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# A lifetime of change: Robert Lee Durham and the New South

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**A lifetime of change: Robert Lee Durham and the New South**

by

**William Allen Hunt**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS**

Major: History

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Ames, Iowa

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## Introduction

The New South is an elusive place and time. In his original introduction to *Origins of the New South*, C. Vann Woodward presented the historical community with the dilemma of defining the “New South.”<sup>1</sup> He explained that the term was more of a catchphrase than a definition. “New South” did not define a period, a geographical region, or a population. As a historical term, “New South” is vague at best. It denotes a notion of change, a hope for the future, and a possible difference between those allegiant to the Lost Cause and those willing to work on behalf of a new cause. Before, during, and immediately after the Civil War, the predominantly rural South’s infrastructure was dilapidated and consisted of dirt roads, failing farms, and a weak economy. The end of the war brought depression, social upheaval, and the railroad. The “New South” stood at the end of radical Reconstruction. Woodward wrote that he would rather not use the term “New South” if he had another option. He argued that the term “designates an ill-defined group of southerners.” This may still be true, but that depends on the way we use “New South” as a tool for understanding southerners after Reconstruction.

For this paper, the New South is a period of change. Whereas Woodward disliked using the term “New South” because of its limitations, the idea of change also has limitations. It is difficult to measure change within a man who died more than half a century ago. The New South did not produce predetermined products nor did it have a predetermined duration. For this case, it lasted an entire lifetime. The subject of this study, Robert Lee Durham, was born in a rural town in North Carolina five years after Lee’s surrender. His parents lived through the Civil War and were defenders of southern culture. As a child, his

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<sup>1</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971).

parents raised him as a traditional southerner; he had no other option. When Durham died in 1949, he was still a southerner, but no longer in the traditional mode of his parents. The changes Durham experienced were, for this project, personal. The changes consisted of small alterations to behavior and belief, which had the cumulative effect, over time, of creating a new person. His change was gradual and as changes accumulated, Durham became less the traditional man, i.e. less like his father, and a more modern man.

Durham's personal changes epitomized the complexities of the New South. For Durham, the New South was a time of transition, generational and long term. Durham's change began when he was a young man living in North Carolina during the late 1880s and early 1890s. By 1908, the South had endured the hand of change for forty-three years and Durham was ready to make a stand. Durham stood his ground on the subject of miscegenation. He entered into the heated debate over the social direction of the South with his book *The Call of the South*.<sup>2</sup> Durham intended his novel to serve as a clarion call to the United States, but more particularly, to the South. His warning focused on the amalgamation of whites and African Americans. Durham's position was clear: racial mixing threatened the downfall of the nation and the morality of all humanity. Durham believed African Americans and whites were not of the same species. To argue that Durham was a racist would be accurate, but such a simple analysis denies the complexity of the man and the time in which he lived. Durham was a racist and other authors have rightly criticized his beliefs. He openly declared himself an authority on the "race issue," and in doing so, opened himself to

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Lee Durham, *The Call of the South* (New York: L.C. Page and Company, 1908).

critique.<sup>3</sup> Durham was a product of, and contributor to, the environment of the New South that changed him so much.

Durham was the son and grandson of Civil War veterans, men who became legends in their hometown communities. Durham was a North Carolinian, author, lawyer, cotton broker, inventor, staunch Democrat and an industrialist. Durham served as the president of an all-Girl seminary as well as a self-designated family historian and genealogist.<sup>4</sup> Durham was a creator of history and one of his greatest goals was to have his grandchildren remember him as a noble southerner. Durham was a man of the South and his racism was only a small part of his greater story and influence. Although his racism was a relatively minor aspect of his character, it acted like a cancer. His hate ate away at his personal relationships until he had only a few defenders. Durham's life provides valuable insight into how a first child of a New South dealt with the pressures inherent in a society in transition. Also important was how he balanced posing as a traditional southerner in an environment that increasingly favored innovation, and how he manipulated historical memory to create a false family identity in order to manipulate his grandchildren's view of him and the family name.

This thesis is more than a straightforward biography because it presents more than a simple dictation of a southern man's life. Durham's story provides insight into changes that occurred in the South during the post-Reconstruction era. Durham was a leader in his day but he also lived under two significant shadows. The first was that of his father and grandfather because both men created a strong family legacy which Durham felt responsible for

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<sup>3</sup> Durham to Dowd, December 23, 1944. RLDP SVU.

<sup>4</sup> The school he served as President of was Southern Seminary Junior-College for Girls. It was located in Buena Vista, Virginia. In 1995, the school permanently closed, but in 1996 the buildings reopened as Southern Virginia College. The school is now co-ed and it is a liberal arts institution.

maintaining. Durham was the son of Captain Plato Durham who was in the Confederate Army and founding member of the Ku Klux Klan in North Carolina as well as a well-respected lawyer and politician. Durham's grandfather was one of the founding fathers of his hometown. This same grandfather helped raise Durham and his siblings after Plato Durham's death in 1875. Thomas Dixon Jr., Durham's cousin, cast the second shadow. Thomas Dixon Jr., who authored the well-known book, *The Clansman*, which was later adapted into the movie *The Birth of a Nation*. Friends and relatives of Durham respected Dixon because he honored traditional southern ideals of racial stratification.<sup>5</sup> Durham felt he had to compete with his cousin as a leader in antiquated racist rhetoric. Durham believed that his place in history, as well as his position within his family, depended on his ability to negotiate his loyalty to his family's tradition of racial intolerance and his own desires for success and recognition as an industrialist and friend of the Yankee.

Histories of the New South and literary criticisms provide context for this study. Both historians and literary critics have recognized Durham as a historical figure worthy of examination, but they have not examined the entire man. This lack of detailed examination led to misunderstandings and understatements. In a review of Durham's autobiography, *Since I was Born*, Professor Frontis W. Johnston of Davidson College, wrote in *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, "The student of Virginia History will find little of value in Durham" in 1954.<sup>6</sup> According to Johnston, "There is some question as to whether it may properly be called an autobiography at all, since Durham is much more concerned with other people and their deeds than with his own thoughts or his own career." For Johnston, the lack

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Dixon Jr., *The Clansman*, (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1905).

<sup>6</sup> Frontis W. Johnston, review of *Since I was Born*, by Durham, *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 62, no. 3 (July 1954): 371-372.

of information dealing specifically with Durham's own life weakened his autobiography. Professor Frontis W. Johnston was mistaken, however, the "lack" of information was actually a complex clue. Although he did not realize it, Professor Johnston comment was quite astute. Durham's method of writing revealed more about Durham than any statement about his deeds or career could have, but only a biography accompanied by an understanding of the New South as an agent of change that Durham went through makes Durham's message understandable. Not just contemporary reviews missed the complexity of the man. Modern scholars have also oversimplified Durham.

In 1996, Barbara Ladd published a review of southern authors. In her analysis, Ladd simply referred to Durham as a "radical racist."<sup>7</sup> She was right, but like Professor Johnston, she did not realize how correct she was. Her incisive observation aptly described Durham's racism, but Ladd missed the layered connections Durham had with the other authors she discussed. The network of racism in the South was complex and informative. She initially discussed Durham by transitioning from Thomas Dixon Jr.'s racist characters in *The Leopard's Spots*. She followed Durham with a quote that demonstrated clearly racist attitudes from a United States Representative, Josephus Daniels of North Carolina. As mentioned above, Dixon and Durham were cousins. In the early 1890s, Durham and Representative Daniels became close friends when they discovered their shared dislike for Populists in North Carolina politics. They were great friends and collaborated on issues within and without the political arena until Daniel's death in 1948. In 1996, Barbara Ladd scratched the surface of Durham. She may have had the opportunity to uncover more, but she was not discussing the network of racism in the South and Durham was only a peripheral subject at best. However,

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<sup>7</sup> Barbara Ladd, *Nationalism and the Color Line in George W. Cable, Mark Twain, and William Faulkner* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996) pg. 147.



Ladd's snapshots of Durham's life led to clear conclusions, but the limitations of the scope of her research meant she could not address why he was a "radical racist."

C. Vann Woodward served the historical community as the leader in New South history for decades. His research and interpretations shaped a generation of thinking and writing. Woodward's *Origins of the New South*<sup>8</sup> and *The Burden of Southern History* provide valuable insight into the actions and reactions of the political elite. Woodward's treatment of the political elite is similar to Durham's treatment in this thesis. Woodward was skeptical of the elite. He found contradictions between their rhetoric and actions. In *Tom Watson*, Woodward presented the New South through a biography.<sup>9</sup> In this biography, Woodward showed how the political fight occurred at the personal level. The dynamic Tom Watson was a superb choice because his life and career were as complex as the Georgian political environment. Historians have been able to understand the New South better because of his work.

In 1992, Edward L. Ayers wrote *The Promise of the New South*.<sup>10</sup> This book changed the way New South historians viewed the New South. Ayers complemented Woodward by continuing the historical narrative into the realm of the average person. Ayers' book was a wonderful first-look at the common people of the New South, but it did not track a single individual. Ayers used snapshots of a variety of people. He used these snapshots to reveal changes that took lifetimes to achieve. Ayers' research was unquestionably thorough and it supports this current research. Ayers showed the New South southerner to be similar to the

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<sup>8</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971). And, C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938).

<sup>10</sup> Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

New Deal northerner and he posited a rational theory of how the New South arrived at its northern parallel. However, this thesis moves in a slightly different direction by combining the *Tom Watson* method of biography and the *Promise* focus on those who did not live in the public eye. Both authors understood the New South to be a paradox. Durham was also a paradoxical New South southerner.

The people of the New South have stories and when the events of their lives are connected, they become examples of the hybrid nature of the New South southerner. Durham was a quintessential New South southerner, but he did not define what a New South southerner had to be. His experiences were personal and atypical, but his life is worth studying. Without Durham, historians of North Carolina, Virginia, women's education, industrialization, and southern literature would lose an opportunity to enhance their understandings of the New South.

The changes Durham underwent transformed him from a traditionally rural agrarian southern boy into an industrial man. As he grew up, he grew away from his family legacy. Politics, social changes, economic demands, military service, and his communities all had a hand in changing Durham. Snapshot history cannot express the small, but important, changes. Durham thought of himself as elite, but he had neither the bank account nor voting power needed to associate with real power brokers. The changes Durham experienced were largely involuntary and they broke longstanding traditions and threatened a family legacy. Some may say the changes were for the better, and others may argue for worse, but either way, Durham changed and tried to hide it.

## Chapter 1

### North Carolina

Robert Lee Durham's life ended far different than it began. He died financially stable, in moderately-populated Lexington, Virginia, and after years of his loved ones pleading for him to change his views, especially his negative opinion of African Americans. His early childhood, like many of the era, was rural, poor and plagued with a deep hatred for newly-freed African Americans. Durham relied on his community and hard work for survival. There is little in the record of Durham's youth to suggest his eventual departure from the land and an agrarian livelihood, but Durham wanted it that way. The majority of what we know about Durham's childhood comes from his autobiography. He completed the manuscript a few years before his death and a local historian at Lexington's Washington and Lee University edited the manuscript prior to publication.<sup>11</sup> The fallacies of memory and Durham's desire to shape his own legacy surely slanted his account.

As a boy, Durham lived an agrarian life devoted to the ideals of the Old South. His parents taught him to love the South as it existed in their memories. His parents held a Jeffersonian view of the connection between man and the land. Because the South was predominantly agrarian, it was also closer to God. Durham believed there was a general responsibility for southerners to maintain the proper proximity between white men and the land. Another lesson dealt with honoring his family and his family's name. For the Durhams, names carried significance and memories. Named after the great Civil War general and his

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<sup>11</sup> The original manuscript is said to be more than 500 pages in length. However, Whittet and Shepperson, the publishing company, is no longer in business and I have been unable to locate the original manuscript.

father meant the young man had, in his own eyes, a responsibility to faith, family, and home. As the oldest son, Durham served his family as a pseudo-father and guardian.

Love of family was not the sole property of southerners, but according to Durham, nothing meant more. For Durham, the family name defined and guided his life. Durham was born May 4, 1870 to Captain Plato Durham and Catherine Lenora Tracy in rural North Carolina. Durham was the first of four children to Plato and Catherine, but there was plenty of room for more. In 1870, the U.S. Census registered Shelby, North Carolina's population at 1,419, which equaled less than twenty-five people per square mile.<sup>12</sup> There were not many people close to the Durham home, but they had each other. When Durham was very young, his father told him the story about the surrender of General Lee at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia. Plato told young Durham that he had been in command of his troops outside the door, when General Lee signed the surrender. Father told son, "General Robert E. Lee held his head high." Plato went on, "That is why I named you after him, that great man." Plato named his second son Stonewall Jackson Durham and his third son, Plato Tracy Durham. Every name held deep significance. Some may wonder why Plato Tracy Durham would be lumped in with Generals Lee and Jackson. Durham wrote that General Lee once said, "Captain (Plato) Durham was the bravest man I ever knew." With an endorsement from General Lee, Captain Plato Durham's choice for his third son's name was acceptable.

