

Zebulon Vance ^[1]

by Timothy N. Osment

Perhaps the most influential figure to emerge out of the mountains of Western North Carolina was Zebulon Baird Vance. Vance would become known to history as "North Carolina's Civil War Governor." His life represented the challenges, struggles, and accomplishments that defined both a divided nation and a growing southern state in the nineteenth century.

Vance was born in Buncombe County just north of Asheville on May 13, 1830. The third of eight children, he came from a Scot-Irish family with a long tradition of military and public service. His grandfather fought in the American Revolution and served in the N.C. General Assembly. His uncle was a U.S. Congressman and his father was a captain in the War of 1812. Vance was only 14 when his father died. Ambitious but uncertain of his opportunities, young Zeb ask for assistance from a fellow Buncombe County native, North Carolina Governor David Swain. Swain arranged a loan for Vance to attend the state university in Chapel Hill. There Vance excelled, earning his law degree and developing the oratory skills that would benefit him throughout his life.

Already a skilled debater and champion of local self-government, Vance began his political career at age 24 when he was elected to the North Carolina State House of Commons.

As a state representative, he quickly gained recognition and was elected to a United States congressional seat just four years later. In 1858, at age 28, he was the youngest member of that body and looking forward to a long career of service to both his state and his country. He had little indication that the most costly war in the nation's history would soon erupt, defining his legacy for generations to come.

As a U.S. Congressman, Vance was a staunch unionist and was quick to point out the advantages of a strong but fair federal government. However, his position changed with the beginning of hostilities at Fort Sumter in 1861. When fighting broke out between the North and South, Vance became an ardent supporter of the Confederate cause. He left Washington, D.C., for Raleigh and organized a company of men known as the "Rough and Ready Guards" who later joined the 14th Regiment. By August of 1861, Vance was elected as commander of the 26th North Carolina Regiment ^[2].

After participating in two brief but intense battles, Vance returned to politics. In 1862, the 32 year-old was elected governor of North Carolina. During the Civil War, conflicting allegiances within North Carolina divided the state. Though a member of the Confederacy, many port-city merchants were pro-Union. Non-slaveholders in the Piedmont had little investment in the conflict. Many communities in the mountains surrounding Vance's home county were in open rebellion against a war that had devastated their region and families. These were the dynamics Vance had to balance as governor. In a state where resistance to conscription and desertions were widespread, it took a vigorous and resolute individual to guide the government through this period of crisis. Without a doubt Zeb Vance was the right man for the job. Though not without his share of controversy, Vance kept North Carolina united while both waging war against the North and resisting the often unreasonable demands of the Confederate government. The daily efforts Vance made on behalf of his constituents ^[3] to provide every possible comfort to them during the hardships of war ensured his place in the minds and hearts of the people he served.

When the war ended in 1865, Vance was arrested and held for several months in a Washington, D.C., facility until he was paroled and sent home. Pardoned in 1867, he was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1870. However, Radical-Republicans in charge of the federal government refused to seat him, protesting his history of owning slaves and of still being under probation. Returning to his home state, Vance was elected again as governor. He was eventually elected to another term as U.S. Senator in 1879. He was renowned as a powerful and skilled debater, and his speeches were always delivered to a packed Senate gallery. He served three terms and was just beginning his fourth when he died in April 1894.

Although the legacy of Zeb Vance belongs to the entire state, as a native son he holds special reverence to the people of Western North Carolina. He was a progressive leader who brought the mountain counties out of isolation and into prominent commercial ^[4] and civic relationships with other regions. He allocated state and federal resources for the construction of the WNC Railroad – a real and symbolic link that provided opportunities and pride for rural Appalachian communities. He was a rugged but educated man who shared a common creed of individual liberty and self-determination with his fellow mountain citizens.

The regional affection and appreciation bestowed on the Vance legacy is evident. His family homestead is preserved as The Vance Birthplace, one of twenty-seven North Carolina Historic Sites. It is nestled in the Reems Creek valley within the Weaverville city limits, a small village in northern Buncombe County. The site features a large two-story structure of hewn yellow pine logs. It has been reconstructed around the original chimney with its two enormous fireplaces. The furnishings and household items on display are period pieces that date from Vance's early years and include a few pieces original to the home. Six log outbuildings surround the main house: a corn crib, springhouse, smokehouse, loom house, slave house, and toolhouse. A visitor center contains exhibits portraying the life of Zeb Vance and small or large tours are welcome.

Besides the Biltmore Estate, perhaps the most recognizable landmark in Asheville is the Vance Monument – a tribute to

the memory and heritage of Zeb Vance. Erected in 1896, the 50-foot granite obelisk is located in the center of town in Pack Square. It stands watch over the local population just as its namesake did almost 150 years ago.

When Vance died in 1894 services were held in two capitals, first in Washington and then in Raleigh. From Raleigh, his coffin made a final trek to Asheville. A remarkable turnout greeted the train carrying his body when it arrived in the mountains. A huge crowd joined the funeral march from the train station to Riverside Cemetery. On that spring day in 1896, not far from where today stands the monument in his honor, over 10,000 people gathered to welcome home and say their farewells to Zebulon B. Vance, North Carolina's Civil War Governor and a proud part of our mountain heritage.

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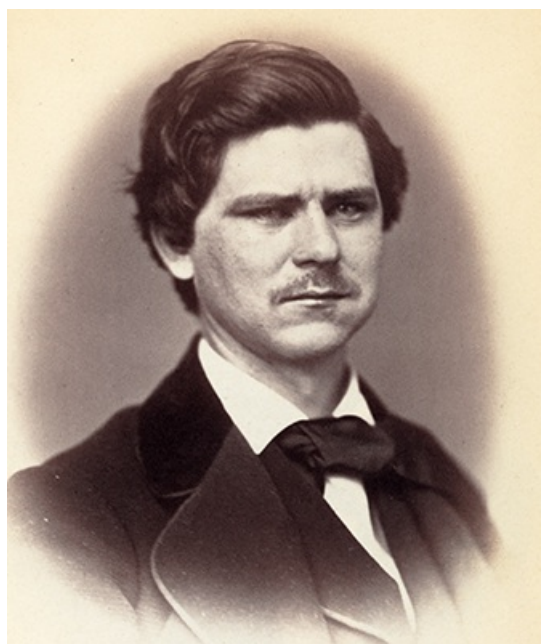
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