

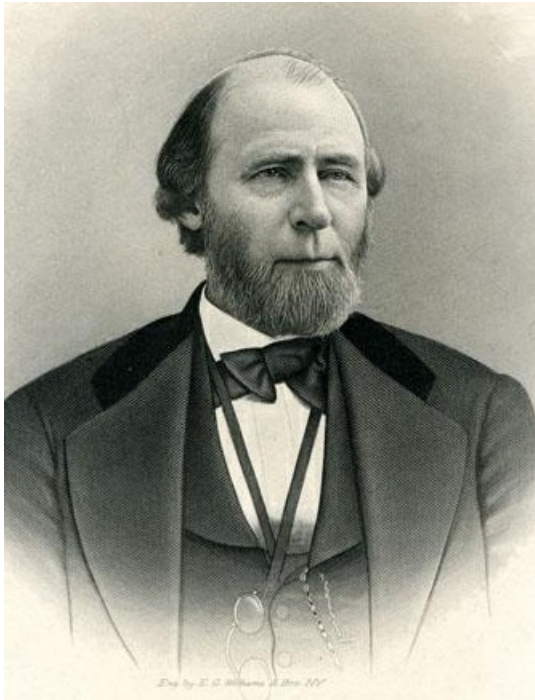
Holden, William Woods ^[1]

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by Horace W. Raper, 1988; Revised SLNC Government and Heritage Library, June 2023

24 Nov. 1818–2 Nov. 1892

See also: [William Woods Holden](#) ^[2], Research Branch, NC Office of Archives and History



An engraving of governor William Woods Holden published in 1906. Image from the North Carolina Museum of History.

^[3]William Woods Holden, printer, editor, politician, governor, and the most controversial state figure during [Reconstruction](#) ^[4], was born near Hillsborough, the son of Thomas Holden and Priscilla Woods, who were never married; he was reared after his sixth birthday by his stepmother, Sally Nichols Holden. His grandfather, who was English, first settled in Massachusetts but later moved to [Orange County](#) ^[5], N.C., to engage in farming. At age ten, Holden was apprenticed as a [printer's devil](#) ^[6] to [Dennis Heartt](#) ^[7], editor of the *Hillsborough Recorder*, who was responsible for his early education and political views. Striking out on his own at age sixteen, he first worked as a printer for the *Milton Chronicle*, then for a Danville, Va., paper (in which his own compositions were first published), and later, in 1836, for the *Raleigh Star* which was edited by [Thomas Lemay](#) ^[8].

Despite the lack of formal education, Holden studied law at night under Henry Watkins Miller of Raleigh and received his license to practice on 1 Jan. 1841. Although he could have played a major role in city politics and civic affairs, the legal profession did not offer the fascination of newspaper work. Thus, when the *North Carolina Standard*, the official organ of the [Democratic party](#) ^[9] in North Carolina, was made available in 1842, Holden purchased control. Through it he became the state's most militant champion of minorities, reform, and state ideals. He served as publisher and editor of the *Standard* until elected governor in 1868.

As editor, Holden had a brilliant record, and his editorial influence was unsurpassed in the state. By building upon such issues as equal suffrage, [internal improvements](#) ^[10] for all sections, universal education, and improved labor conditions in an industrial economy, he became the tactical leader of the Democratic party. By the 1850s he had made it the dominant and most popular party in the state. (Later, he was mainly responsible for similar success by the [Conservative](#) ^[11] [1862] and [Republican](#) ^[12] [1868] parties.) Throughout life his major goal was reform, especially to alleviate human wants and human misery, and, if the state leaders were unwilling to work for it, he was ready to lead the political fight himself.

In 1844, when elected to the House of Commons, Holden immediately sponsored legislation calling for the creation of an institution designed to support people with speech and hearing disabilities in Raleigh. Later, he served as state printer. He was also a member of the Literary Board and the board of trustees of [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[13]. He also served as commissioner of the institution that supported speech and hearing disabled people. He also served as commissioner for the psychiatric hospital. In 1858 the Democratic state convention in Charlotte rejected his bid for the governorship because of his humble origins and vigorous support for the "common folk," as well as the fear by members

of the state's aristocracy (especially those from the east) that they could not control him. In the same year, he failed to win election to the U.S. Senate. No doubt these rejections caused him ultimately to break away from the Democratic party and to completely change the direction of the state during the Civil War and Reconstruction eras.