After family, perhaps the most important element in Durham's early life was poverty. Poverty was a signature condition for post-war rural North Carolina and Durham considered

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<sup>12</sup> This number is calculated by reviewing the number of people reported on the U.S. Census from 1870. That information can be found at <https://www.familysearch.org/pal:MM9.3.1/TH-267-12862-76946-2?cc=1438024&wc=1587582>. This website required a township number in order to designate which town was Shelby. I found the township number at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cleveland\\_County,\\_North\\_Carolina](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cleveland_County,_North_Carolina). My calculations are approximate, but the point is clear; Shelby was a rural locale in 1870.

his trials with poverty to be an experience of value. Between 1871 and 1894, Durham's family struggled to make ends meet. Prior to the Civil War, the family apple and grape orchard in combination with Plato Durham's sporadic legal work made the home prosperous, but the value of their produce dropped after the war and their full trees yielded far less money. Profits from Plato's legal practice shrank as well, partly due to the free services he offered to impoverished Confederate veterans. There are no records within Durham's paper to determine if the family owned any slaves, which could have generated or demonstrated a degree of wealth. When Durham was five years old, his father died of pneumonia and Durham inherited his father's responsibilities for at least a year on the orchard. Although poor, Durham came from a stable home, but living in Shelby, North Carolina, immediately following the Civil War brought certain hardships. In his autobiography, Durham wrote,<sup>13</sup> "the rationing that was required during the war helped to prepare the people of the South for after the war." Durham wrote, "Everything was scarce. As a growing boy I was always hungry."<sup>14</sup> This level of scarcity was a shared experience. Durham held this memory as a reminder of the trials the South endured and as evidence of the enduring spirit of the southern people. But his hard work was never enough and Durham recounted stories of nights in which he went to bed hungry. Durham described to his readers that the smell of apples was nearly torture.<sup>15</sup> He was approximately six years old and his mother was unable to sell enough bushels to pay debts and purchase food. Durham's father died less than a year earlier and the family was still recovering from the loss. Durham went to bed extremely hungry and

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<sup>13</sup> All of the biographical material presented in this paper comes from *Since I Was Born* unless specified. There is no other document, that I know of, that deals with Durham or his family. I can infer certain events based on an array of sources, but this book will serve as the source of basic information. It is through Durham's hand and therefore it is a part of the larger story as well.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Lee Durham, *Since I was Born*, ed. Marshall William Fishwick (Richmond: Whittet and Shepperson, 1953).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

all he could smell was the sweet aroma of ripe juicy apples. He wished in vain that a half-rotten apple would fall near his window. None did and he awoke the next morning still hungry. This experience obviously stuck out in Durham's mind as formative.

Due to the scarcity of nutritious food, and money, Durham learned to rely on his community for help. Communal cooperation was a critical component in the early New South. This situation affected Durham deeply. In fact, his community occupied a special place in his memory and in his autobiography. He used events from his childhood, especially those of charity, to define who he was as a retired man. One of the stories he used was an excellent example of, what Durham called, the "southern spirit." Durham's family grew apples and grapes, but they could not eat their source of revenue. Durham credited William Andrew "Andy" Mauney and Jacob Simri "Jake" Mauney for providing help to local hungry boys. The men were friends of the Durham family. Fortunately, the Mauney family did not suffer the same level of economic distress as the Durhams. The Mauney family opened and operated a general store near the Durham home after the war. Durham fondly reminisced about how the Mauney brothers would buy their family's products at a principle cost. The value of Durham's crops dropped each year, but the Mauney brothers always paid the Durhams the highest rate. Durham remembered that southern hospitality forced a traditional protest by his mother, but she always relented and the Mauney brothers paid exorbitant prices for the produce. Not only did those men pay top dollar, but "upon later inspection," the Durhams frequently found that the brothers had voluntarily paid interest.

The Mauney's generosity extended beyond business transactions and into the hearts of boys like Durham. As young eight-year-old Durham and his friends traveled home from school, he would regularly pass thru the Mauney brother's general store. From time to time,

the brothers left slivers of cream cheese seemingly unattended on the counter, and within reach. Durham remembered that the local boys would accept this generosity willingly. It was Durham's prayer that, "Mr. Andrew" and "Mr. Jake" sat a little further up front in heaven for what they had done for the boys of North Carolina in the days of the post-Civil War depression.<sup>16</sup> Later in life, Durham realized that the Mauney brother must have watched for the boys, counted how many were coming, prepared the cream cheese, and hid away in an effort to make local boys happy. Durham learned the lesson of community before he left elementary school. From Durham's words, it was obvious that he grew up in a community and in a home.

Durham's poverty experience shaped him as a man because he saw value in the struggle to overcome his family's situation. Similarly, Durham saw value in other life lessons and Durham's childhood was typical. He farmed, played, got into mischief and learned to hate African Americans. Like other boys in his area, Durham's father and grandfather were Civil War veterans. The war of northern aggression colored their perspectives, and thus, his perspective because they were his primary examples of manhood. Durham's father died when Durham was five years old while working away from home with the Ku Klux Klan. Captain Plato Durham co-founded the Shelby, North Carolina chapter of the KKK, but before he died, he taught Durham to defend his race. Durham imbibed one of the more nefarious elements of a southern childhood, intense codified and traditional racism. Durham grew up hearing the arguments against the freedom and civil treatment of the African Americans. During his childhood, Durham certainly witnessed ex-slaves working in white households and being treated as inferior. Durham watched as family and friends actively

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-55.

worked for the disfranchisement of newly-freed African Americans. For Durham, it was the only way to think. Durham heard similar arguments aimed at dis-enfranchisement as an adult, but he was no longer a student; Durham was a participant.

Fortunately, white supremacy was not the only type of education available to young boys in and around his hometown. Although his mother was primarily responsible for raising the children, he helped support the home, laboring in the apple orchard. Young Durham worked with family and neighbors who were solid agrarians. Agriculture life was a cornerstone of southern life, his family and community believed. Durham's family and neighbors espoused the agrarian lifestyle as ordained by God and a "holy work."<sup>17</sup> Although hunger caused Durham to suffer, his siblings and friends romanticized his childhood as a positive time because they overcame the struggle. This was how Durham wanted to portray his childhood. He was poor, but he was poor for a reason. According to Durham, some of the men in his town considered factory or rail work an abomination. Durham learned at a young age to appreciate the feel of soil.

As noted earlier, Durham's mother taught him that working towards an education needed to be one of Durham's highest priorities. Durham remembered what his mother taught him and he chose to share certain elements of his early education in his autobiography. Most of Durham's southern education came from the fields, but he also attended elementary and high school. As a school aged young man, it is possible to understand Durham's future resentment of public schools because the local school system he attended was new, unprofessional, and, in Durham's view, a failure. Durham's view that the school was a failure illuminated the respect he held for his mother's opinion. Durham viewed education a way out

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<sup>17</sup> Durham to Stonewall Jackson Durham, September 12, 1934. RLDP SVU.



and his elementary education could not help him accomplish his goals. Durham's formal education began when he was seven years old. He attended W. T. R. Bell's King's Mountain High School. This school taught basic math and reading. The name of the school betrayed the education received there. It was an elementary school at best. Captain Bell contracted with the State to hold classes each year for as many months as taxpayer's dollars would support, then, those who could not afford to pay would drop out until the next free term. It was at this school that Durham received his first education in the roughness and vulgarity seemingly inherent in public schools. It was at this institution that Durham heard, and regretfully used, his first "bad" word. After meeting with the principal, Durham vowed never to use foul language again because it hurt too much. Perhaps Durham's greatest disappointment from public school occurred at *King's High*. Durham learned how babies were born and gained firsthand experience into the need for professional educational supervision.<sup>18</sup> Durham and a few of his friends stumbled on an interesting sight. Some young girls, the same age as Durham, were playing "babies." One of the girls screamed, moaned and writhed on the ground until another girl had to call for the doctor. When the girl returned with the doctor, a small bespectacled girl, the doctor set to work. After some "signs of energetic activity," the doctor stood up in triumph holding in her hands a doll, "*fully dressed!*" Later in life, Durham joked that this fully dressed birthday party gave modern obstetricians something to shoot for.<sup>19</sup> Durham managed to find humor in the situation as an adult. However, his disappointment in the system was clearly evidenced by choosing such a story as an example of the failed public education system.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-61.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

For high school, Durham attended the prestigious *Horner Military School of Oxford*, North Carolina. It was at *Horner* that Durham took the first steps of replacing an agrarian future with one centered on modern fields of study, namely math and engineering. His stepfather served as the school's superintendent and was able to enlist Durham as a cadet. At the young age of seventeen, Durham demonstrated mathematical skills that shaped significant portions of his life. According to Durham, he excelled in basic mathematics and eventually challenged his instructors' knowledge concerning math theory. His education planted the first signpost of discontinuity. Math would lead him to engineering and away from the agrarian traditions in which he was raised.

The Horner Military School of Oxford was only the first step in Durham academic education. Durham needed family connections to gain admission to Horner due to poverty. After excelling at Horner, Durham decided to attend Trinity College in Randolph County, North Carolina. Trinity held a special place in the hearts of the Durham family. Trinity College operated under the direction of Braxton Craven, the headmaster and President of the College for forty-one years. Trinity was a sanctuary for the Confederacy during the Civil War and it taught traditional Methodist doctrine. Prior to the Civil War, the faculty frequently used the school as a forum for political discussion. In 1860, the headmaster, Craven, gave a speech in which he declared that the South had never been free. Craven said, "The Revolutionary war broke our servitude to England and left the South subject to the North."<sup>20</sup> The Durham family's dedication to the Confederacy and Methodism made Durham's choice to attend Trinity an easy one.

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/253/entry>

In Durham's eyes, loyalty was far more important than prestige. He wanted his readers to understand that he based his choice to attend Trinity on values, not pride. Durham's friends occasionally teased him about his decision to attend Trinity. A friend of Durham once asked, "Durham, why did you and your brother Stonewall go to Trinity?" His friend explained, "Come on over and join us at the University. That is the place where the *prominent* and *well-to-do* people in the state send their sons." This interchange was quite informative. First, Durham's friends recognized him as sufficiently capable of the intellectual rigor of the state university. Second, this is the first evidence that the Durham family had recovered from the poverty of Reconstruction. Until this point in the record, the Durham family relied on the community to meet its needs, but Durham's loyalty to southern tradition and Methodism kept him at Trinity and he found success while there. While attending Trinity, he played tennis and won the high jump in the only intra-mural track meet. He was a baritone in the glee club. He graduated with the third highest GPA and he was an active member of the student body. Despite all the success Durham experienced at Trinity, one event made him a legend. Durham opened the first interstate collegiate football game in the South with his kickoff.<sup>21</sup> Later in the game, Durham's brother joined him in sports' lore by scoring the first touchdown. Durham graduated from Trinity with a four-year degree in civil engineering in 1891.

His devotion to southern traditionalism and Methodism made him an obvious choice when the school announced that it was going to change its location. It moved to the city of

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<sup>21</sup> Durham, *Since I was Born*, 128.

Durham, North Carolina, in 1892 and later changed its name to Duke University.<sup>22</sup> Later on, Durham served as a charter trustee during the transition from Trinity College to Duke University. He claimed that his only activity while serving was to remind those in charge of what they were leaving behind. When Durham received this appointment, he had effectively ended his family's traditional course. Ironically, the position's sole responsibility was to remember. Durham remembered why he chose to attend Trinity. Trinity intimate relationships with the Confederacy and Methodist Church gave it a special spirit. The board of trustees charged Durham with keeping the spirit alive during the transition. Durham's own transition proved somewhat different. He left the rural countryside and the agrarian lifestyle, two major elements in the traditional South.

Due to the national economic failures of 1893, Durham decided to give up his dreams of building bridges across the wide rivers of South America. Durham abandoned the engineering trade and swiftly moved to the law. With that decision, Durham effectively departed from the agrarian lifestyle for the remainder of his life. National economic conditions influenced Durham's shift in career, but he embraced the change. His willingness to give up a tradition he previously held in high regard was predictive of the remainder of his life.

Durham attended Judge Durham P. Dick's Law School in Greensboro, North Carolina. In this, Durham took advantage of a traditional connection. Judge Dick was a close friend of Captain Plato Durham, Durham's father. Judge Dick volunteered a position to Durham after Durham realized the unlikelihood of being an engineer in 1893. Durham did

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<sup>22</sup> When the school moved, Benjamin Newton Duke assumed primary financial control over the school. The school changed its name to Duke University in 1924. <http://newsoffice.duke.edu/all-about-duke/quick-facts-about-duke>

not go into law because he loved it or because his father was a lawyer. Durham pursued the law because he had to; the changing world forced him into it. Durham's legal education was not evidence of a continuation of a tradition. In his decision, success dominated tradition. Durham passed the North Carolina Bar Exam in 1893.<sup>23</sup>

The next major period of Durham's life began after he passed the North Carolina Bar exam and commenced work as a lawyer, politician, soldier, and educator. During this period, which lasted from 1893 to approximately 1919, Durham served in a variety of public and private positions in several states. He worked as a cotton broker, served in the Spanish-American War, and began work in the field of education. It was also during the 1890s, Durham found his love for inventing. Drawing on his engineering degree, he submitted patents for tires, generators, saddles, propellers and a variety of other items. From this time until Durham's death, he had a desire to aid the industrial machine.

After graduation, Durham opened his own law firm and began to "dabble" in politics.<sup>24</sup> In 1894, Durham served as a delegate to the State Democratic convention. At the convention, Durham found a "rapidly developing cyclone" known as Populism. A southern Democrat, Durham intensely mistrusted the alliance of Republicans and farmers. Durham did not trust the kind of people that fed him when he was hungry and protected his family after his father died. Upon returning from the convention, the delegates appointed Durham as the Chairman of the Gaston County Democratic Committee. Normally this would lead to a seat in the State senate. This was especially true for Durham because of his popularity among the people. Those who would vote for him consisted of residents of Cleveland county and J.A.

<sup>23</sup> Durham, *Since I Was Born*, 131.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

Anthony, “the Cleveland man” who was also extremely popular. Anthony held a great deal of political power in and around Cleveland County.<sup>25</sup> It was clear that Durham was accepted as elite. Historian Paul D. Escott argued, in *Many Excellent People*, that the North Carolinian elite effectively prevented the rise of unqualified white men.<sup>26</sup> Durham obviously made the cut.

Durham admitted that the idea of being a State Senator was appealing, but he could not stand with his party on every issue and he knew that solidarity was vital. Durham agreed with his party on the issues of race relations, taxation, and most other policies, but gold caused Durham to refuse the office of State Senator. Durham thought gold should be the standard the nation’s currency and he wanted to vote to guarantee its use. The prominent politicians in North Carolina were moving toward a “free-silver” policy and Durham did not want to cause a rift in the party. Durham refused to have his name on the ballot in an effort to protect his political allies. Durham remained in contact with those he rubbed elbows with in politics, but he remained on the periphery for the rest of his life.

Durham served as a Captain in the United States Army during the Spanish-American War. Initially, Durham wanted to serve as a Brigadier General. He offered to muster a sufficient number of troops to justify the rank. Durham wrote to the Governor of North Carolina and offered his service in exchange for the commission, but he also noted that he would still muster the men as a Colonel. The Governor thanked him graciously for his offer and requested that Captain Durham do all he could to help the United States. Durham willingly accepted this lesser commission and served honorably during the war. According to

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>26</sup> Paul D. Escott, *Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850-1900*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

Durham, this was, “The first time I have felt near to my father.”<sup>27</sup> Durham continued a family tradition of service when he joined the military. The war presented itself as an opportunity at notoriety and he wanted recognition. Durham was not a war hero. He did not live up to that element of the family tradition.

