

Thomas, Charles Randolph ^[1]

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by Eric D. Anderson, 1996

7 Feb. 1827–18 Feb. 1891

Charles Randolph Thomas, lawyer and congressman, was born in Beaufort, the son of Marcus and Elizabeth Duncan Thomas. His father was a wealthy shipowner and merchant, and Charles received the best education available in antebellum ^[2] North Carolina, graduating from The University of North Carolina ^[3] in 1849. He read law with Judge Richmond M. Pearson ^[4], tutor of many of the state's illustrious attorneys, and was admitted to the bar in 1850.

Thomas once declared that he was born a Whig ^[5], "and after some study and reflection about politics, he supposed that had he lived in the time of Hamilton, he would have been a Federalist." When the Whig party ^[5] disintegrated, he supported the Democrats "until that party went for secession and disunion." He won his first political office in 1861 as a Unionist delegate to the secession convention but lost his bid for a seat in the Confederate Congress ^[6] in 1861. From 1862 to 1864 he was chief clerk of the state senate. Named secretary of state by the assembly in January 1865, he served until the end of the war, when provisional governor W. W. Holden ^[7] appointed him to the same position; he left the post at the end of 1865. From 1868 to 1870 he was a judge of the superior court, and in 1868 he was a trustee of The University of North Carolina. He had no military record during the Civil War ^[8].

After the war, he became active in the affairs of the Atlantic and North Carolina Railroad ^[9], of which the state was a part owner. In 1867 he was appointed president of the railroad. The next year Thomas was elected a superior court judge on the Republican slate.

Before he had completed his term on the bench, the Republicans of the Second Congressional District nominated Thomas for the House of Representatives. Based in New Bern and running in a heavily Black, Republican district, he was elected in 1870 and reelected in 1872. Opposition within the Republican party denied him a third nomination in 1874. As a director of the Atlantic and North Carolina Railroad (an office he continued to hold while in Congress), Thomas had defied the railroad policy of the Republican governor, Tod R. Caldwell ^[10], who in the spring of 1874 removed Thomas and five other directors, appointing a new board led by political rivals of Thomas. Thomas was further weakened by the strong feeling among many Black voters that a Black nominee ought to be chosen for the Second District seat. In the end the nomination went to Black legislator John A. Hyman ^[11].

Thomas formally broke with the Republican party in the campaign of 1876. He announced that he would support the Democratic candidates for president and governor, even as he affirmed his Whiggish principles and defended his vote in Congress for the Civil Rights Act of 1875 ^[12]. In a speech in New Bern he said that he considered both "Bourbon" Democracy and "Radical" Republicanism to be dangerous extremes. He returned to the private practice of law, never again holding a partisan political office.

Thomas's wife was Emily Pitkin, described as a Northern woman, and they had five sons, one of whom Charles Randolph, Jr. ^[13], also served in Congress. Thomas died in New Bern shortly after his sixty-fourth birthday and was buried in Cedar Grove Cemetery. He was a member of the Presbyterian ^[14] church.

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