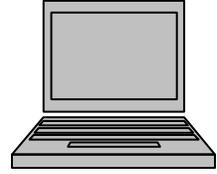




# FACULTY FORUM



“You Cannot Conceive The Many Without The One”

-Plato-

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David Schenck: Christian Manhood, Respectability, and Confederate Identity

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Scholarship on Confederate identity and religion in the Civil War South has emphasized the planter class and how evangelical Protestantism provided the metaphysical basis for Confederate ideology. Much of this work, however, does not adequately explain the convergence of religious manhood, class, and patriotism on the home front, particularly among the South's small but emergent professional middle class. Those southerners—often young lawyers, doctors, and merchants—were men whose social and economic interests developed alongside the plantation economy. The term "middle class" aptly describes them, for in antebellum North Carolina's social order, they occupied a social, political, and economic rank beneath the planter elites but above yeomen, poor whites, free blacks, and slaves. Although members of the professional middle class were relatively few in number, their strong religious and nationalist convictions had a profound impact on the Confederate South. To be sure, many served in the Confederate armies and distinguished themselves on the battlefield. A significant portion, however, stayed at home and served their country in other ways. Middle-class professionals who remained on the

home front often served as secondary government officials, filling bureaucratic positions at the county, regional, and state levels. In their capacity as bureaucrats, they became the face of the Confederate government at the local level and were responsible for implementing the widely unpopular policies of the Jefferson Davis administration.

David Schenck (1835–1902) of Lincoln, North Carolina, is a good example of this type of middle-class Confederate bureaucrat whose Christian faith and zeal for the Confederate cause formed a single religio-political identity. Schenck's devotion to the cause of Southern independence never wavered, even when battlefield reverses and the collapse of morale on the home front portended an ominous future for the young Confederacy. The pages of Schenck's wartime diary reveal that his patriotism and service in the Confederate bureaucracy represented more than simply his desire to contribute to Southern independence, however. They suggest that his devotion and service to the cause constitute the linchpins linking antebellum concepts of religion, manhood, class, and patriotism together into a single identity.

Schenck grew up in a comfortable but modest home in Lincoln County in the 1840s and 1850s. His father, David Warlick Schenck, was a well-respected doctor in the community. His mother, Rebecca, died when he was only two years old, and her death left a subtle but ever-present melan-

choly hovering over Schenck's boyhood home. David and his older sister, Barbara Elizabeth, were left to the care of their father, who never remarried. Despite the absence of a mother, Schenck grew up in a loving and structured home, where he was first taught the Christian faith. During the 1850s, the South experienced great prosperity and a growing religious consciousness; at that time, evangelical Protestantism dominated the cultural horizon of most southerners.

Schenck's pro-southern sentiment found its fullest expression in religion and southern patriotism. In January 1860, as he pondered the South's political future, Schenck articulated his support for radical secessionists: "The South is in a considerable state of excitement on the present state of politics. I am a Disunionist," he wrote.<sup>1</sup> Schenck's position on disunion so early in 1860 contrasts sharply with the Unionist sentiment held by the vast majority of North Carolinians. A few months later, after attending a sermon on the doctrine of imputed righteousness, Schenck experienced God's plan of salvation as an epiphany, and his weak and faltering faith quickened to a vivacity that he had never before known. Shortly thereafter, Schenck recorded in his diary: "being thoroughly convinced of my duty I united myself to the Presbyterian Church in Lincolnton . . . for God has greatly increased my faith and strengthened my grace."<sup>2</sup> Schenck's early commitment to secession and the timing of his religious awakening are no mere coincidence; they demonstrate the gradual process by which the sacred and secular spheres of his life converged into a single identity.

Southern divines had for many years depicted the ecclesiastical conflict over slavery with their northern counterparts in starkly contrasting terms: orthodoxy versus heresy, purity versus corruption, godliness versus ungodliness. Schenck made a similar comparison, albeit implicitly, when, on the day he recorded joining the church, he wrote, "I feel

a strong hope in Christ, but I know that all who live godly in Christ Jesus must suffer tribulation—I trust in his many promises for my support."<sup>3</sup> Like many southern evangelicals, Schenck sensed the "tribulation" at hand and viewed the approaching conflict as essentially religious in nature.