The next time Durham served his country was under slightly different circumstances. In 1900, Durham no longer lived in North Carolina. For reasons unknown, he moved to Virginia immediately following his discharge earlier in the year. Wiley Rankin, a local political manager in North Carolina, wrote Durham.<sup>28</sup> Wiley Rankin informed Durham that he (Rankin) and some others had commissioned Durham to be the county registrar. Rankin was worried that some of the African American men working on a new water and sewage system would attempt to vote. Durham initially tried to turn the appointment down due to a busy schedule, but Rankin had a ready response. Rankin said, “Can’t do it this time, Captain. There are from five hundred to a thousand strange niggers in the town a-workin...every darn one of them will try to register to vote...and they’ll swamp us if they do. It will take a man to hold ‘em. The appointment is already made – goodbye.” Durham accepted the position and did all he could to please those who hired him. On March 9, 1900, the Western District Court of North Carolina appointed Durham as a United States Commissioner.<sup>29</sup> There was a clear sense of a home rule by the Democrats and Durham was an integral part of the

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>28</sup> Unknown author from L.C. Page and Company to a “literary editor,” March 31, 1908. This is a letter from Durham’s publisher to a literary editor. The purpose of the letter was to sell Durham as a man who can write about the race problem.

<sup>29</sup> United States of America, Western District of North Carolina, Order of the Court, District Clerk, March 9, 1900. RLDP. SVU. This is a copy of the court order that gave Durham the authority to act as a registrar during the elections of 1900. There is an interesting characteristic of this document. This document states that 1900 was the 124<sup>th</sup> year of Independence for the country. This is ironic because Durham is being appointed in order to limit the independence of North Carolinians and because Durham would rather have the document state the 35<sup>th</sup> year of southern independence.

disfranchisement machine.<sup>30</sup> There was a concerted effort in 1900 to disfranchise the African American population of North Carolina during the election season. The political strategists hired Durham to do the job. The Saturday following the election, a large group of white men gathered at the local bar to discuss the week's election. Durham's was clearly satisfied with Rankin's assessment of his performance. Durham wrote proudly about Rankin's victory speech. According to Durham, Wiley Rankin addressed the crowd and said, "I thought there might be trouble...but Durham didn't need any help. He held them lying niggers up and turned 'em down right and left and yet he didn't brow-beat 'em or cuss-em out. He showed 'em all their lies and called all their bluffs and tricks, but he talked to 'em and showed 'em how it was in such a way that they went away feeling that he was as good a friend as they had on earth." Durham chose to tell the stories he felt described him accurately. He valued the lessons learned from poverty and a poor public school education, but he also valued the memory of the man he was in 1900.

After returning to Virginia, Durham continued to practice law. He had a successful firm, but for unknown reasons he eventually accepted a teaching position at Davenport College, in Lenoir, North Carolina. After Davenport College, Durham was a faculty member at Centenary College. Durham specialized in mathematics and Latin. He then served as the Dean of Students at Martha Washington College. Martha Washington had experienced a crisis between the students and the faculty. The two groups had become antagonistic towards the other and the school did not know how to solve the underlying issues. Martha Washington College specifically chose Durham to deal with the challenges between the

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<sup>30</sup> Woodward, *Origins*, 15, 51. Woodward clearly explained that there was a sense of a Democrat home rule. He also wrote that the "white man's party" was meant to crush the negro power derived from foreign (northern) control.



faculty and student body.<sup>31</sup> Although there are no records detailing why the school chose Durham, it would be logical that his years as a professional debater, orator, and lawyer made him acutely prepared to mediate between the two groups. Durham solved the problem in less than one year. Durham interviewed as many people at the school as possible in order to discover the source of the tension. He found that the faculty lacked “school spirit” and the students refused to follow instructors who failed to support the institution. Durham recommended that the school dedicate itself to school spirit from the top down. Durham instructed the administration and senior faculty to begin this process. Within a year, the students and the staff were in relative harmony.<sup>32</sup> By 1917, Durham was a professional academic. With the exception of his equestrian activities, he was disconnected from the land, completely.

When Durham was a child, his parents taught him the importance of family, community and education. His life of poverty taught him the value of reliance and being reliable. His family and neighbors tried to instill the value of an agrarian life and the importance of keeping the African American politically and socially subservient to white southerners. These were essential to be identified as a traditional southerner in Shelby, North Carolina in the 1880s. By 1919, Durham remained true to only two. He treasured education and he hated the African American. Economically he looked forward, but politically and socially, he still looked backwards. Durham used this period of his life to figure out who he was. He knew he was the son of Plato Durham and he recognized the importance of his

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<sup>31</sup> Official Letter from Martha Washington College to Durham, June 12, 1911. RLDP. SVU.

<sup>32</sup> Durham to the Faculty of Martha Washington College, undated. This was a report on the state of discipline at the school. Durham based his analysis on interviews with the students, observations in the classroom and conversations with the faculty. He concluded his report with suggestions for the school.

family name, community, education, and his willingness to follow in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, but he gave up his agrarian traditions for the law and invention.

## Chapter 2

### The Call of the South

April 3, 191-, two fictional armies, U.S. and Germany, were finally going to fight.<sup>33</sup> The Venezuelan terrain was high-walled and bisected by a running river. It was a terrible place to fight. The soldiers were not cowards, but they were not ready. Both sides spent the next two days preparing for war. Corporal Hayward Graham was always ready. He awoke the morning of the conflict and swiftly prepared for battle. He was twenty-three years old, almost a Harvard graduate and a leader among men. When he reached the front, he received his orders, which were to shovel the horses' stalls at the rear. His position in the military never riled him, but this assignment was almost beyond endurance.

It was a massacre. No one knew the Germans had positioned machine gunners directly in the path of the marching Americans. The American lines went alive. As hot lead pierced the soldiers, the line curled and writhed like a dying snake. General Bell called for reinforcements. The 10<sup>th</sup> and the 71<sup>st</sup> responded. Corporal Hayward learned of the orders and raced back to the front. His first sight of a dying man shook Corporal Graham's nerves. Then it came. With a pain he had not known before, Corporal Graham went down. A German soldier shot him in the shin. The wound was superficial, but bleeding profusely. He saw the man who shot him and all of his life's anger came rushing to the front of his mind and took the form of the German gunner. Hayward wanted revenge. Then he saw Colonel Philips of the 71<sup>st</sup> go down in the grass. Corporal Graham forgot his personal grievance, and thought of the man on the ground. His second thought turned the fallen-man's daughter. Before leaving for war, she gave Graham a pendant so he could remember her. He had remembered her and was now standing near her bloodied father. He ran to the Colonel, picked him up and ran through the hurricane of lead to safety. Hayward's bravery afforded the Colonel another chance at life and it afforded Hayward a second chance with the Colonel's daughter.<sup>34</sup>

This graphic scene from Robert Durham's 1908 novel, *The Call of the South* precipitated a grievous crime. Hayward Graham, an African American soldier and Colonel Phillip's white daughter were the novel's primary actors and the "second chance" Hayward so desperately desired would eventually lead to miscegenation, a mixed child, and national

<sup>33</sup> Durham deliberately omitted the last number for the year and claimed that the armies were fictional in order to claim he was not referring to real people.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Lee Durham, *The Call of the South* (L.C. Page and Co., Boston, 1908). This is not a quoted section from his novel. The abbreviated version above comprised the main story line dealing with the relationship between Hayward Graham and Colonel Phillips during a pivotal battle. I used material from pages 45-52.

tragedy. Durham's story reflected his interpretation of the New South. Durham was a man of internal conflict and the South was not very different. White men have been afraid of white women being intimate with African American men for centuries and the tensions between the races reached a breaking point at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>35</sup> The freedoms African Americans received after emancipation, the passage of Federal law, and the rewriting of State constitutions placed the African American community in a different kind of proximity to the white population. It became more difficult for white men to initiate sexual relations with black women because "the Negro buck" would not let them have it. African Americans pressed their interpretations of freedom into their social spheres. In response, Jim Crow legislation made its way throughout the South and Durham was a participant in that transition.

Durham wrote *The Call of the South* to be a call to the South, a call to repent of the sin of amalgamation and return to appropriate traditions of proximity and caste. In a way, Durham was telling the country, "Go back to *when* you belong. Go back to *when* everything made sense." Regrettably, Durham did not leave behind a clue as to why he felt compelled to write his novel, but something must have triggered him. Whatever caused Durham to write his novel also forced him to reevaluate his position within society. His novel critiqued a society that he could not understand and one he did not fit. *The Call of the South* was an extension of its author. As the novel received mixed reviews, so did Durham.<sup>36</sup> As a historical document, the novel shows changes occurring in Durham's world and the fears

<sup>35</sup> Ayers, *Promise*, 152-53. Another example of scholarship dealing with miscegenation is Martha Elizabeth Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century South* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

<sup>36</sup> This statement must be qualified. There is no way of knowing if the available reviews were all that Durham received. There may have been more that he discarded because he did not like what they said. Several of the negative reviews he kept were humorous in nature. Perhaps he saved these because they demonstrated that particular quality.

associated with social revolutions. In order for the reader to understand the reviews, a short summary of the novel is appropriate.

The novel followed the relationship between Hayward Graham, Colonel Phillips, and the Colonel's daughter, Helen. Hayward was a descendant of a "wild African" named Guinea Gumbo, who was known for incivility.<sup>37</sup> Although Hayward was only a descendant of an African American and held primarily white blood, the thought of having that "wild Negro blood" running in his veins frightened him. Durham meant to emphasize the untrustworthy nature of African Americans, even if they are only slightly black.<sup>38</sup> Hayward was educated at Harvard and was a star on the school football team. When the United States entered into a war with Germany, Hayward decided to enlist for service. When the medical officer filled out Hayward's medical sheet, Hayward admitted to being partially African American and the Army refused him entry into the white 71<sup>st</sup>. As a remedy, Hayward enlisted in the black company, the 10<sup>th</sup>.

In battle, Hayward saved the life of his commanding officer, Colonel Phillips. The Colonel did not forget Hayward's act of bravery. Phillips later became a politician and eventually the President of the United States. Throughout the Colonel's political career, he kept Hayward near him as a trusted aide. President Phillips' daughter was beautiful, but "wild and unpredictable." Helen fell in love with Hayward. The couple broke a socially ordained law. The President initially refused to allow the relationship, but Hayward "fooled" the President with the false promise that this relationship would bring more African American votes. Prior to marriage, Helen became pregnant. The political firestorm nearly

<sup>37</sup> Durham, *Call of the South*, 21.

<sup>38</sup> Durham to Alfred Smerskin, July 8, 1908. RLDP. DUA.

consumed the entire family. In time, the situation calmed down and the two young lovers were married. Normalcy returned and the baby's birth was highly anticipated.

When the child was born, the President visited the baby. Durham described the child this way. "It was a Negro baby: the colour was that of Ethiopia, the unmistakable nose, the hair that curled so tightly, the lips that were African, the large whites of the eyes."<sup>39</sup> The recessive gene that Hayward held found manifestation in his child. When the President saw the child, he gripped his chest, looked at his daughter and fell to the ground, dead. As a result, Helen lost her mind. Helen's family institutionalized her where she stayed "for the remainder of her life." Hayward suffered from the guilt of contaminating the White House and hurting the nation. He decided to dedicate his life to the military, in the hope he could give what he had taken, but his life could not make up for Colonel Phillips.

One of Durham's most potent social fears was that of miscegenation. The age of eugenics<sup>40</sup> was peaking and Durham was highly concerned with racial purity.<sup>41</sup> Durham believed that when two races mixed, the offspring received only the worst traits from the parent races. The fear generated by the fall of slavery and the need for segregationist laws for the New South, turned Durham into a type of activist. His preferred method of protest was the written word. *The Call of the South* was Durham's magnum opus in the fight to end amalgamation. Although Durham strongly focused on the future when he dealt with

<sup>39</sup> Durham, *The Call of the South*, 385.

<sup>40</sup> A concise discussion of the history of the eugenic movement can be found in Clyde Chitty's and Tony Benn's *Race, Eugenics, and Intelligence in Education*, New York: Continuum International Publishers, 2007, 25-42. Chitty explained that after Karl Marx and Charles Darwin initially collaborated on eugenic theory, their ideas were coopted by other social intellectuals. These scholars in Britain shifted the notion of selection to focus directly on blood. It was this idea that blood held the key to human potential that Durham accepted. Durham believed blood carried traits and a mixture of blood risked impurity.

<sup>41</sup> In Durham's description of Graham's features, he gives an unusually detailed account of how the base of the hair twists and how the nose was a touch wider than white men's. He also spent several paragraphs on the quality of blood and how personal traits and properties were transmitted by blood.

industrialization and economics, Durham held his father's antiquated views when it came to race relations. In 1908, Durham was still a staunch racist. His industrial habits eased his attitude toward his Yankee brothers, but nothing ever changed his heart towards African Americans.

The New South, of 1908, was a place of schism. Political shifts, including the competition for the remaining African American votes, threatened white control. The response by some white southerners to politically and socially active African Americans in the public eye led to the enhancement of Jim Crow legislation, disenfranchisement and lynching. Even Republican President Theodore Roosevelt's progressive policies forced division in the South. Roosevelt's attitude toward the advancement of the African Americans was not in line with Republicans in the South. Durham tended to imagine the environment of the Old South as far more stable, but it was only his imagination. The early twentieth century was chaotic. Men of the South were choosing political and social sides and their divisions were frequently violent. The KKK was active in the South and intimidation at the polls and union meetings were their *modus operandi*.<sup>42</sup> By 1908, southern white men had proven the myth of the solid South. The differences between southerners were visible after reviewing some of the reviews associated with the release of Durham's novel.

The reviews following the release of *The Call of the South* revealed a lack of solidarity among southerners, but not a stark division. From the reviews Durham kept, none disagreed with his fundamental distain for miscegenation. Those who most vehemently railed against him and his novel chose to rail against his apparent willingness to incite violence and discuss bawdy subjects. The other primary group of Durham's opponents simply thought he

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<sup>42</sup> Cash, *Mind*, 335-337, 392.

lacked originality. None of the negative reviews confronted Durham's treatment of his African American protagonist.

