

Stephens, John Walter ^[1]

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Stephens, John Walter

by Allen W. Trelease, 1994

14 Oct. 1834–21 May 1870



A 2009 photograph of the Caswell County Courthouse, Yanceyville where John Walter Stephens was murdered. Image from Flickr user Natalie Maynor.

^[2]John Walter Stephens, Republican state senator from [Caswell County](#) ^[3] assassinated by the [Ku Klux Klan](#) ^[4], was born near Bruce's Cross-roads, [Guilford County](#) ^[5], the son of Absalom and Letitia Stephens. As a child he moved to Wentworth and later to Leaksville [Rockingham County](#) ^[6], where his father, a tailor, died about 1848. John received only the most rudimentary education and went into the harness-making business in Wentworth. In 1857 he married Nannie E. Walters (or Nancy Waters); she died two years later, leaving an infant daughter. In 1860 he married Martha Frances Groom, of Wentworth, who also gave birth to a daughter. An active [Methodist](#) ^[7], Stephens was an agent for the American Bible and Tract Society for a year or so. Then he became a [tobacco](#) ^[8] trader, moving to Yorkville (now York), S.C.

When the [Civil War](#) ^[9] broke out, Stephens went to Greensboro and for a time served as a press agent commandeering horses for the Confederate army. He avoided military service until near the end of the war, by which time he had returned to Wentworth and resumed the tobacco trade. Following his army service he got into a quarrel with a neighbor over two of the latter's chickens, which had strayed onto his property. After spending a night in jail for killing the chickens, Stephens retaliated by caning the neighbor and then shooting two by-standers who tried to interfere. Thus originated the slurring political epithet, "Chicken" Stephens, by which Democrats referred to him in later years.

In 1866 Stephens moved to Yanceyville, Caswell County, where he continued in the tobacco business. Subsequently he served as an agent of the [Freedmen's Bureau](#) ^[10] and became an active member of the [Union League](#) ^[11] and the [Republican party](#) ^[12]. In these capacities he associated frequently and freely with local blacks, who outnumbered whites in Caswell, and they accorded him a position of political leadership. As a result he was elected to the state senate in 1868 over [Bedford Brown](#) ^[13], a former U.S. senator and an elder statesman. Stephens came to be hated by the white community as a racial and political renegade, and no accusations of incendiaryism or perfidy were too extravagant to win credence. He was socially ostracized and expelled from the Methodist church. As a result of repeated threats, he insured his life, fortified his house, and took to carrying three pistols on his person.

In truth, Stephens threw his influence on the side of political and racial moderation. He consistently advised blacks against physical retaliation following white terrorist attacks. In May 1870, while observing a [Democratic](#) ^[14] county convention at the courthouse, he was lured to his death by Frank Wiley, a former Democratic sheriff whom Stephens was urging to accept the Republican nomination for reelection. By prearrangement with other waiting Klansmen, Wiley persuaded Stephens to leave the court-room and accompany him downstairs to a small room, where the others quickly overpowered and stabbed him to death, leaving the body on a woodpile to be discovered the next day. The details of the murder were not revealed for sixty-five years, but Klan involvement was suspected from the outset. It was in response to this crime that Governor [William W. Holden](#) ^[15] called out the militia under Colonel [George W. Kirk](#) ^[16], leading in turn to Holden's [impeachment](#) ^[17] and removal from office by a Democratic legislature.

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