As the November 1860 elections drew near, Schenck became increasingly involved with the John C. Breckinridge presidential campaign, canvassing the judicial circuit in which he practiced law in support of the southern Democratic candidate. Schenck's political motivation stemmed in part from his desire to preserve the Constitution and to shield the South from the disgrace a Republican victory was sure to bring. In October, he wrote, "In this cause [the Breckinridge campaign] I have enlisted for the campaign, not as a politician or aspirant for office, but with pure and conscientious motives—to preserve our Constitutional rights and thereby save the Union, or if denied this, to choose secession in preference to disgrace."<sup>4</sup> During the campaign, Breckinridge Democrats fended off accusations that a vote for Breckinridge was a vote for disunion by arguing that their strident defense of southern rights reflected their desire to preserve the Union. Although Schenck was an advocate of disunion, he feared the grim consequences that were sure to follow secession. "[T]he pages of history for another year may be written in blood," he wrote, while pondering the stakes involved in the coming election.<sup>5</sup>

News of Abraham Lincoln's victory reached Lincolnton on November 8, and the town buzzed with activity. From his home on the outskirts of town, Schenck recorded the people's response to the results of the election: "Sadness covers every countenance, and alarm pervades every walk of life. There is panic in the money market, and every woman and child talks of war and its consequences. It is generally conceded that at least South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida

will secede immediately."<sup>6</sup> Between December 20, 1860, and February 4, 1861, the seven states of the lower South did indeed secede from the Union and formed the Confederate States of America, but in the upper South states of Virginia, Tennessee, Arkansas, and North Carolina, a strong conditional Unionist sentiment dominated.

As the cotton states of the lower South severed ties with the Union during the winter of 1861, a political battle pitting Unionists against secessionists was taking shape in North Carolina. Secession helped lay bare deep rifts in the state's political landscape by revealing that although North Carolina was a slave state, the planter ethos and the fire-eaters' rhetoric on states' rights did not hold sway over the vast majority of Tar Heels. Secessionists were a minority in North Carolina, where most people, including substantial slaveholders, expressed a strong allegiance to the Union. A vibrant two-party system consisting of the resurrected Whig Party and the Democratic Party thrived in North Carolina, helping to maintain political equilibrium in the midst of secession and into the war years. Most North Carolina Whigs were Unionists who advocated a "wait and see" policy regarding the Republican victory. They cautioned Tar Heels against drawing premature conclusions about the Republican doctrine on restricting slavery in the territories. They also scorned the state's small number of fiery secessionists, portraying them as irrational fools seeking to lead the state down a path of political suicide. Factionalism plagued North Carolina's Democratic Party, and although the party was not split, two discernible camps had formed within its ranks. The majority of Democrats were moderates who, along with some Whigs, advocated secession on a conditional basis only. Moderates understood that the overwhelming majority of voters who cast ballots for Breckinridge were Unionist Democrats, and party leaders were therefore reluctant to associate themselves with the

radical fringe. Secessionists constituted the minority voice among Democrats, and in the winter of 1861, secessionists worked feverishly to persuade Governor John Ellis, a secessionist himself, to encourage the legislature to hold a statewide vote on a secession convention to debate North Carolina's future in the Union. After a lengthy discussion, a date was set in February for North Carolinians to vote on the convention question and to elect delegates from each county should the convention be approved.

During the months of January and February 1861, secessionists and Whigs waged an intense publicity campaign in every county. The atmosphere across the state grew tense as secessionists and their opponents tugged voters in opposite directions. In the midst of this charged political environment, Schenck made a series of risky decisions that, if successful, might catapult him into the position of prominence he had so longed for, but if unsuccessful, would destroy his dream of joining the inner circle of North Carolina elites.

First, Schenck enlisted in the secessionists' cause to quash Unionism in North Carolina. He toured the judicial circuit of the western Piedmont, speaking to crowds and attending gatherings at which he urged voters to sever ties with the United States and join their sister states in a southern Confederacy. Schenck often compared the current political environment to that facing the Patriots in the American Revolution. "We are in the midst of revolution," he wrote while touring the circuit. Throughout the region, Schenck encountered sharp political divisions and noted, "political differences are so embittered as to engender personal animosity daily. Everyone not for us is against us and is counted an enemy, a submissionist, equal to a Tory."<sup>7</sup>

On February 28, North Carolinians voted on the convention, and the results sent a clear message to secessionists. The call for a convention was defeated by a majority of

votes, and, moreover, the majority of delegates that Tar Heels elected to attend the would-be convention were Unionists. The message: North Carolina was still firmly attached to the Union. Schenck's frustration boiled as he assessed the situation: "We the secessionists are laboring manfully to join them [Confederate States], but the Tories of 76 are not all out of North Carolina yet—I feel like cursing the state and bidding it a final adieu."<sup>8</sup>

Shortly after the convention vote, secessionist leaders proposed another convention wherein delegates elected to attend the first proposed convention and others from all parties would assemble in the small town of Goldsboro to discuss further the matter of secession. More than two-thirds of the delegates elected in the February 28 vote were Unionists who flatly refused to countenance the Goldsboro Convention. Moreover, the Unionist press denounced the convention as illegal and revolutionary. In spite of the controversy surrounding the Goldsboro Convention, Schenck attended as a delegate from Lincoln County.