Durham expected a considerable amount of support for his views and thanks to his friends, he was not disappointed, but the welcome was not unanimous. Contrary to Durham's hopes, the South was not waiting with baited breath for another diatribe against the African American population. It was not looking for another Thomas Dixon Jr.<sup>43</sup> Durham's cousin published *The Clansman* only a few years earlier in 1905. Both books dealt with the "Negro question" and both determined that the only solution was a return to an antebellum tradition. Dixon's book was far more popular. Both authors were looking to the past, but Dixon was a better writer and his story took place in the past, not the future. In addition, the nation had changed significantly since 1905. Durham's audience was not Dixon's. Instead of a unanimous voice heralding his work, some clearly thought little of the book and the author. None of the critics seemed to dislike the book's primary argument but a couple found reasons to be concerned with the book's effect on current race relations.

Frank Clark, a congressman from Florida, wrote that the book was "brutally Horrible."<sup>44</sup> The congressman said that a novel like this could, "Only bring hurt and no good can come from it." The "good" the congressman referred to was a peaceful African American population. It was clear that the congressman did not agree with Durham, but their difference stemmed from Durham's desire to address publicly what he viewed as a social ill. The politician felt the same way, but wanted to keep his opinions private. The author and the politician had more in common when they are placed in the context of the New South. The

<sup>43</sup> Thomas F. Dixon Jr., *The Clansmen* (New York: American News Company, 1905).

<sup>44</sup> Frank Clark to L.C. Page and Company, April 2, 1908. RLDP. DUA.



changes within the New South affected both men. The congressman, like Durham, was balancing on a social and political tightrope. They were both looking backwards when viewing race but forward in their acknowledgment of the times. They knew change was coming. Even while he lambasted the book, congressman Clark made certain his audience knew that his “religion” had taught him that, “whites were superior.” He simply believed that white people had a responsibility not to intentionally flare relations.

By 1908, the changes experienced by the New South significantly removed Durham from the traditions of his father, but his father’s racism remained. He no longer had an economic or social connection to his agrarian upbringing, which was key to his father’s racism. Plato Durham witnessed white men losing their cultural and agricultural positions to freed slaves. Durham based his racism on eugenic science and “observations.” Since his father’s death, Durham had many opportunities to embrace his father’s memory, but *The Call of the South* was the first time he published the racial connection between the generations. *The Call of the South* gave Durham the chance to look to and connect with the past that his forward-looking life did not afford.

Yet another critic hailed Durham as “a fair representation of the several people of the South.” In other words, Durham’s views were unpopular and wrong. He wrote that he would like to shake the hand of the publisher that refused to print this “terrorist fiction.”<sup>45</sup> Durham’s argument centered on maintaining a certain status quo, which Durham viewed as being a traditional acceptance of white superiority. The critic, like the congressman, thought Durham’s ideas were dangerous. Simply put, some commentators viewed Durham’s book as calling for a white revolution. Durham wanted the white community to return-look

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<sup>45</sup> Book Review, *The Evening Mail*, city unknown, March 4, 1908. RLDP. DUA.

backwards- and create stability within the society. The implications were clear. The African American community would not sit idly by and watch their remaining freedoms be taken without some response, perhaps a violent response. For the first two critics, Durham's message was dangerous.

There was another reason some may have viewed Durham, and Durham's publisher, as "terrorist." Initially, the "terrorist" label seemed unfair, but when viewed through the lens of evidence, Durham did not help his case. Durham actively pushed his book on people, especially congressmen. In a series of letters between Durham and his publisher, they discussed how the congressmen received the book. These letters showed the publisher and Durham contacting representatives that judged the book poorly. Durham and his publisher had a standard response to negative criticism. They informed oppositional congressmen, "Everyone, barring yourself, loved the book." They would also imply that dissenters were not of the "most straightest sect."<sup>46</sup> Durham and his publisher were making a clear threat. The congressmen needed to think like Durham, or they would lose the "most straightest sects" vote. Durham and his publisher were determined to convince the leaders of the nation that *The Call of the South* was good for their political careers.

In April of 1908, a reporter for the *Saturday Night Detroit Michigan* presented a novel idea for disliking the book. The author argued that it was simply not original.<sup>47</sup> This reviewer wrote, "Durham had out Dixoned Dixon." He also wrote that Dixon was sensational, but Durham was "sensationaler." The reviewer openly mocked Durham. He wrote, "When a rube comes to the big city for the first time he is undoubtedly impressed, but

<sup>46</sup> Frank Clark to L.C. Page and Company, April 2, 1908. RLDP. DUA.

<sup>47</sup> Book review. *Saturday Night Detroit Michigan*, April 25, 1908. RLDP. DUA.

after a few months it takes something extraordinary to impress him.” The message was clear. The critic was no rube and Durham failed to impress. When Thomas Dixon Jr. presented *The Clansman*, people were impressed. The idea had three years to germinate and some, those like this reporter, were not looking for more of an old idea. Durham thought his form of eugenic and scientific racism was modern, acceptable, and new but not everyone agreed.<sup>48</sup>

Not everyone enjoyed dwelling on the amalgamation of the white and black races. Durham’s fear, miscegenation, presented a mental image some were not ready to confront. A book reviewer for *The Washington Herald* wrote, “This book is a standalone argument for the need of a literary censor.”<sup>49</sup> Under the heading, “A Book to be Banned” the critic began his attack on Durham and his publisher, L.C. Page and Company. The author wrote that Durham’s book was, “One of the most shameful and disgusting novels written by an American.” The author went on to say, “Durham has a cheap, nasty and third-rate mind,” which illustrated the critic’s real issue with the book. The author had no problem with Durham’s claim that Negroes needed to return to positions permanently inferior to whites. The critic’s primary concern dealt with miscegenation. He thought it deplorable to imagine a white girl “fall(ing) for” an African American. The critic was equally upset with the idea of an African American being a war hero, a football hero, or serving admirably under the President of the United States as an advisor. On a certain level, Durham and the reporter were of like mind, but the critic could not tolerate reading about the social systems of the future. Another reviewer was willing to give credit to those who are capable of overcoming their

<sup>48</sup> Ayers, *Promise*, 145. Ayers connects the sophistication of the New South and racism. For Ayers, it is a new trend. It was no longer an “old” way of thinking because science has sustained its principles.

<sup>49</sup> Book Review, *The Washington Herald*, May 24, 1908. RLDP. DUA.

disgust at Durham's plot description at still finish the book.<sup>50</sup> The critic for *Budget* magazine also felt Durham was discussing scenarios too disturbing to mention, but the writer did not challenge Durham's position.

Durham faced negative reviews, but he received a significant amount of support as well. The support Durham received took a variety of forms. Of course, Durham's publisher presented the book as worth buying, but he also received support from social commentators and politicians. Farther West, Durham found support from religious officials. The angriest, and arguably the most popular, group of supporters were men of hate. There were also supporters who simply liked Durham's family. This motley crew of like minds demonstrated the variety of social, economic, and regional extent of the racist infection. For some it was purely business and for others it was tradition.

Those who supported Durham's novel frequently used Hayward Graham as a target for their disgust and hate. Not all of Durham's supporters were overtly racist, but racism and white superiority were common themes. Most of the positive reviews took the form of social commentary and left racial rhetoric out. For others, business and politics earned the spotlight during their discussion of the book. Two critics' assessments of the novel took on spiritual or religious tones. The final group of favorable critiques failed to mention the book in any direct manner. Those critics respected Durham solely because of his family's history. In fact, an author from this last group wrote his opinion with no evidence he had read the book.

L.C. Page and Company was excited about the publication of Durham's novel. *The Call of the South* served as an instrument for the publisher and Durham to look for success in

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<sup>50</sup> Book review, *Budget*, April 11, 1908. RLDP. DUA.

the future, but Durham was not always confident of the book's potential. The publisher repeatedly assured Durham that the book demonstrated a solid grasp of contemporary issues and that "right-minded politicians" would agree. The publisher's reassurance continued, "Those who disagree either never read the book, or were not capable of understanding it." Durham's publisher went beyond soothing Durham's ego though. He informed Durham that he had congressmen proselytizing non-believing representatives. The publisher reported that if a representative admitted that he did not like Durham's book, they immediately became the focus of a concentrated letter writing campaign in an attempt to influence their campaigns.

Some politicians saw value in Durham's work. A Senator wrote, "I should think that President Roosevelt would have given you \$100,000 not to have written that book."<sup>51</sup> This was for good reason. President Theodore Roosevelt appeared suspiciously similar to President Phillips and by Durham painting him as outside the mainstream American mind, his Democratic friends had more to work with within their campaigns. Perhaps the most conclusive evidence existed in the White House's dining room. President Roosevelt had invited Booker T. Washington to the White House for dinner in 1901. Booker T. Washington accepted the invitation and bravely attended the dinner. This decision infuriated Durham. Durham decided to mirror the events of 1901 in his novel. In the novel, Durham called the fictional event, "Phillips' nigger luncheon."<sup>52</sup> Durham was simply taking a shot at a political enemy. Several reporters made this connection as well. One reporter wrote, "The [fictional] President of the United States is a pro-negro advocate who emulates President Roosevelt by

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<sup>51</sup> This is a newspaper article of unknown origin and date. The author claimed to be a United States Senator and the newspaper protected the identification of the author. However, the paper's identification has been damaged and is not identifiable. RLDP. DUA.

<sup>52</sup> Durham, *The Call of the South*, 401.

dining with a Negro doctor and a Negro Bishop.”<sup>53</sup> Durham tried to identify President Roosevelt as overly friendly with the African American population and because Durham was looking backwards, his opinion of the President’s African American relationship was fundamentally negative. But Durham’s supporters were not always powerful men of state.

Durham meant for his novel to be a call *to* the South, but the whole nation heard it. Southerners were not the only ones to hold feelings similar to Durham and some people simply enjoyed the novel. Of those that supported Durham, one source simply stated that Durham held a firm grasp on the situation in the nation and accurately described the reality of the times.<sup>54</sup> A book reviewer from the Associated Press “Loved it.”<sup>55</sup> He wrote that Durham’s book was “one of the most interesting books I have ever had the pleasure to read.” A separate reviewer alluded to Thomas Paine when he wrote, “the barrier against social intermingling of the white race and the black is not the result of race antipathy, whim pretense, or prejudice, but that it is grounded in the clearest common sense.”<sup>56</sup> For these men, Durham’s stance against miscegenation was sound due to clear thinking and common sense. A friend of Durham and a literary critic wrote that Durham’s story “is to be welcomed as a spreader of intelligence.”<sup>57</sup> Another reviewer praised Durham for his skill in “showing the utter futility and base criminality of social equality.”<sup>58</sup> A friend in Brazil hailed *The Call of*

<sup>53</sup> Book Review, *I American*, April 12, 1908. RLDP. DUA.

<sup>54</sup> Book review, *Booksellers*, June – 1908. RLDP. DUA. Durham hired Henry Romeike Inc. to collect copies of all published newspaper articles concerning *The Call of the South*. In the Duke University Archive, there are 153 newspaper clippings referring to the book. It would be too much repetition for me to include all of them. I have only used those that demonstrate a variety in opinion of both the book and Durham. For those interested in using these sources, there are many that I have not used that can enhance this argument.

<sup>55</sup> L.E. Ladd Jr. telegram to Durham, May 14, 1908. RLDP. DUA.

<sup>56</sup> Book Review, *I American*, April 12, 1908. RLDP. DUA.

<sup>57</sup> Book review, *The Examiner*, March 21, 1908. RLDP. DUA.

<sup>58</sup> Book review, *Book News Monthly Philadelphia, PA*, May--, 1908. RLDP. DUA.

*the South* as a great book and Brazilians who read it were surprised that it had no racial hatred.<sup>59</sup>

Politicians found value in Durham's book, but some clergy did too. Durham was an active member of the Methodist Church and was central in the Church's unification efforts in the 1930s. His later activity turned him into a well-known religious personality, but in 1908, he had not made a name for himself in the religious circles until *The Call of the South*. An unknown author used religious terminology when they hailed Durham as a "prophet."<sup>60</sup> The reader clearly thought Durham received divine inspiration when writing his novel. A Methodist pastor in Saint Louis wrote that he loved it and another minister in Chicago echoed that message.<sup>61</sup> The pastor in Chicago even went as far as to write that Durham was "equal an author to Tolstoy." The Pastor from Saint Louis, H.S. Bradley, requested permission from the publisher to quote Durham in his sermons. Bradley wrote that he was "thrilled by the subject." Support from the religious community opens the door to a more vitriolic form of advocating. When racism and bigotry are understood in religious terms, they historically led to racial violence. Durham's father helped found the Ku Klux Klan based on his religious fervor. Durham knew first-hand the power religion held over race relations. Along with his publisher, politicians, social commentators and men of faith, Durham's support base included those who based their support on the author.

<sup>59</sup> W. B. Lee to Durham, January 8, 1909. RLDP. DUA.

<sup>60</sup> This article did not have identifying headings or a label from Henry Romeike Inc. RLDP. DUA.

<sup>61</sup> L.C. Page and Company to Durham, April 8, 1908. RLDP. DUA. H.S. Bradley to Durham, November 5, 1908. RLDP. DUA.

One reviewer based their opinion on Durham's book on his background. The author's logic was that a "good southerner" would only produce good ideas.<sup>62</sup> The critic wanted to evaluate Durham, not the book. His only mention of the book was limited to, "it deals with the race problem." His real argument revolved around the man. "Mr. Durham is of the families of Durham and Baxter, prominent in the South for generations...Both of his grandfathers were members of the North Carolina secession convention, and with their five sons followed Lee's flag into its last sunset...Politically, Mr. Durham inherited allegiance to the Democratic Party from his father, Captain Plato Durham." The article went on for several more lines and never again addressed the novel.

