

Caldwell, Tod Robinson (from Research Branch, NC OA&H) ^[1]

TOD ROBINSON CALDWELL ^[2]

Governor: 1871-1874

by Jerry L. Cross

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<https://www.dncr.nc.gov/about-us/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program> ^[3]



Tod Robinson Caldwell (1818-1874), the first lieutenant governor in North Carolina history, succeeded his predecessor [William Woods Holden](#) ^[4] as Chief Executive when the latter was brought to trial on impeachment charges. Caldwell was born on February 19, 1818, in Morganton and was the son of Irish immigrant merchant John Caldwell and his wife, the former Hannah Robinson. He attended a local school before travelling to Hillsborough to study under prominent educator William J. Bingham. A member of the class of 1840 at [the University of North Carolina](#) ^[5], he received high honors upon graduation. [David L. Swain](#) ^[6], president of the university, personally tutored the promising [Burke County](#) ^[7] student in law. Tod Caldwell married Minerva Ruffin Cain in 1840; they would have three daughters and two sons.

In 1841 Caldwell began a law practice in Morganton and shortly afterwards became county prosecuting attorney. A keen mind and strong oratorical ability earned him a reputation as one of the best criminal lawyers in the state. Eager for the political arena, he sought and won election to the House of Commons in 1842 at age twenty-four, beginning a series of five legislative terms (four in the House and one in the Senate) before the Civil War. Caldwell greatly admired Henry Clay and eagerly adopted the principles of the [Whig Party](#) ^[8]. He was an ardent nationalist and bitterly denounced all talk of secession. He broke the pattern of most North Carolina Whigs, however, by not abandoning his Union loyalty after the state had joined the Confederacy. He refused to take any part in the war and suffered doubly when his only surviving son was killed fighting for the South at Gettysburg.

With the war's end, Caldwell served briefly as president of the Western North Carolina Railroad before reentering politics. He attended the [Convention of 1865](#) ^[9], but when the provisional government gave way to the Conservatives led by [Jonathan Worth](#) ^[10], Caldwell joined forces with [W. W. Holden](#) ^[4] to form the Republican Party in the state. Radical Reconstruction paved the way for a revised constitution in 1868 that called for the position of a lieutenant governor. Caldwell's Union allegiance and service to the Republican Party were rewarded with the candidacy for the lieutenant governorship on the ticket with Holden. Two and a half years into the term, he took over the executive duties when Holden was suspended from office pending his trial on impeachment charges. Caldwell became governor on March 22, 1871, with the conviction and removal of Holden.

As governor, Caldwell called for a methodical resolution of the state debt; tried to pump new life into the school system; proposed new laws to restore order in the society, particularly in regard to the newly established rights of black citizens; and asked for a vigorous prosecution of bond fraud leaders [George W. Swepson](#) ^[11] and [Milton S. Littlefield](#) ^[12]. A Conservative legislature, hostile to the Republican regime, nullified virtually all of his efforts except for prosecution of the bond frauds. Caldwell maintained a conciliatory tone and sense of moderation during his tenure. His efforts to reinvigorate the public school system met with opposition in the General Assembly and he evinced little interest in reopening the University. Caldwell did enjoy a measure of success in education with the appointment of Alexander D. McIver as superintendent of public instruction.

In the 1872 gubernatorial election Caldwell narrowly defeated Conservative candidate [Augustus S. Merrimon](#) ^[13]. Two years later, on July 10, 1874, while attending a meeting of the directors of the North Carolina Railroad in Hillsborough, Governor Caldwell was stricken with a gall bladder attack and died the next day. His body was returned to Morganton for burial.

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