The convention opened on March 22, and delegates elected Weldon N. Edwards to preside over the assembly. Franklin J. Moses of South Carolina delivered the opening speech, in which he "referred to the natural affinity between North Carolina and the seceded states and reminded his hearers of the difficulties which then beset them in the old Union."<sup>9</sup>

Later that day, Schenck delivered a speech before the convention, another risk he was willing to take to establish firmly his Confederate allegiance. In his speech, Schenck distinguished himself as a staunch advocate of southern rights. Among those listening was a young boy named John M. Hollowell, a native of Goldsboro who came to witness the excitement the convention brought to his otherwise sleepy town. So forceful was Schenck's speech that seventy-

eight years later, Hollowell mentioned it in a series of articles he wrote for the *Goldsboro Herald*, collected and published as *War-Time Reminiscences and Other Selections*. Recalling the events of the convention that invaded his hometown as a boy, Hollowell wrote, "I remember well when old Moses, of South Carolina, came to Goldsboro and made his secession speech. There was [sic] other speeches on that day—one by young Schenck, who after the war became Judge Schenck."<sup>10</sup>

On March 23, delegates formed committees to draft several resolutions. One resolution produced by the convention set forth that "the vote taken on February 28 was not the deliberate fiat of the people; that subsequent events had brought many into a readiness for reconsideration of the state's relations to the Union."<sup>11</sup> The convention also established the North Carolina branch of the Southern Rights Party and recorded those present as founding members. Schenck boasted of his activities at the convention in his diary: "On the 22nd & 23d I put myself on record before the country as an unconditional secessionist—I attended the Goldsboro Convention which organized the Southern Rights Party of North Carolina which laid as its foundation the secession of North Carolina from the late United States."<sup>12</sup>

The Goldsboro Convention drew rebuke from Unionists and moderate Democrats alike and was never recognized as a legitimate assembly, but for Schenck, the convention marked the consummation of his Confederate identity. Throughout the secession crisis, and perhaps because of it, the various components of this identity—politics, religion, and patriotism—all came together to form, in Schenck's view, a new definition of faith, manhood, and respectability. Like disparate elements cast into the furnace and forged into tempered steel, Schenck's identity as a Confederate nationalist stemmed from a blending of antebellum politics, religion, and

notions of respectability, but represented more than the sum of its parts.

After the Goldsboro Convention adjourned, events unfolded quickly. In the early hours of the morning of April 13, 1861, Confederate general P. G. T. Beauregard commenced his long-anticipated attack on beleaguered Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. The next day, Governor Ellis received a telegraph message from Abraham Lincoln requesting him to supply a quota of troops to help suppress the rebellion in the South. Ellis replied quickly, "you can get no troops from North Carolina," then ordered the state militia to seize all coastal forts and federal arsenals within the state. On May 27, a secession convention called by Governor Ellis convened in Raleigh, and within hours, delegates voted unanimously to approve North Carolina's secession from the Union.

Throughout the summer of 1861, a wave of Southern nationalism swept across the state, manifested in gleeful volunteerism. Every level of society appeared to make sacrifices for the Confederacy, and all looked optimistically to victory on the battlefield. Even Whigs and Democrats seemed to forget their differences and joined hands in a common cause. The surge of brotherhood that characterized the early months of the war faded very quickly, however, and by October of 1861, there were signs of discontent across the Old North State.

North Carolina's disproportionate contribution to the war effort in men and materiel began taking a toll on the state early in the conflict. As historian Paul D. Escott has noted, "Virtually the entire military population served at some point, yet there was another side to the story. It also was true that North Carolina led the South in desertions and signs of disaffection."<sup>13</sup> Discontent, in fact, began almost immediately after secession, when the state's political parties realigned into the Conservative Party, which consisted of old Whigs and Unionist Democ-

rats, and the Confederates or secessionist Democrats. In the first few months of the war, while all seemed to be going well, the Confederates gloated over their Conservative counterparts. By the autumn of 1861, however, the Confederates' popularity plummeted as the reality of a protracted and costly war set in on the home front. Acknowledging the lack of public support for the Confederates, Schenck and many other secessionists sought to downplay their role in promoting secession by slipping quietly into the ranks of the Conservatives, yet Schenck remained ardently committed to the cause of Southern independence.