It is worth noting that Durham's supporters tended to let Durham speak for them. It was usual for publishers to insert a bio when promoting a book, but the bio Durham provided was full of self-aggrandizement and exaggeration. L.C. Page requested a two-paragraph bio to accompany the book and a 3-4 sentence summary of the story. Durham sent his publisher four pages of biographical material and a paragraph summarizing the book. From the group of critics who supported Durham, very few thought for themselves. Durham wrote the words most of the southern reviewers used to introduce Durham to their readers, with little variation. From a pool of more than seventy staunch supporters of Durham's book, only eleven described Durham with a vocabulary significantly different from what Durham submitted to his publisher.<sup>63</sup> Durham's supporters were followers. They let the past direct their future. Durham tried to do the same, but could not.

<sup>62</sup> Book Review, *States*, May 29, 1908. RLDP. DUA.

<sup>63</sup> Durham to L.C. Page and Co., Jan. 19, 1908. RLDP. SVU.



Durham rarely responded to his critics. He sent a few letters of appreciation to the politicians his publisher used in Congress, but beyond that, the evidence suggests that he patiently waited and watched as his book made its way across the nation. He knew where and when he was. He was in a torn nation during a period of social, economic and political upheaval. If his novel accomplished anything, it demonstrated the South to be torn. Although none of the reviews Durham kept stated that his ideas were wrong, many of them demonstrated a lack of support for his delivery and conclusions.

Durham's *The Call of the South* clearly presented him as a staunch social conservative. He stood as a representative of a traditional southern social ideal, but he could not escape the effects of his personal industrial advances. Even as Durham tried to fill a niche left by his father's generation, he demonstrated his own position within a new social paradigm. Durham was a complex individual and Hayward Graham was his literary manifestation. It is my assertion that when Durham created Hayward Graham, he unconsciously re-created himself, as an out-of-place African American.

Durham wanted the novel to influence people into returning to earlier social model. Durham's creation of Hayward Graham exposed Durham as not being when and where he belonged. He had serious identity confusion. In *The Promise of the New South*, Edward Ayers proposed the idea that the changes within the New South bred confusion.<sup>64</sup> Durham exhibited this confusion. In order to succeed in the nation of 1908, Durham could not live like his father. Durham felt the strain between the expectation he placed on himself to be like his father and his ambitions for success. He was also powerless to affect real change. Outwardly, Durham presented his book as a condemnation of miscegenation and

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<sup>64</sup> Ayers, *Promise*, 65.

amalgamation. Everyone, white or not, had an appropriate station, or place where they belonged. This social placement was a figurative home- safe and comfortable, orderly. *The Call of the South* called for order and Durham believed in order. Yet Durham was what he despised. Durham was out of place and consequently out of order.

Like Hayward, Durham's position within society was not completely the result of his actions. Neither Hayward nor Durham created the social and political environments in which they existed, although both were participants. Durham chose to become a lawyer, politician, soldier, author and educator, but when he was a child, his mother directed him away from the farm. Since leaving the farm and school, his changing world determined a significant number of his actions. However he arrived at his position, Durham was between the stagnant past and the progressive future. Both Durham's past and future dealt with issues like race. According to Durham, the primary crime Hayward Graham committed was being where he should not have been. As a result, Hayward was with people he should not have associated with and doing things he had no business doing, but he had no other choice. The race-mixing President Phillips required Hayward's presence in the White House. The President pulled Hayward out of his proper place. Durham created this fictional situation to address his view of real situations.

Hayward Graham was socially homeless. Being one-sixteenth African, yet "intelligent," a hero, and handsome meant Hayward did not belong to the African American community. His white blood gave him the qualities that made him "too good" for the African American community. Durham presented Graham as having no natural community. Hayward was a hybrid; he had no place in society, but neither did Durham.

Durham had the heart of an Old South southerner, but he lived through the changes of the New South. Like Hayward, Durham could not access his traditional community.

Hayward was too white to be an African American and too black to be white. Durham was too northern to be a traditional southerner and too southern to fully integrate into progressive social policy. The parallels between Durham and Graham go beyond Graham's blood and Durham's social progression. Durham grew up in a supportive family, but Durham did not know his father. His father fought in the Civil War and died when Durham was only five. Durham attended a fine high school and was a local football legend during college. He became a lawyer and served his country during the Spanish-American war. Durham was a politician and an active member of the Democratic Party. If anything, Hayward was not only similar to Durham, he was an enhanced version of Durham.

Hayward was what Durham wished he could be. Hayward grew up in a financially stable home, a feeling Durham did not have as a child. Hayward's father did not die on a bed suffering from pneumonia, like Durham's; Hayward's father died fighting in the Civil War, which is how Durham preferred to think about his father's death. His father's martyrdom was a metaphoric badge of courage for the young Hayward Graham. Durham could not wear that badge. Hayward Graham attended Harvard University and "no one ever questioned *his* choice" of school. It was interesting that Durham would add that detail to his novel after defending his family's decision to attend Trinity College and not the University of North Carolina. Hayward not only played in significant football games, but he single handedly led his team to victory in a championship game, as team captain. Likewise, Durham played football and even became a local legend, but his legendary status came from a kickoff in 1889, nothing grandiose. Durham was never team captain.

Hayward almost graduated from Harvard. He voluntarily left his education to be a soldier, but later worked as a professional in the legal field, not a lawyer. When a fictional war with Germany erupted, Hayward heard the call to arms and responded by volunteering. Durham volunteered during the Spanish-American War. Durham wrote to the Governor of North Carolina and offered his service in exchange for a commission as a Brigadier General. The Governor denied him his commission, but offered him a position as a Captain. Durham willingly accepted this lesser office. Likewise, Hayward volunteered for military service and was denied entry, not into a rank, but into a white company. Undaunted, He accepted entry into a less distinguished African American company. Unlike Durham, who served well and received a simple honorable discharge, Hayward served with distinction and earned honor for himself, his family and his country by saving the life of a Colonel and future President. Durham used Hayward to accomplish goals that were, for Durham, out of reach. Hayward's involvement with politics illuminated Durham's desire to make political change.

Durham was constantly involved in politics. As one standing on the outside, Durham did all he could to influence the political arena. He knew his friends on Capitol Hill heard his voice, but he never had the power to make real change. Hayward Graham was also on the outside, but his actions changed a nation. Hayward's social decision taught the nation a lesson. Durham wanted to have that effect, but never did. In a letter to Dr. Archibald Henderson, Durham discussed Dr. Henderson's review of *The Call of the South*. He asked, "What will the function of our Negro be then?"<sup>65</sup> Although he was commenting on African Americans, he might have asked the same question of men like himself. What was the function and position of transitional southerners? The southerner caught in the transition of

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<sup>65</sup> Durham to Dr. Archibald Henderson, November 12, 1941. RLDP. SVU.

the New South, like Durham, could not return to a memory and nor go forward for fear of denying the same memory.

In 1911, the L.C. Page and Company decided to discontinue its efforts on behalf of Durham's novel. The nation moved on. For three years, sales dwindled until the publisher ended publication. In a letter from the publisher to Durham, L.C. Page and Company negotiated a payment to Durham for the remaining unsold books and the rights to the novel.<sup>66</sup> *The Call of the South* became what Durham was in 1908, out of place.

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<sup>66</sup> L.C. Page and Company, a letter from the publisher, to Durham, Boston, MA, February 20, 1911. RLDP. SVU.

## Chapter 3

### The Southern Seminary Years

After L.C. Page stopped promoting *The Call of the South*, Durham continued to work for various schools as an instructor, dean, or student advisor. He did well for himself within the field of education. During this time, Durham also committed more time to his three primary hobbies: horses, inventing, and math. He loved writing and his pen remained active, although subdued, until President Franklin Roosevelt took office. His southern boyhood had slipped almost completely away as he gave way to industrialist habits. He saw the growth of machinery, factories, and the automobile as an opportunity, not competition and he wanted to be a part of it. He was not content with a rural or agrarian lifestyle. He did not live in urban centers, but he did travel to New York and Boston frequently to meet with manufacturers, professors, and publishers. After years of enduring the changes within the New South and compromising tradition for innovation, the cumulative effect on Durham was significant. The decisions he made in response to economic, social, and political changes created a man quite dissimilar to the young Durham of Shelby, North Carolina.

Between the years of 1911 and 1948, Durham transitioned from being a low-level educator to the President of an all-girl seminary; he dealt with some of math's most difficult equations, invented dozens of small machines, and fought against President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Durham simultaneously acted as a booster for the traditional South and the industrial North. The thirty-seven years that encompassed the final period of Durham's life witnessed him as a fully invested industrialist and the paternal overseer of Southern Seminary Junior College for Girls. These years also saw him as a man disillusioned with the

national Democratic Party and driven towards self-aggrandizement. Durham's transformation of the New South reached its apex during these years. As the literary door closed on 1911, the door to invention swung open.

Durham's dedication to invention and innovation revealed a great deal about him as a man, a southerner and an American. This chapter does not attempt to argue that "southerners" were not innovators, inventive, or mathematically inclined. In fact, we know that they were, but in most cases, innovations considered "southern" tended to address agrarian needs.<sup>67</sup> By the time Durham was forty, he had no interest in strengthening the agrarian machine because his needs were not associated with the land. Durham focused on the factory.

In 1914, Durham's brother, Stonewall, wrote a letter to Durham.<sup>68</sup> In the letter, Stonewall discussed the creation of a generator Durham designed. The language of the letter clearly revealed that Durham had initiated this correspondence and had requested an opinion on his idea. The generator united the common generator with a dynamo and magnets. He was trying to make an engine that, once running, would be able to continue running from the power generated by the friction of the engine and only small amounts of fuel. Stonewall recognized that this technology could help everyone, but Durham's primary purpose was

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<sup>67</sup> Invention was not the sole territory of the North. The South was constantly working to make their predominantly agrarian lifestyle more efficient. The New South was no different. Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, dealt with innovation in the lumber industry, the railroad, and Ayers wrote that reconstruction brought new necessities and they forced invention. C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, discussed railroads as well even though his book is primarily a political approach, introduction, but he also dealt with the mechanization of the tobacco industry, pg. 129. Don H. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990). Doyle also dealt with innovation and invention as an element in the rate of recovery of four comparative cities.

<sup>68</sup> Stonewall Jackson Durham to Durham, April 1, 1914. RLDP. SVU. There is a great deal of technical information in the letter. Most of the information is beyond my scope of understanding.

inventing a machine in order to be successful. In later letters, the focus of the project clearly centered on the potential profits and recognition the engine would bring. Durham was not concerned with humanity's improvements from the new technology. This should not imply that if Durham were a purely "Southern" man that he would only think of the common good. There is no evidence that southern equated to benevolent selflessness. However, it does demonstrate that his mind was that of a capitalist industrialist, traits the kindly owners of Durham's childhood general store, the Mauney brothers, did not have.<sup>69</sup>

Durham was a constant inventor and, in one sense, that epitomized the southerner of the New South. After the Civil War, the South played catch-up with industrialization and Durham tried to help the South by reaching his personal goals. Edward Ayers argued that necessity frequently promoted invention when he discussed the invention and adaptation of Bonsack's automated cigarette-rolling machine.<sup>70</sup> The South needed to produce more cigarettes at less cost, and James Bonsack of Virginia invented a machine to do it. The South had just as many needs as any other region of the nation and like Bonsack, Durham wanted to profit from filling regional needs. In 1915, Durham's efforts to meet his own needs required him to seek professional help. Durham began a business relationship with Dodge and Sons, a law firm based in Washington, D.C., and specialists in patent law.<sup>71</sup> Durham was no less conflicted in 1915 than he was at any other point in his adult life and the decision to use Dodge and Sons was evidence of his conflict. As a southerner and an industrialist, he made a logical selection. Dodge and Son's founder fought as a Confederate soldier against the

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<sup>69</sup> There are not records concerning production, but there are eleven dealing with the motor. In all of the correspondence, Durham is trying to make the motor sufficiently unique in order to claim a patent. Dodge and Sons repeatedly informed Durham that there were several other products that were too similar.

<sup>70</sup> Ayers, *Promise*, 106, 119.

<sup>71</sup> Dodge and Sons to Durham, January 14, 1916. RLDP. SVU. This letter is in response to a request from Durham concerning the cost of patent application.



Union. This gave the company appropriate standing in the southern community, but Durham was no fool. He would not risk failure for Civil War loyalty. He wanted to work with people who would help him succeed. As a business decision, Durham wanted experienced lawyers as aids. For Durham, success was paramount. Durham wanted to benefit from his talents and he hoped this agency would help him achieve his goals. Durham continued his relationship with Dodge and Sons well into the 1940's. He submitted his last patent application only four years before his death, when he was seventy-four.<sup>72</sup> His industrial ambitions were lofty, but he was determined.

Twenty years after Henry Ford first began manufacturing cars on an assembly line, Durham tried to get into the booming market. In 1928, Durham created what he called a “soring wheel.” The surviving documents do not describe the wheel, but the response from his lawyer is clear. There were no less than three other patents already issued which were too similar to Durham’s “improvement.” This disappointment would not keep Durham from spending the next thirty years and more than eight thousand dollars on patent applications.<sup>73</sup>

From the records, it seems that Durham enjoyed inventing for the sake of inventing, but he consistently transitioned from working as a hobby to selling his ideas. Though he proposed dozens of small machines, improvements to existing technology, and original ideas he could not support his wife, child, and extended family on his inventions. For this reason, Durham was excited when a friend of his offered him a permanent position at Southern

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<sup>72</sup> Based on the surviving documents, there were no fewer than thirteen registered inventions Durham tried to patent.

<sup>73</sup> The actual total of Durham’s investment into patenting and inventing items is roughly eight thousand twenty two, but two of the documents are difficult to read. If the numbers are shown to be different than I have understood, the amount could be significantly different. However, with the use of only the clear documents Durham spent no less than six thousand dollars on his activities. On each document there are up to twenty listed transactions.

Seminary School for Girls.<sup>74</sup> This position served Durham as an opportunity for financial success. As a historical moment, Durham's career at Southern Seminary revealed a paternal, or fatherly, side of the man.

On April 2, 1919, Durham wrote to his brother, Stonewall, and told him about an offer Rev. E. H. Row, co-owner of the Southern Seminary School for Girls, made him. Durham was clearly excited about the opportunity. He described the school to his brother in the best terms, but left out the fact it was failing, noting only a slight decline in enrollment during the year 1918-19, because of the "epidemic."<sup>75</sup> He was certain, however, that the numbers would soon be on their way up again. Durham told Stonewall that his salary would increase \$650 per month and that the school would pay for his housing and board.

