessed 19 February 2015.

“The Reported Confession was a Matter of Common Report. Dr. Kingsbury, Then On The Staff Of The Sentinel, Writes Interestingly Of The Stephens Murder.” *State Chronicle*, December 8, 1891. Accessed 17 February 2015.

“Sheriff Wiley and the Stephens Murder.” *News and Observer*, December 29, 1891. Accessed 17 February 2015.

“One of the Ku-Klux Crimes. The Assassination of Stephens.” *Charlotte Observer*, 24 January 1897. Accessed 17 February 2015.

“Reminiscence of Capt. Ball of Local Interest” *Reidsville Review* (Reidsville, NC), February 7, 1911. Accessed 17 February 2015.

“Peter Williamson Dies in Reidsville” *The Bee* (Danville, VA), February 14, 1922. Accessed 17 February 2015.

Goins, Martha. “Leasburg Will Celebrate Fourth of July Quietly” *Danville Register*, 3 July 1977. Accessed 17 February 2015.

It is clearly demonstrated by just the small sampling of newspapers that John Walter Stephens remained in the public record for over a century. The audacious nature of Stephens’s assassination, as well as the far-reaching, and decades-long conspiracy over the murder was a source of both fascination and repulsion for the Ku Klux Klan in the public and political conversation. Even after amnesty was given to the participants of the alleged murders the conspirators never broke their pact of secrecy and a “whodunit” folklore emerged. The sheer spectacle of the murder endured locally well into the early decades of the twentieth century. As the decades grew on and the aged witnesses and participants died, their tangential connections to the events put the recently deceased in the headlines and Stephens back in the spotlight.