

clark, walter ^[1]

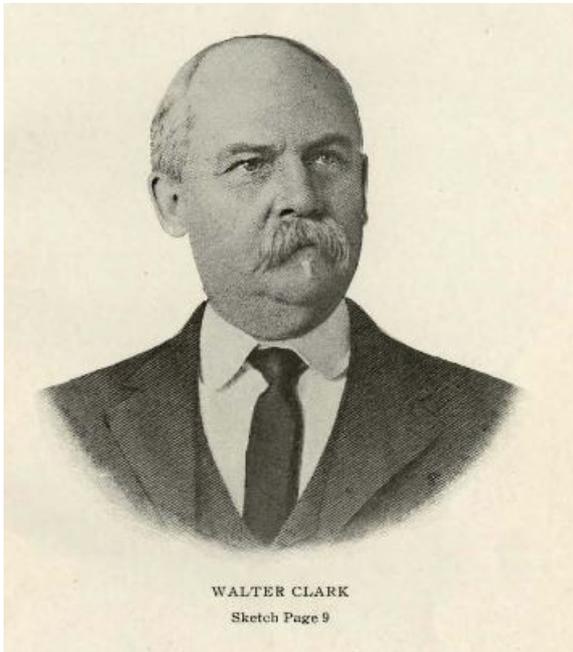
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Clark, Walter

By Christopher Meekins, North Carolina Office of Archives and History, 2020

1846-1924



brief biographies of leading people for ready reference purposes".

^[2]Jurist and editor of *The State Records of North Carolina*, as well as the five-volume set "*Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina in the Great War 1861-65*," Walter Clark (1846-1924) grew up in Halifax County. He benefitted from the status and class of his family and enjoyed influential connections and a good education. At age fourteen he joined the Confederate army where he served the Governor as drillmaster and was attached to the 22nd Regiment under Pettigrew. He was promoted to adjutant for the 35th North Carolina Regiment. In 1863 Clark resigned his commission and returned to school. He completed his education at the University of North Carolina in 1864. Clark was then elected Lieutenant Colonel of the 70th N.C. Regiment (1st Junior Reserves). After the war he studied law at Columbia University and took up practice in Halifax and then in Raleigh.

Appointed a superior court judge in 1885, Clark was appointed to the state supreme court in 1889 and rose to be chief justice in 1902, a post he held until his death. Justice Clark is said to have had "the youngest mind on the bench" and his opinions, even in dissent, shaped the state's law. Toiling long hours, his interests led him to edit for free the sixteen-volume *State Records* and, in five volumes, the *Histories of North Carolina Regiments*, accounts by unit of the state's role in the Civil War.

The *Regimental Histories* were crafted within the framework of the Lost Cause interpretation of the American Civil War. Completed for the benefit of the State of North Carolina in 1901-1905 after white supremacists had seized control of the government, these volumes embodied the concepts of "valor" and "duty to cause" that set both the boundaries of interpretation and the grounds for reunification with northern soldiers. The main concept in this was North Carolina's

“Rebel Boast” – a summation of the Tarheel soldier’s service to duty: First at Bethel, Farthest to the Front at Gettysburg and Chickamauga, Last at Appomattox. Not only were these claims of martial prowess emblazoned on the cover of each volume but Clark also admonished his readers that these were not boasts but merely “sober historic truth(s)” that told the story of “North Carolina’s fidelity to duty.” This uncoupling of battle actions from the root cause of the war, slavery, served the white supremacist narrative. Clark strove to shift the chronicle away from the cause of Southern Independence (claiming it “had passed forever from among men” and that “no advocate remained”) to the valor, service, and duty rendered by North Carolina’s Confederate soldiers. Along with similar writings by other contemporary historians, this interpretive construct survived without challenge for much of the 20th Century.

Justice Clark, however, was progressive in other aspects of his public life. He condemned privilege and antidemocratic forces. He boosted woman suffrage and progressivism. Among his targets were the American Tobacco Company, which he believed had violated antitrust law, and the railroads, which had set exorbitant rates. Clark lacked somewhat in charisma and met with defeat in his bid for the U.S. Senate in 1912. His plantation house, “Airlie,” one of the finest in the region, gave name to the local community.

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Authors:

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