Durham's tenure at Southern Seminary Junior College began in 1919.<sup>76</sup> Only two years later, he purchased just over half of the school. Durham quickly set himself up as the primary decision maker. Prior to President Durham's appointment, a Board of Trustees ran the school for more than thirty years. When he assumed control, he immediately dismissed the Board of Trustees. The Methodist Church controlled the majority of the board so when Durham dismissed the board he dismissed the Church too. Durham was devoutly Methodist and he continued to have an ecclesiastical leader open the school year with prayer and required the students to attend a church of their choice, but only Durham would make

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<sup>74</sup> The name of the school was later changed to Southern Seminary Junior College for Girls.

<sup>75</sup> In the same letter, Durham wrote that "they have made money in the past." That was true, if they were very selective about the period in question. From 1900-1919, there were only eight years when the school made a profit.

<sup>76</sup> Frederick William Kling, "The History of Southern Seminary," [Master's Thesis, University of Virginia], 1937. Kling's history of Southern Seminary discussed the basic physical layout and the educational curriculum of the school. His work had no interrogation of the material and no analysis. His work is useful because he lays out important basic information, which may otherwise be lost. Margaret Durham Robey also wrote a history of Southern Seminary. Her thesis was accepted in 1952 at the University of Virginia.

decisions for the school.<sup>77</sup> After he consolidated power, he became the official father figure. From his office, Durham produced a monumental amount of literary works, mathematical proofs, inventions, and political diatribes. Durham retired from actively leading Southern Seminary in 1939. When he retired, the school was at maximum attendance and a financial success.

President Durham presented the institution as *the* center for southern tradition. Southern Seminary was located within a few miles of Lexington, Virginia. Durham translated that proximity into Southern Seminary being located at the Valhalla of the South.<sup>78</sup> No other all-girl seminary was located so close to the burial sites of Generals Lee and Jackson and no other school was as dedicated to traditional southern gender roles. Durham was not interested in training girls to become women of the workforce. Durham's educational techniques disregarded the contemporary trends because he focused on traditional gender roles.

To some, the roaring twenties represented the potential of the modern world. Flappers, factory workers and feminists presented new possibilities to women. As the modern world advanced, Durham's curriculum increasingly reinforced traditional lessons. Durham trained "his girls" to be wives, hostesses and southern belles, not modern confident women independent of men. Durham's treatment of his girls was paternalistic, but not in the traditional sense associated with the South. Durham expected his girls to understand that "the fundamental idea about all success or approach to perfection in the world is an idea of order." In a commencement speech given to the freshman class of 1923, Durham said "I sometimes wonder why the young people of today are not more chaotic than they are, although they

<sup>77</sup> Frederick William Kling Jr., pg. 11.

<sup>78</sup> Robert Lee Durham to Sidney B. Hall, Buena Vista, Virginia, February 23, 1935. RLDP SVU

show good evidence of being somewhat chaotic I must say.”<sup>79</sup> The women of the 1920s did not make sense to Durham. His notion of propriety did not allow women to choose their professions or extra-curricular activities.

Marjorie Spruill Wheeler’s *New Women of the New South* addressed an element of the issue Durham could not understand.<sup>80</sup> Wheeler studied the financially secure southern women involved in the women’s suffrage movement. For Wheeler, southern women were capable of balancing tradition and social advancement. Durham trained his girls to become the women Spruill studied, but his rhetoric did not match his educational results. Durham did not intentionally create women capable of being leaders of men. He strove to teach his girls to lead other women. Durham took his position as the father and defender of the school and students seriously.

Durham saw himself as their father away from home. On June 10, 1924, the registrar at Southern Seminary received a telegram from the actual father of one of “his girls.”<sup>81</sup> On the telegram, Mr. Feamster wrote that he would not send his daughter back to Southern Seminary because he heard that a Washington and Lee student had been “shot and painfully wounded” by the school’s security. He claimed that this occurred “merely because [the Washington and Lee student] happened to be calling on a young lady of your school.”

<sup>79</sup> Robert Lee Durham, speech to freshman class, Buena Vista, Virginia, 1923. RLDP SVU

<sup>80</sup> Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Wheeler demonstrates how the southern woman navigated the potentially dangerous waters of the post-reconstruction South. Part of her thesis was that southern women were capable of organizing and accomplishing significant unity. Durham’s educational tactics fostered unity, but not organization and not a vision of independence.

<sup>81</sup> Mr. G.M. Feamster to the Registrar of Southern Seminary, June 10, 1924. RLDP. SVU.

Offended, Durham penned an acerbic yet humorous response. Referencing postal laws concerning “libelous and damaging statements”<sup>82</sup> Durham first thanked Mr. Feamster for being specific in referencing which shooting offended him. By stating that the male student was “shot and painfully wounded,” it easily eliminated the “murders of Washington and Lee students...by stabbing in the back or the use of bombs.” Durham then went on to reassure Mr. Feamster that since Durham had served as President of the school, no Washington and Lee students had been shot or shot at. Durham assured the protective father that he preferred taking a visiting man’s fraternity pin because it “reduced him to zero” and “avoided bloodshed which is not only offensive to feminine sensibilities but always makes the parlor rug look so messy.” Durham continued his sarcastic response for two pages. Finally, Durham concluded with, “It is my humble opinion that your daughter’s greatest need is that some kind friend would wake her daddy, who seems to be having a pleasant dream.” Durham signed it, “Your kind friend, Durham.”<sup>83</sup>

Mr. Feamster may have thought Durham was a poor leader, but Durham genuinely cared for his girls. He protected them from villainous Washington and Lee students, but he was also concerned with other social dangers. Durham was a staunch supporter of the Democrat enacted prohibition law of 1919. He was not opposed to individual liberty, but he supported the law designed to decrease social depravity. As Durham assumed leadership of Southern Seminary, President Wilson enacted the policy that made the buying and selling of alcohol illegal. Durham applauded that legislation because it protected his youth and the community.

<sup>82</sup> Durham to Mr. G. M. Feamster, June 11, 1924. RLDP. SVU.

<sup>83</sup> This response must be read in full in order to be appreciated. His sarcasm and condescending tone are excellent insights into who he was. Due to the structure of this paper, there is a limit to the number of examples given to prove that Durham was a prolific writer.

After running the school for several years, Durham began promoting Southern Seminary as *the* school for southern women, but there was a problem. Southern Seminary was becoming less “southern.” When Durham became President of the school, one-hundred percent of the student body came from previously confederate States and nearly eighty percent were from Virginia. By 1930, only ten years after assuming control, only ten percent were from the former CSA and only seven students were from Virginia.<sup>84</sup> Durham’s paternalism crossed North/South boundaries. He did not care where his students came from because their education was the same. Durham’s personal connections with northern families helped populate his school. A significant number of the families that sent their children to Southern Seminary moved into northern States during the prosperous 1920s. As the Depression of the 1930s wore on, the school became overwhelmingly northern, perhaps pointing to more economic trouble in the South than the North. Perhaps it is not surprising then that as northern enrollment climbed, his promotion of the school as distinctly southern became even more strident. Durham was teaching women living in the North how to be southern ladies.<sup>85</sup>

The economic woes of the Depression hurt Virginia, and its educational system. The superintendent of Public Education in Virginia, Sidney Hall, sent Durham a letter requesting a short essay extolling the virtues of Southern Seminary.<sup>86</sup> Sidney Hall was trying to lure potential students, and revenue, into Virginia. Mr. Hall was in the process of creating a brochure of Virginia schools to send around the nation. Superintendent Hall asked Durham to include specific information such as cost, financial aid information and scholarships. Durham

<sup>84</sup> Kling, “History of Southern Seminary,” charts 2 and 4. Southern Virginia University Archive Room.

<sup>85</sup> The idea that Durham was teaching northern women to be southern ladies has been one of the most important products of my research. Although it is clear that he did teach northern women to be southern, it is a topic that requires more research in order to be dealt with adequately.

<sup>86</sup> Sidney B. Hall to Durham, February 20, 1935. RLDP. SVU.

included none of this material. Instead, he wrote that Southern Seminary “gives insight into the finer things...and makes these a part of her own personality.” Durham went on to inform the reader that the school was only a few miles from Washington and Lee University and the Virginia Military Institute, which exposed his understanding of the primary purpose for the school.<sup>87</sup> Women went to Southern Seminary to meet a husband who could provide for them during the troubled times, not to become independent women.<sup>88</sup>

In 1936, an interesting shift occurred among the students at Southern Seminary. The student body stopped calling President Durham by his title. Durham viewed himself as the father of the students and school, when the students replaced “President” with “Daddy Durham” he did nothing to stop them. The change happened between the spring of 1935 and the fall of 1936. In 1936, Durham hired Margaret Durham Robey, his daughter, as a Vice-President. She spent the next four years training to take over control when her father retired. The change from President to “Daddy” and the increased affection may be due to the presence and actions of Margaret instead of anything Durham may have done. Having his daughter in a position of leadership may have accented his fatherly attributes, which transferred to the students.

The years Durham spent as the President of Southern Seminary coincided with his other industrial activities. He lived two lives. As the president of *the* school for southern girls, he celebrated the traditions of the Old South, but his office also served as headquarters for his industrial aspirations. His girls were obviously important to him, but his position at

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<sup>87</sup> Durham also calls the area immediately around Lexington “Valhalla.” This is a reference to a mythical burial ground of dead heroes and soldiers. Durham E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson are buried in this area. Durham clearly presents the idea that a woman should attend Southern Seminary because a dead General is near by.

<sup>88</sup> Durham to Sidney B. Hall, with an accompanying essay, February 23, 1935. RLDP. SVU.

the school did not meet his need for fame and recognition. Durham used his mathematical skills as his vehicle to the recognition he thought he deserved.

The transformation of the New South, both regional and on an individual level, was a direct consequence of Reconstruction. By the time Durham was an adult, an agrarian rebirth was not an option. Reconstruction opened southern business to northern influence in a degree that would have taken far longer without southern defeat during the Civil War. The product of the intermingled businesses was a working relationship with northern institutions. Although Durham did not work and trade in commodities, his work also required his partnership with northern institutions. Durham thought his best chance at recognition lay with his mathematical abilities. He did not care who he had to work with in order to achieve his goals. He corresponded with Dr. Henderson of South Carolina and Williard V. Quine of Harvard University. Professor Quine was a professor of mathematics at Harvard and Durham courted him. Durham did this because Dr. Quine determined the “style” of the journal of the Mathematical Association of America, the American Mathematical Monthly (AMM). Simply, Dr. Quine decided which entries the journal published. Durham reasoned that if he were to make a name for himself within the field of mathematics he would need Dr. Quine. Durham also worked with Dr. H. S. M. Coxeter, of the University of Toronto. Dr. Coxeter was an associate editor of the AMM. Durham truly desired to be published in the prestigious journal, but there was a price to pay. If Durham wanted a published article in a recognized journal, he had to rely on the North, but he did not seem to mind.

In 1921, after taking control of Southern Seminary, Durham returned to his industrial obsessions, but he also found a new outlet for his energy in solving the trisection of an



angle.<sup>89</sup> This mathematical problem stood as an opportunity for fame to whoever solved it. Within Durham's papers, there are more than eighty pages of correspondence with professors of Mathematics and family members. Durham began his relationship with H. S. M. Coxeter in 1934 after Durham struggled on his own for thirteen years. Eleven years and countless letters later, Durham still failed to spell the professor's name correctly.<sup>90</sup> In addition to H. S. M. Coxeter and Dr. Quine, Durham used his brother, Stonewall Jackson Durham, and his daughter, Margaret Durham Robey. Years after he began his mathematical odyssey, his brother and daughter had the unenviable task of telling Durham he was wrong. This nearly cost Margaret her inheritance. In March of 1943, Durham thought he had discovered the key to the equation he began twenty years earlier. He quickly telegraphed his daughter, who was in graduate school in Staunton, Virginia. After creating his equation, Durham contacted everyone he thought might care. He sent telegrams to his brother and daughter, of course, but he also contacted Dr. Coxeter and the American Mathematical Association. He sent the association a copy of his work immediately, in fact the same day as the telegram. His dream of fame was in his grasp. His daughter replied with enthusiasm, but sent a follow-up telegram the next day. She asked, "what if you change the size of the angle?"<sup>91</sup> Margaret found the formula Durham created only fit one set of numbers. His equation was wrong. Durham's reply to his daughter was simple. "It worked. All I needed to know from you was that it worked. If you plan on coming home for Christmas, rejoice with me."<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Durham to Dr. Archibald Coxeter, December 28, 1942. RLDP. SVU. In this letter, Durham is joking with Dr. Henderson but admits that he was obsessed with solving the riddle.

<sup>90</sup> Dr. H. S. M. Coxeter to Durham, June 28, 1943. RLDP. SVU. In this letter, professor Coxeter wrote that Durham "still haven't got my name right!" He does so after apologizing for bringing it up. Coxeter obviously did not want to hurt or embarrass Durham.

<sup>91</sup> Margaret Durham Robey to Durham, March 27, 1943. RLDP. SVU.

<sup>92</sup> Durham to Margaret Durham Robey, March 28, 1943. RLDP. SVU.

In the letter to Stonewall, Durham wrote, “The fact is that I have just completed the geometrical construction necessary to solve a puzzle which has been a riddle of the sophists (500 B.C.) and their...teachers of science and geometry for twenty-five centuries.”<sup>93</sup> Durham also reminded Stonewall to “keep it under your hat” and that a friend from the University of South Carolina, Dr. Archibald Henderson, was involved in the formula’s development. Durham wrote, with a tone of gloating, that Dr. Henderson once asserted the equation needed was “indisputably demonstrated unsolvable.” Durham went on, “Isn’t that a funny way for a scientific mind to put itself out on a limb in this day of airplanes and radios.” Durham thought Henderson was wrong because there were so many “Einsteins in this country.” Durham thought he was on par with Einstein, but he had put himself out on a very weak limb when he mailed his formula to the American Mathematical Association.