Schenck determined early on that his "poor health" precluded him from military service. Although he had suffered a mild case of diphtheria in the winter of 1860–61, by March his health was fully restored. Yet, throughout his life Schenck believed that his health was failing and that physical exertion would result in his death. Fearing that camp life would bring about his demise, Schenck expended much energy in acquiring a bureaucratic position well out of harm's way. He served in the state's Commissariat Corps, where he was commissioned as a captain under the quartermaster general and was responsible for organizing and distributing supplies to North Carolina troops in the field. Schenck resigned this position in September 1861, a few weeks before the state's commissariat was handed over to the Confederate government in Richmond. Shortly thereafter, he was elected to replace William Lander as Lincoln County delegate to the state constitutional convention under way in Raleigh. The convention concluded its business early in 1862, and Schenck returned to Lincolnton, where he served as a Confederate receiver for the remainder of the war. As receiver, Schenck was responsible for collecting and recording tax revenue for the Confederate government, an unpopular occupation to say the least. Safely excluded from conscription,

Schenck remained on the home front, where he witnessed the slow death of the society he loved.<sup>14</sup>

Discontent on the home front increased as North Carolinians suffered the burdens of war. Poverty was perhaps the greatest source of disaffection, as the collapse of the Confederate economy brought financial ruin to many thousands of Tar Heels. Deprivation and sacrifice sapped North Carolinians of what little enthusiasm they had for the Confederate cause. A growing moral depravity and sense of desperation emboldened many to commit immoral acts that in times of peace would have shocked evangelical society to its core. Schenck frequently warned that vulgarity, apostasy, thievery, and "disloyalty" would likely bring God's wrath down upon the state. Moreover, advocates of peace had tapped the political voice of poor whites, unleashing a rabble of "such men as never would have dared to speak in times of peace," according to Schenck. Disillusionment at home erased the social boundaries separating the classes and forced the elite establishment to address the concerns of the masses. By 1864, everywhere he looked, the society that Schenck loved and held up as a model for the world was being torn apart. Not surprisingly, Schenck fell back on a religiously-based explanation. He blamed the Confederacy's misfortunes on the sin and immorality that permeated the home front. He believed that Tar Heels had abandoned their faith and that God would bring defeat as punishment for their wickedness. Nevertheless, Schenck clung to his belief that the Confederate cause was just, and although God might punish the South with defeat, He had not abandoned the society that now stood in ruins.<sup>15</sup>

The making of David Schenck's Confederate identity reveals that the sectional crisis and the Civil War produced a unique set of social, religious, and political pressures that redefined the meaning of Christian virtue, respectability, and honor. For Schenck, tireless devotion to the Confederate cause and the society it represented was an act of religiosity that affirmed his place among the respectable members of antebellum North Carolina society. Ironically, the cause meant to rescue Schenck's beloved society from an unholy alliance with the North also brought it to ruin. Historians have often failed to demonstrate the catalytic relationship between antebellum concepts of Christian manhood, honor, politics, and patriotism and the crisis over slavery that refined them into a Confederate identity. For middle-class Confederate bureaucrats such as Schenck, who not only survived the war but also flourished in its aftermath, the strong regional identity forged during the Civil War played a significant role in shaping the ethos of the New South.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> David Schenck Diary, Jan. 1860, Southern Historical Collection, Manuscripts Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; hereafter cited as Schenck Diary.

<sup>2</sup> Schenck Diary, 13 May 1860.

<sup>3</sup> Schenck Diary, 13 May 1860.

<sup>4</sup> Schenck Diary, 1 Oct. 1860.

<sup>5</sup> Schenck Diary, 1 Oct. 1860; Marc W. Kruman, *Parties and Politics in North Carolina, 1836-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983) 201-04.

<sup>6</sup> Schenck Diary, 8 Nov. 1860.

<sup>7</sup> Schenck Diary, 1 Feb. 1861.

<sup>8</sup> Schenck Diary, 18 Mar. 1861.

<sup>9</sup> *Fayetteville Observer* 18 Mar. 1861, quoted in Henry McGilbert Wagstaff, *State Rights and Political Parties in North Carolina, 1776–1861* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1906) 142.

<sup>10</sup> J. M. Hollowell, *War-Time Reminiscences and Other Selections* (Goldsboro, N.C.: Goldsboro Herald, 1919).

<sup>11</sup> Wagstaff 142.

<sup>12</sup> Schenck Diary, Mar. 1861.

<sup>13</sup> Paul D. Escott, *Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985) 35–36.

<sup>14</sup> Wagstaff 142.

<sup>15</sup> Schenck Diary, Mar. 1861.

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