

The Rip Van Winkle State

In 1819, Washington Irving published his short story “Rip Van Winkle,” in which the character of Rip Van Winkle goes off into the mountains and falls asleep for twenty years — missing the American Revolution and all of the changes it brought. Many North Carolinians were beginning to feel that time was passing their state by just as it had Rip Van Winkle. The state’s leaders were committed to a small government and an agricultural economy. But with poor transportation, no public education, and little economic opportunity, thousands of North Carolinians left the state each year seeking a brighter future elsewhere.

In this chapter we’ll examine this out-migration from North Carolina. We’ll analyze people’s reasons for leaving, what some leaders tried to do about the state’s problems, and why, for a long while, they failed.

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In Washington Irving's story, Rip Van Winkle slept for twenty years while the world changed around him. Some North Carolinians wondered whether their state would ever wake up.

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