Durham’s relationship with Archibald Henderson cooled too. Before Durham broke the code, their communications were frequent and contained several running jokes. By May, things were not so jovial. Less than two full months after his discovery, Durham sent a request to Dr. Henderson. Durham wrote, “It is unmistakably clear...that you have no further...interest in the framed geometrical drawings which I sent some time ago. May I request that you have some cheap man re-pack the parcel and send it back to me? I am enclosing five dollars to cover the cost of such re-packing.” Durham’s increasing desire for recognition created tension with his old friend. Durham tried to set himself up as the only author of the formula. It worked, and the mathematical association publicly recognized Durham as the flawed formulas only author.

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<sup>93</sup> Durham to Stonewall Jackson Durham, March 26, 1943. RLDP. SVU.

Eventually, the American Mathematical Association admitted Durham into its ranks as a member and the society published Durham's article. Along with the article, Durham was required to submit a title for his article. Durham chose, "A Simple Construction for the Trisection of an Angle: By President Dr. Durham Esq." The editor changed the title to, "A Simple Construction for the Approximate Trisection of an Angle, Without the use of a Protractor: By Dr. Durham." Durham protested both the title and the removal of his many honorifics, but the editor did not change his mind. The published article held the editor's title.<sup>94</sup>

The affair over the formula rankled Durham for years. When he was seventy-seven years old, and unable to write on his own, he dictated a letter to his brother insisting his formula was correct, bitterly lamenting the lack of recognition he received for his efforts. In his reply, Stonewall wrote, "I was convinced you were in error" and "your point in explanation of their report is wholly useless." The American Mathematical Monthly further triggered Durham's bitterness. The journal dedicated an entire article to Durham's method and stated that his method was "seriously flawed."<sup>95</sup> Stonewall tried to comfort his brother but "only after hours of checking and thought, and I add after death of thrill and hope, and until now, am convinced of your error."<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Letter from the American Mathematical Association to Durham, not signed, and not dated. RLDP. SVU. Note: The letter was significantly damaged. There appeared to be a great deal more discussion over the equation, but it was not readable.

<sup>95</sup> I have been unable to locate the article Stonewall Durham referenced in his article to Robert Lee Durham. The quote "seriously flawed" comes from the letter as well as the reference to the edition of the journal.

<sup>96</sup> Stonewall Jackson Durham to Durham, December 3, 1947. RLDP. SVU. Stonewall was not the only person who tried to persuade Durham to stop insisting he had done something he had not done. H. S. M. Coxeter to Durham, September 30, 1943. In this letter, Coxeter wrote, "I am very sorry to hear that you think of reprinting the pamphlet, containing as it does a blunder that any professional mathematician who reads it will notice." Durham did publish it and critics did point out its flaws, but Durham would not yield.

In many years of life, Durham never received the recognition he thought he deserved. He wanted the industrial or scientific community to know him for something great, but success at that level eluded him. The irony and lesson came from his successes not his failures. He earned patents several times; he was recognized for his mathematical skills by a prestigious journal, and he was published and promoted as an author. He also received recognition from local politicians.<sup>97</sup> Unfortunately, it was never enough. As he adapted to the changes in the South he changed his notion of success. For Durham, success presented itself in two ways: financial and remembrance. Even though he achieved so much, he perceived his life as lacking because his endeavors never reaped the financial or public benefits. The person Durham was at the end of his life showed little resemblance to the child living through the end of Reconstruction in rural North Carolina.

Durham's decision to abandon the national Democratic Party exemplified the changes Durham endured. He could not accept a life of accomplishments as successful and he was no longer in lockstep with the political party of his early adulthood. For Durham, prohibition was the turning point of his personal political allegiance. Durham always had an aversion to alcohol. When he was a child, his maternal grandfather taught him alcohol was evil and Durham never forgot that lesson. His grandfather's proclamation seemed fresh in Durham's mind when President Wilson signed prohibition into law. Durham was a proud Democrat that day. Although by 1919 Durham had significantly turned away from his heritage, he still had some strong connections. His allegiance to the Democrat Party was a primary element in

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<sup>97</sup> Governor Clyde R. Hoey served as the governor of North Carolina from 1937-1941. He, like Durham, was born and raised in Shelby, North Carolina. He was seven years younger than Durham, but knew him from childhood. In 1936, the people of North Carolina voted for Hoey. Only two weeks after the election and before he entered office, Durham wrote the Governor-elect and asked him to speak at Southern Seminary's commencement the following May. Even though it was governor Hoey's first graduation season, he left North Carolina for Southern Seminary because Durham asked him to. This was a significant honor.

Durham's connection. Therefore, when Franklin Roosevelt ran under the Democratic ticket for the presidency of the United States and included an end to prohibition as a portion of his platform, Durham's life took a small, but sharp turn.

There are few social patterns that historians would agree were primarily southern, but voting democratic was one of them. Democratic loyalty was a hallmark of the southern man, but Durham suffered from an identity crisis at the end of President Hoover's four-year term.<sup>98</sup> In his autobiography, Durham wrote, "voting Republican was akin to a dishonest character." Years earlier, he also wrote that no "respectable" man in North Carolina would vote for Teddy Roosevelt.<sup>99</sup> For historian Edward Ayers, politics defined the man and this held true for Durham, which amplified the degree the change Durham experiences during the New.<sup>100</sup> Being a Democrat was one of the last connections Durham had to his father. Without it, he was no longer able to identify with his father and grandfather. Their worlds were too different and now the people were too. Historian C. Vann Woodward opened his book, *Origins of the New South*, with the history of the Democrat Party.<sup>101</sup> Woodward argued that the Democrat party of the early New South was a mixture of the Whigs and the Democrats, both alive and active. Southerners kept the title of Democrat and were willing to defend it, but it was not a collection of like minds. By 1930, the local and national parties were too dissimilar for Durham to side with both.

When candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt promised to end the prohibition of alcohol, Durham found an enemy he would fight until FDR's death. Roosevelt argued that prohibition hurt business and created crime and he wanted to reverse the damage of the policy. During

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<sup>98</sup> Ayers, *Promise*, 240.

<sup>99</sup> Durham, *Since I Was Born*, 183.

<sup>100</sup> Ayers, *Promise*, 34.

<sup>101</sup> Woodward, *Origins*, 1.

his campaign, FDR promoted a “temperate use” of alcohol. In response to FDR’s promise, Durham did the unthinkable. He switched parties and sided with President Herbert Hoover. This was an emotional decision for Durham. He wrote the sitting President in an effort to stop FDR. In his letter, Durham referred to FDR as the “wettest candidate” to ever run and added that FDR had a “whiskey soaked conscience.” Durham disliked Roosevelt’s plan because of what it would do to the youth and his girls. During the campaign, FDR gave a speech wherein he presented his plan concerning the prohibition issue. In response, Durham wrote to a close friend. He wrote, “Responsibility for the effect of this speech from Mr. Roosevelt’s present exalted position, whether he is elected or not, is something that cannot be measured this side of hell to which it invites our boys and girls.”<sup>102</sup> A series of letters between Durham and President Herbert Hoover demonstrated the political complexities of the early 1930s. In 1932, Durham did something he would have judged as traitorous only a few short years earlier; he campaigned against the Democrat Party in support of the incumbent.<sup>103</sup> Durham referred to himself as a “dry Democrat” who was “betraying his own party for a higher moral cause.”

Durham expanded his critique of FDR beyond the prohibition issue and cemented his animosity towards the national Democratic Party. In 1934, Durham accused FDR of stealing from the American people. In a letter to the Carter Glass, a U.S. Senator, Durham was upset with the administration’s proposed policy of lowering the value of the dollar, then “taking” the money, and returning it to its previous value. Durham thought that the President and

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<sup>102</sup> The letter is unidentifiable by date or recipient. Durham’s signature is located at the bottom and the content of the letter shows that Durham was quite familiar with the family of the recipient. However, the top section of the letter is missing and that section contained the recipient’s name and date. RLDP. SVU.

<sup>103</sup> Durham to President Herbert Hoover, August 29, 1932. RLDP. SVU.

Congress should “steal first; and devalue afterward.”<sup>104</sup> For generations, the southern man followed their Democrat Party. It was almost a blind allegiance, but the changes in the New South gradually caused southerners to leave the Party. This attitude was directly in line with Edward Ayer’s work. He wrote that the Democrat Party lost the uncritical acceptance of the southern white in the early 1890s.<sup>105</sup> Durham’s sense of loyalty lasted longer than many, but by 1930, he turned his back on the national party.

Durham did not understand how he and “his” party could be at such odds. In an effort to understand his own mind, Durham wrote “Silhouette.”<sup>106</sup> The novel attempted to understand the mind of a southern man who lived through the twenties and into the 1930s.<sup>107</sup> Durham’s turn against the Democratic Party forced him to evaluate his situation. Once again, he found himself outside of the norm and “Silhouette” was the result.

Durham tried to have his manuscript published in 1932. He contacted “Good Housekeeping Magazine” and asked the publisher to publish his manuscript in installments.<sup>108</sup> Durham understood the southern mind to be drunk with the ease of industrialization and he wanted to present the nation with solutions. This was the second time Durham attempted to correct the national momentum.<sup>109</sup> “Good Housekeeping Magazine” refused to publish it. He then sent it to the Knopf publishing house with a letter that gave a brief description of the novel and a list of reasons the publisher should publish the

<sup>104</sup> Durham to Honorable Carter Glass, January 20, 1934. RLDP. SVU.

<sup>105</sup> Ayers, *Promise*, 267, 285.

<sup>106</sup> There are no surviving copies of “Silhouette.” Any detail concerning the manuscript came from other correspondence.

<sup>107</sup> The remaining portion is a brief summary attached to a rejection letter from a publisher.

<sup>108</sup> Durham to Good Housekeeping Magazine, Buena Vista, VA, May 23, 1932. RLDP. SVU.

<sup>109</sup> His first attempt was with his novel *The Call of the South*.

document.<sup>110</sup> He provided a list of seven reasons including: he was a native of “the South,” his characters were fair representatives of southern culture, his narrative contrasted Victorian and modern values and his style was “out-moded, but not extinct.” Although his self-assessment was interesting, it was not the point of his letter. He declared himself an authority of southern culture and of the southern mind. It is worthy to note that Durham was not the only commentator to try to work with the Knopf Company on this subject.

A year earlier, Knopf commissioned W. J. Cash to write a commentary on the southern mind; his commission became *The Mind of the South*. Cash’s book opened the mind of the South to everyone by investigating southern notions of class, pioneer relationships, racism, religion and the romantic nature of southern remembrance. Historians do not consider *The Mind of the South* a definitive work, but it is still referenced as a significant contributor to the southern historiography. In dismissing Durham’s “Silhouette,” the publisher’s response was short and cutting, “we have recently read other books which we like better.”<sup>111</sup> Cash and Durham viewed the South as a place in transition.

The years between 1919 and 1948 were tremendously important for Durham. He found a permanent position at an all-girl seminary. He exerted a great deal of energy while he tried to invent and formulate his way out of Virginian obscurity and he gave up one of his last connections to his father when he ended his association with the national Democrat Party. Although he failed to receive the recognition he desperately wanted, he managed to endear himself to hundreds of the young women he presided over and he passed his control of Southern Seminary to his daughter. His personal transformation during the New South

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<sup>110</sup> Durham to Alfred Knopf Inc., Buena Vista VA, April 24, 1937. RLDP. SVU. This letter contains far more information than what I use in this project. His seven characteristics are well defined and lengthy.

<sup>111</sup> Alfred A. Knopf Inc. to Durham, area with date is not readable. RLDP. SVU.



found him in 1919 balancing between the backward looking South and the forward-looking North

In 1948 his life was nothing like his father's, but he had done all he could to change that. While he fought with FDR, yearned for recognition through his mathematical theories, guided Southern Seminary to success in turbulent financial times, and became a solid supporter of industrial and capitalistic principles, he simultaneously tried to realign the relationship between himself and his father.

## Chapter 4

### Since I was Born

After Durham's death, his daughter and brother tried to paint him with an agrarian brush. Margaret and Stonewall claimed that he lived a traditional humble southern life. They held, and still hold, that notion despite his personal papers containing hundreds of pages of correspondence between Durham, his lawyers, his brother, mathematicians, engineers, and patent offices.<sup>112</sup> Durham was ambitious. His internal drive contradicted his "daughter's" affirmation that her father was satisfied with his accomplishments and never felt the need to "sell his wares."<sup>113</sup> Actually, his daughter never said Durham was satisfied. Those who have read Durham's autobiography may think she did, but she never said it, Durham did. Before Durham died, he wrote the preface to his autobiography and ordered his daughter and publisher to assign the preface to Margaret. Durham did sell his wares, to anyone that would buy, read, or listen.<sup>114</sup>

On a cold winter's day in 1953, nearly five years after the death of her father, Margaret Durham Robey received a package in the mail. The box was not heavy and she brought the box to her office in Main Hall at Southern Seminary Junior College for Girls.

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<sup>112</sup> The Durham collections at both Southern Virginia University and Duke University have many such correspondence. At my last count, there are more than 250 patent requests and more than twice that number in letters that reference his inventions. There are far too many to include in this paper. Instead, I have chosen to include those I have determined to be of worth. Their value generally lies in their ability to demonstrate the breadth of Durham's mind or the persistence of his character.

<sup>113</sup> Margaret Durham Robey, "Preface," *Since I Was Born*. Pgs. 7-10. In the preface Durham is credited for several noble characteristics including a self-satisfaction with creation. He is made to look as one who did not seek recognition. All of this is false. Durham wrote the preface and left it for his daughter, Margaret, to publish. She sent Durham's copy to the publisher and signed her name. She also wrote that she had not drafted this preface, but her father did. The publisher placed it in the book and assigned it to Margaret.

<sup>114</sup> Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1987). Kirby's book focused on the methods the South was turned urban. Durham's inventions were not directly responsible for the changes addressed in Kirby's book, but his attitude was that of rural destruction.

When she arrived at her office, Margaret opened the box and perused the first copy of her father's autobiography, *Since I was Born*.<sup>115</sup> Mrs. Robey waited almost four years after her father's death to compile Durham's memoirs and it took less than a year to complete, but she was not working from scratch. Durham gave Margaret clear instructions concerning the manuscript and she followed them. After seventy-nine years of life, Durham presented his family with a portion of their history and a new interpretation of the author. He spent almost twenty years creating the manuscript he felt the family needed in order to ensure a proper legacy. The story of Durham's efforts to recreate his history through his family's legacy, which culminated in his autobiography, is the completion of his personal expression of the changes within the New South.