While Democratic spokesman for North Carolina, Holden played an active role in national issues and in the party. Throughout the 1840s and 1850s he advocated Southern rights to expand slavery and at times championed the right of secession, but by 1860 he had shifted his position to support the Union. Thus, at both the Charleston and Baltimore Democratic National conventions, he worked diligently to keep the state from bolting the party and leaving the Union, prophesying that should secession occur a long and devastating war would result. In early 1861 he led the forces that defeated the proposed state secession convention, but when the fighting began he joined with leaders from the other political factions at the second convention in voting for secession ^[14].

During the Civil War, Holden waged a continuous battle for individual liberty, helped to secure the nomination and election of Zebulon B. Vance ^[15] for governor in 1862, and by 1864 was the avowed leader of the state's peace movement ^[16]. "Recognizing the futility of the war, he declared that it was far better to make an honorable peace while still possible rather than being forced to accept unconditional surrender. Moreover, he thought the time had come to overthrow the agrarian aristocratic rule and, based on the rising tide of industrialism, to create a progressive state for the welfare of the masses rather than continue the existing order for the privileged few. For such views Holden was denounced as a traitor. In September 1863, the *Standard* office was attacked by Georgia troops and his personal papers and type were destroyed. Nevertheless, he continued to publish the *Standard* until suspension of the writ of habeas corpus took away the freedom of the press. As a matter of principle, Holden opposed and was defeated by Governor Vance in 1864 on the peace issue. (He had accepted the nomination only after he could not persuade any other prominent politician to enter the race.)

In May 1865 President Andrew Johnson ^[17] summoned state Union leaders to Washington, D.C., to discuss North Carolina's reentry into the Union, and from that meeting came the decision to appoint Holden provisional governor of the state, in which capacity he served from 29 May to 28 Dec. 1865. In this office he exerted leadership in the reorganization of state, county, and local governments, making more than 3,000 nonpartisan appointments in an effort to unify the state; supervised the taking of amnesty oaths; revised the state constitution to meet national demands and restore federal authority; and worked towards the state's economic recovery. Despite these efforts, he was again denied the governorship in late 1865, when he was defeated by Jonathan Worth ^[18]. As compensation, he was offered a seat in the U.S. Senate, but declined in order to resume the editorship of the *Standard*. Later, President Johnson offered him the post of minister to San Salvador, which he chose not to pursue in view of potential confirmation difficulties.

During this period Holden continued to help restore North Carolina to the Union. In 1866, sensing the waning strength of the president to control the Northern Radicals and realizing that it would be disastrous for the state to resist congressional rule, he began to work with the new political forces. He was instrumental in organizing the Republican party ^[12] in the state, and in the winter of 1866–67 he spent much time in Washington working with the radical leaders. In 1868 Holden headed the Republican ticket in the state elections and was elected governor by a vote of 92,325 to 73,594, defeating Thomas Samuel Ashe ^[19]. He carried with him six of the seven congressmen, all executive and judicial officials except one judge and one solicitor, and both houses of the state legislature. When Governor Worth refused to recognize the Republican victory or to vacate his post before his term expired, Holden assumed the governorship through the direct interdiction of General Edward Canby and the Reconstruction laws.

Holden faced enormous challenges during his administration: reorganization of local and state governments, reestablishment of public schools open to all children, penal reform and the construction of a state penitentiary, development of a deteriorating economy by encouraging northern migration of labor and capital, expansion of railroads and other internal improvements, and obtaining equal justice for all persons. The last issue caused the greatest concern, as many North Carolinians were unwilling to extend full civil rights and suffrage to African Americans. Thus, as elsewhere in the South, the Ku Klux Klan ^[20] was organized to restore whites to local and state offices. Holden attempted to maintain law and order by suppressing the Klan, although the state was unable to convict known offenders; by encouraging prominent men to take active roles in preventing depredations; and by securing from President Ulysses S. Grant and federal authorities the military aid to maintain peace.

In March 1870, when civil authority weakened in Caswell and Alamance counties, Holden declared them to be in a state of insurrection as authorized by the Shoffner Militia Act ^[21]. Troops were organized, first under the command of William J. Clarke ^[22] but soon transferred to George W. Kirk ^[23], who had made a reputation for himself as a terrorist during his Union raids in the western part of the state. Holden originally had appointed W. W. Robbins of Marshall, who declined in order to keep a federal job and in turn recommended Kirk. The troops made many arrests in the two counties, ignoring the writ of habeas corpus and causing much fear and alienation. Later, Holden ordered the arrest of Josiah Turner, Jr. ^[24], editor of the Raleigh *Sentinel* and "King of the Ku Klux" for his avowed opposition to Republican rule.

