

Bourbons ^[1]

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Bourbons

by William C. Harris, 2006

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Bourbons were conservative [Democrats](#) ^[3] who came to power in North Carolina after [Reconstruction](#) ^[4], which officially ended in 1877. They were also sometimes known as "[Redeemer](#)" [Democrats](#) ^[2] because they purportedly "redeemed" the state from [Republican](#) ^[5] Reconstruction. Created by political opponents, the term "Bourbons" evoked Talleyrand's comment that the French royal family of that name, when restored to the throne in 1814, had apparently learned nothing from the French Revolution. North Carolina's Bourbons, like their counterparts in other southern states, supposedly had not changed their views despite the [Civil War](#) ^[6] experience.

In reality, the southern defeat greatly influenced the economic policies of the North Carolina Bourbons. While continuing to honor the "[Lost Cause](#) ^[7]" of the [Confederacy](#) ^[8], they sought a new economic order for the state modeled after the victorious North, including agricultural diversification and industrialization. To maintain northern goodwill and prevent the reenactment of Reconstruction, these conservatives promised to abide by the provisions of the [Fourteenth](#) ^[9] and [Fifteenth](#) ^[10] Amendments (ratified in 1868 and 1870, respectively) protecting black rights. They generally ignored this promise, although they were careful to avoid racial violence that could result in federal intervention.

In their efforts to promote industrialization and secure northern capital, conservative leaders ignored the plight of poor farmers. Their retrenchment policies for public services, especially education, came at a severe cost to the majority of North Carolinians still recovering from the [Civil War](#) ^[6]. Furthermore, Bourbons, in attempting to retain power, resorted to ballot-box fraud. During the 1890s a coalition of farmers, organized as the [Populist Party](#) ^[11], and Republicans, consisting mainly of black voters, overturned the rule of the Bourbons.

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Subjects:

[Gilded Age \(1876-1900\)](#) ^[12]

[Political movements and parties](#) ^[13]

[UNC Press](#) ^[14]

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Links

[1] <https://ncpedia.org/bourbons>

[2] <https://ncpedia.org/redeemer-democrats>

[3] <https://ncpedia.org/democratic-party>

[4] <https://ncpedia.org/reconstruction>

[5] <https://ncpedia.org/republican-party>

[6] <https://ncpedia.org/history/cw-1900/civil-war>

[7] <https://ncpedia.org/lost-cause>

[8] <https://ncpedia.org/confederate-party>

[9] <https://ncpedia.org/fourteenth-amendment>

[10] <http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/15thamendment.html>

- [11] <https://ncpedia.org/populist-party>
- [12] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/gilded-age-1876-1>
- [13] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/political-movemen>
- [14] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/unc-press>
- [15] <https://ncpedia.org/category/authors/harris-william-c>
- [16] <https://ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/encyclopedia->