

Fountain, Richard Tillman ^[1]

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by Donald R. Lennon, 1986

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A photograph of Lieutenant Governor Richard Tillman Fountain. Image from the State Archives of North Carolina.

^[2]Richard Tillman Fountain, lawyer, legislator, lieutenant governor, and gubernatorial candidate, was born at Cedar Lane near Tarboro, the son of Almon Leonidas and Sarah Louisa Eagles Fountain. After attending Edgecombe County ^[3] schools and Tarboro Male Academy, he entered The University of North Carolina ^[4] where he received a law degree in 1907. During the same year he began to practice law in Rocky Mount. From 1911 to 1918 he served as the first judge of the Rocky Mount municipal court, and from 1919 to 1927 he represented Edgecombe County in the North Carolina House of Representatives. During the 1927 session of the General Assembly ^[5] he served as speaker of the house. The following year he was elected lieutenant governor of North Carolina and served from 1929 to 1932.

In 1932 Fountain sought the Democratic nomination for governor, running against J. C. B. Ehringhaus ^[6] of Elizabeth City and Allen Jay Maxwell ^[7] of Raleigh. Fountain ran as an anti-administration liberal and a champion of the common man. He strongly opposed the centralization policies of the O. Max Gardner ^[8] administration and the "machine politics" of his major opponent. After a first primary defeat of less than 50,000 votes, Fountain demanded a runoff. Campaigning virtually without funds or political organization, he lost the second primary by only 13,000 votes (182,055 for Ehringhaus to 168,971 for Fountain).

In 1936 and again in 1942 Fountain unsuccessfully challenged the incumbent, Josiah W. Bailey, for the Democratic nomination for U.S. senator. Once more operating on a very limited budget, Fountain polled 184,000 votes in 1936.

In addition to his law practice, Fountain owned and edited the Rocky Mount Herald newspaper (1934–42), served as director of the Home Building and Loan Association of Rocky Mount, director of the First National Bank of Rocky Mount, member of the board of trustees of The University of North Carolina, chairman of the State Board of Equalization, and member of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park Commission. He also served as president of the Rocky Mount Bar Association, vice-president of the North Carolina Bar Association ^[9] (1922–23), member of the American Bar Association ^[10], member of the Rocky Mount School Board (1917–35) and its chairman for seven years, and charter member and president of the Rocky Mount Civitan Club. In the legislature he was the author of the bill that created the East Carolina Industrial Training School for Boys in Rocky Mount. He served as chairman of the board of trustees of that institution, which subsequently became known as the Richard T. Fountain School.

In 1918 Fountain married Susan Rankin of Gastonia. They had four children: Susan Rankin (Mrs. Thomas G. Thurston), Anne Sloan (Mrs. Thomas G. Dill), Margaret Eagles (Mrs. John H. Paylor, Jr.), and Richard T., Jr.

References:

Richard Tillman Fountain Papers ^[11] (Manuscript Collection, East Carolina University, Greenville).

Martha H. Tharrington, "Richard Tillman Fountain and the Gubernatorial Primary of 1932 in North Carolina" (Master's thesis, East Carolina University, 1974).

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State Archives of North Carolina. "Richard T. Fountain (1885-1945), lawyer, legislator, Speaker of the House, and Lieutenant Governor." From the General Negative Collection, State Archives of North Carolina (call #: N_97_5_324 Richard T. Fountain, NC Lt. Governor 1929-1933). Photograph. *Flickr*, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/north-carolina-state-archives/8493481598/> ^[2] (accessed October 1, 2013).

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