Holden hoped to have the Klan prisoners tried by state military commissions, an action initially endorsed by Chief Justice Richmond M. Pearson ^[25]. However, on 6 Aug. 1870 Judge George W. Brooks ^[26], U.S. district judge at Salisbury, issued a writ of habeas corpus that they should be tried in a federal court for possible violation of their constitutional rights. Thus began a series of legal maneuvers culminating in the dismissal of the state troops and any effort to control the Klan, as well as the demise of Governor Holden.

On 9 Dec. 1870 Frederick W. Strudwick ^[27] of Orange County, a former Klan leader, introduced in the state house of representatives a resolution calling for Holden's impeachment for high crimes and misdemeanors. The resolution was adopted on 14 December. Five days later, the house approved eight articles of impeachment against Holden: the first two

alleged that he had illegally declared Alamance and Caswell counties in insurrection; the third and fourth concerned the "unlawful" arrest of Josiah Turner, Jr., and others without benefit of trial; the fifth and sixth accused the governor of disobeying the writ of habeas corpus; and the last two charged him with the unlawful recruitment of troops and their illegal payment from the state treasury.

When the state senate was notified of the charges on 20 December, Holden immediately turned over the duties of his office to Tod R. Caldwell ^[28]. His trial began on 23 Jan. 1871. On 9 February the house voted a ninth indictment, charging Holden with conspiring with George W. Swepson ^[29] to defraud the state in connection with railroad bonds. This article was never presented to the senate, nor mentioned in the press, for fear of implicating Conservative leaders who were active in the Holden trial. No legitimate claim could ever be made that Holden was personally dishonest or that he had used his office for personal gain. The defense based its arguments on the fact that the violent activities of the Klan required stringent enforcement regulation, that the governor was authorized under state law to use such force, and that any maltreatment of prisoners was done contrary to orders. After a highly partisan trial, the senate—on 22 March—rendered a guilty verdict on the last six charges (the minor ones insofar as constitutional rights were concerned), and ordered that Holden be removed from his post and denied the right to hold office again in the state.

The verdict came as no surprise to Holden, who was in Washington at the time. He expected assistance from his Republican friends, and two possibilities were extended: diplomatic service or the editorship of a newspaper that the Republican National Committee proposed to establish in the nation's capital. Holden declined a ministerial post in Peru or the Argentine Confederation, and the proposed newspaper never materialized. Forced to find employment on his own, in September 1871 he assumed the political editorship of the Washington *Daily Chronicle*. Despite his success in greatly expanding the paper's circulation, Holden soon longed to return to his native state. The opportunity was offered and accepted in February 1872, when he was appointed to the postmastership in Raleigh, a position he retained until 1883.

Although many efforts were made to remove his political disabilities, Holden refused to participate, insisting that such movement must come voluntarily from the people of the state and without political friction. Until 1889 he participated in local affairs, acting as unofficial head of the state Republican party (until he could no longer support the national policies of high tariffs, pro-business, and nonsupport for the South), writing for the Raleigh and Charlotte newspapers, composing poetry, taking part in church functions, and lecturing. His address, "History of Journalism in North Carolina," ^[30] delivered before the press association on 21 June 1881 in Winston, came to be considered one of the masterpieces of the state's journalistic history.



A 1906 photograph of William Woods Holden house in Raleigh. Image from the North Carolina Museum of History.

^[31]Retirement emphasized Holden's outstanding personal traits—kindness, charity, warm hospitality, fearlessness, close family ties, and constant interest in the welfare of the common folk. He also enjoyed his two story frame colonial residence that he had built in 1852 on the corner of Hargett and McDowell streets. He had chosen to live at home during his two terms as governor rather than occupying the executive mansion. It was considered one of the finest homes in Raleigh, had one of the first bathtubs in the city, and was noted for its sunken garden. He spent much time there among the blooming flowers, boxwoods, and a weeping elm which was the only one of its kind in Raleigh. After suffering a stroke in 1889, Holden lived quietly until his death. He was buried in the Holden family plot in Oakwood Cemetery, Raleigh.

Holden was married twice. His first wife was Ann Augusta Young (19 Feb. 1819–20 June 1852), whom he married in 1841; she was the daughter of John Wynne Young, a native of Baltimore, Md., and Nancy Peace, and the niece of William Peace, founder of Peace Institute. After her death he married, in 1854, Louisa Virginia Harrison, the daughter of Robert Harrison, a prosperous Raleigh citizen. His children included Laura (Mrs. W. P. Olds), Joseph William ^[32] (1844–75), Ida Augusta (Mrs. Calvin J. Cowles), Henrietta (Mrs. Fritz Mahler), Mary Eldridge (Mrs. Claude A. Sherwood), Beulah (Mrs. Walter R. Henry), Charles C., and Lula (Mrs. F. T. Ward).

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