The reinvention of his family's history presented Durham with several challenges. Durham did not intend his project for popular consumption. Instead, he focused on convincing his grandchildren, especially those who "never knew him." His next major hurdle was establishing the ideological groundwork for arguing that he was a great man through the virtue of others, beginning with his father and grandfather.<sup>116</sup> In order to accomplish this, Durham provided historical context to support his claim to noble blood, virtuous forefathers and evidence that blood linked superior paternal qualities. He also used his family to define what a "good southerner" looked like, but omitted his family's racist traditions. The façade of the project was a Durham family history, but the real purpose of the book was to spotlight Durham's interpretation of his upbringing and his adherence to traditional values later in life. Unfortunately, Durham abandoned those values long before he wrote his memoirs. He could

<sup>115</sup> Durham, *Since I Was Born*, ed. Marshall William Fishwick (Richmond: Whittet and Shepperson, 1953).

<sup>116</sup> Durham's first focus was his father. In March 1930, Durham began requesting information from friends and family about his biological father. Once received, he started playing with timelines and manipulating the data. His efforts at whitewashing his father's history lasted until his own death.

not present his adult life as a defense of traditional beliefs. Durham needed to find a way to write about his life without writing about his choices, but he did not believe he had a great deal of time because his youngest brother died.

On February 9, 1930, Dr. Plato Tracy Durham gave his last public address. He directed his comments to Dr. John Hope of Spelman College.<sup>117</sup> Plato Durham presented Dr. Hope with the Harmon Award in Education.<sup>118</sup> He had chosen his remarks carefully. He knew this was a once in a lifetime opportunity and he wanted to express thoughts he had spent years cultivating. In part, he said,

“It has come to be my deliberate opinion that the most tragic and most difficult of all parts of human civilization today is being played by a cultured, educated Negro leader of his people. The deep tragedy of that I have come through long years of association in work with them to know. Their deep and terrible difficulty I also have come to know. That in [Dr. Hope] more than in any other man I have come to sense that tragedy where the inalienable rights of personality that is raceless and timeless is thwarted by conventional limitations and prejudices, by the accidents and incidents of history. And the deep sounding of that tragedy has made some of us at times deeply unhappy and has made some of us at times swear, that so far as we – not as white men but as men – are concerned, that tragedy shall pass from this earth; that whatever God put into the human spirit akin to Him from the beginning and passing through this mighty cosmic circle to Him in His likeness shall not be overtaken by the accidents and incidents of mere human prejudice and injustice.”<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Plato Tracy Durham was significantly different when compared with Durham. In order to appreciate Plato, I read a book that dealt with the African-white relationship. Howard Zinn, *Southern Mystique* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1970) provided an interesting insight into the revolution of thought in relation to the revolution of action. Plato was apart of the revolution of thought early enough to allow him to participate in the revolution of action. He was also the Dean of the School of Theology at Emory University, which he resigned from in 1919.

<sup>118</sup> The William E. Harmon Foundation award for Distinguished Achievement among Negroes commonly referred to as the "Harmon award" or "Harmon foundation award", was a philanthropic and cultural award created in 1926 by William E. Harmon and administered by the Harmon Foundation. It was offered for distinguished achievements in eight different fields: literature, music, fine arts, business and industry (such as banker Anthony Overton in 1927), science and innovation, education (for example, educator Janie Porter Barrett in 1929), religious service, and race relations. Although awards were created in eight categories, it is best known for its impact on African American art of the Harlem renaissance, and particularly on the visual arts.

<sup>119</sup> Dr. Plato Tracy Durham to Dr. John Hope, "speech," February 9, 1930. RLDP. DUA.

After returning to his hotel room, Dr. Plato Durham went to bed and by morning, was dead. The concierge found Plato, contacted Spelman College, and by noon, Durham held a telegram confirming the death of his youngest brother in Atlanta, Georgia.<sup>120</sup> This event held immediate consequences for Durham and it changed his life. Durham was the oldest son, the most successful in financial terms, and the recognized patriarchal leader of the Durham family. Plato's death did not directly challenge Durham's reign patriarchal position, but Plato's legacy threatened Durham.

Plato Tracy Durham, the third son of Captain Plato Durham of the Confederate Army, was a devout Methodist and ardent civil rights activist. As adults, Durham and Plato Tracy shared a faith, but little else. Durham and Plato Tracy grew up in the same home, went to the same schools, were raised by the same community, but during college their lives went in dramatically different directions. Dr. Plato Durham dedicated his life to the equal education of African American and white children. Long before *Brown v. Board*, Plato had petitioned the State of North Carolina to take up the cause of equal education in 1898.<sup>121</sup> Plato Tracy lived for the benefit of others and his death created an immediate need for Durham to rewrite the Durham family history.

Durham understood the ramifications of his brother's death shortly after he received the news. He knew that his brother's friends and associates would remember Plato as a humble, selfless, religious, great southern defender of all people. Plato's threat to Durham was his legacy, a legacy he created by living his principles and protecting the African-

<sup>120</sup> Telegram to Durham, February 10, 1930. RLDP. DUA>

<sup>121</sup> Durham to Stonewall Jackson Durham, June 11, 1898. RLDP. SVU. Durham wrote to Stonewall and criticized his brother's actions. The letter does not specify the nature of the case, but it was clear that it was an embarrassment and had to do with "those people." It is reasonable to conclude Plato was working with African Americans.

American community. Plato's legacy held the potential to endure and set the standard for the Durham name. Durham would not allow his little brother to control the family legacy. It would be difficult to prove that Plato's death led directly to the re-writing of the Durham family history, but Durham's sense of urgency and self-understanding gave the needed evidence. Durham began rewriting his family history only three weeks after burying his brother, leaving all mention of his brother out of his narrative. Simply put, Durham knew he could not sell himself as a traditional southern defender, even though he fought against the amalgamation his brother fought for. He was not the legacy he wanted to project.

Durham never received the recognition he believed he deserved from the industrial, mathematical, political or educational communities in which he worked, but in 1930, he did not know that would be the case. When Plato Tracy died, Durham was still an active inventor, school president, mathematician and political booster, but he was unwilling to risk failure. Simultaneous with his inventing, presiding, formulating and debating, Durham created a contingency plan. If his contemporaries did not remember him for his advances, then his grandchildren would remember him for his resolute, but fictional, resistance to the northern industrial machine and loyalty to traditional southern values. Durham's grandchildren were an insurance policy against obscurity. His desire for fame and his willingness to minimize his brother's memory demonstrated his desires, but his inability to use his own life was evidence of his personal changes in response to the New South.

Durham's personal changes during the New South turned him into someone he could not pass as a traditionalist. The seemingly insignificant decisions he made because of personal, social, economic, and political pressures created an industrialist. His industrial activities removed him from his mythical traditions. In order to convince his grandchildren,

he had to present them with a traditional image they could believe in. In recreating his family's history, he incorporated the idea that virtue passed from father to son and that was the key. If Durham were to create a Durham family legacy, he would become the direct heir to his fathers' greatness. In order to receive his inheritance, he needed to recreate his father and grandfather.

Durham's recreation lasted the rest of his life, but he had to transform his father so thoroughly that it took twenty years to achieve. Durham tried to turn his father into a figure his grandchildren could be proud of and himself into an extension of Plato's greatness. Plato Durham was born September 20, 1840 in Rutherford County, North Carolina. His family consisted of fourteen children and although his family had means, his education was elementary at best. One source reported that his education came from the "county schools and Plow handles."<sup>122</sup> Plato eventually became educated in the law. He attended the University of North Carolina's law program and was admitted to the bar in 1866, two years before the Union readmitted North Carolina as a State. During the Civil War, Plato served as a private, First lieutenant and captain. Plato managed to survive several major engagements without injury. Captain Durham led his men through Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, and Spotsylvania, before being in command of his troops during the surrender at Appomattox Courthouse.<sup>123</sup> After the war, Captain Durham CSA was an outspoken member of the constitutional convention of 1868. His involvement in the convention was almost a family tradition. Several years earlier Captain Plato Durham's father, Micajah, was a member of the secession convention. The citizens of Cleveland County elected Plato to public office twice,

<sup>122</sup> The historical marker database served as a source of documentation. HMdb.org, "Plato Durham," <http://www.hmdb.org/marker.asp?marker=23535> (accessed November 5, 2011).

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

but he never served. After the elections of 1868, General E. R. S. Canby overrode the election and planted a Republican in office and in 1870, the Republicans did it again and Plato Durham did not take office due to his confederate connections.

Only two months before Durham died, he wrote an article for the *Gastonia Gazette* titled, “Remembering One of Our Great Heroes.” This article was the last piece of the new Durham family history. Durham deliberately misrepresented the nature of his father’s participation in the Ku Klux Klan in order to justify a vision of Plato as a hero. His particular interpretation focused on Plato’s positive values and deemphasized the negative reality. Durham needed his father to be cast in the best light possible or his mission of reinvention would have failed. His father had to become a primary source of pride. If Durham failed to present his father well, then he would have failed in his efforts to rewrite the Durham history. The article admitted to Plato’s participation in founding of the Ku Klux Klan, but Durham minimized his involvement. He made his father’s activities palatable. Durham wrote, “Captain Durham was the one who guided the white citizens in their struggle to overcome this situation. He was the reputed head of the original Ku Klux Klan.” He then wrote, “As soon as [the Ku Klux Klan’s] serious work was accomplished and it got out of hand under the control of a younger, rougher element he abandoned it and did all he could to see it outlawed and disbanded.”<sup>124</sup> In reality, Captain Plato Durham was an active supportive member of the Klan until his death. Durham focused his efforts on disassociation. Durham hoped that his grandchildren would remember Plato Durham positively although he was an associate of the Klan. Plato’s hands would be metaphorically clean and Durham would not inherit a fault. Once clean, Durham effectively eliminated his own guilt from the family

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<sup>124</sup> Editorial, *Gastonia Gazette*, November 17, 1948. RLDP. DUA.



record. Durham understood that he and his father were racist, but they did not act on blind hate. He reasoned that they were protectors of the virtues inherent in the South and they did on everyone's behalf.

Although Durham did not want to admit it, there is no record of Plato Durham ever leaving the Klan. Durham wanted the best of both sides of the KKK issue. He used the rhetoric of peacekeeping while simultaneously arguing that his father defended southern traditional values through violence when appropriate. Durham's newspaper article minimized Plato's participation, but he clearly contradicted his published position in his autobiography. Durham wrote, "[Plato] declined to betray his fellow Klansmen – for which immunity was to be had."<sup>125</sup> Durham referenced an incident that landed his father and other Klansmen in jail. The judge offered Plato immunity if he testified against his friends. He did not. In 1874, Plato appeared in court on behalf of the Klan and he died in 1875. The question for Durham was evident. When exactly did Plato "disassociate himself?" He never did. Durham's entire argument that his father was not a violent racist was planned and false. Plato Durham was one of those arrested during the Kirk-Holden war. This conflict was between the Governor of North Carolina, William Woods Holden, one of his Generals from the State Militia, George Washington Kirk, and the KKK. The Klan had lynched a town commissioner and murdered a State Senator. Both law enforcement and the Klan openly suspected Plato Durham of the Senator's murder. The response from Governor Holden was clear when he sent General Kirk

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<sup>125</sup> Durham, *Since I was Born*, 46.

to stop the Klan. The Governor allowed Kirk to suspend the writ of habeas corpus and jailed as many Klansmen as needed, Plato Durham included.<sup>126</sup>

With the memory of Captain Plato Durham CSA sufficiently doctored, Durham transitioned to his grandfather, from his mother's side, James Tracy. Major James Tracy was a medical officer during the Civil War. He served with the North Carolina 14<sup>th</sup>. He died in battle, but not before making his mark.

The story Durham sent to Mr. Bradford centered on Dr. Major James Wright Tracy. In the story, Tracy saved a column of General Jackson's troops from discovery. According to Durham, Major Tracy was riding a captured Yankee horse later named Abe Lincoln. He was at the rear of Jackson's column due to his medical responsibilities and he wanted to watch after the soldiers ahead of him. He watched as the column passed through an open field the Yankees were shelling. The chaos and smoke caused by the shelling made it difficult for the Union artillery to see the passing troops. Major Tracy recognized that if the artillery stopped, the smoke would clear and they would see the end of Jackson's column through the trees. In an effort to avoid disaster, Tracy charged into the open area of the field and gave the Yankees a target. Major Tracy spurred Abe Lincoln slightly faster than intended and reached the opposite side of the open field too quickly. The column was not out of range. This meant he

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<sup>126</sup> The Historical marker database contains descriptions and short backgrounds of those people and places on historical markers. This particular page is dedicated to Plato Durham. This marker gives basic information, but the short article on the website delves slightly deeper into Plato's history. This site reported that Plato was involved in the Kirk-Holden war. <http://www.hmdb.org/marker.asp?marker=23535> A brief search for the Kirk-Holden war produced dates, June - July 1870, which meant that Durham, born in May, was only a couple months old at the time of the conflict. [http://docsouth.unc.edu/highlights/holden\\_kirk.html](http://docsouth.unc.edu/highlights/holden_kirk.html) There is no mention of Plato Durham in these records, but his name is prominent in case proceedings following the conflict. [http://books.google.com/books?id=nMN4AAAAMAAJ&pg=PA144&lpg=PA144&dq=%22plato+durham%22&source=bl&ots=XnoQw0Xk4J&sig=v7s7qzHW31110WKvupPZq3mTEh8&hl=en&ei=s3tETeXoHoT78AaDsazWAQ&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=6&ved=0CDQQ6AEwBQ#v=onepage&q=%22plato%20durham%22&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=nMN4AAAAMAAJ&pg=PA144&lpg=PA144&dq=%22plato+durham%22&source=bl&ots=XnoQw0Xk4J&sig=v7s7qzHW31110WKvupPZq3mTEh8&hl=en&ei=s3tETeXoHoT78AaDsazWAQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=6&ved=0CDQQ6AEwBQ#v=onepage&q=%22plato%20durham%22&f=false)

had to run the gauntlet again. The Yankees welcomed the excitement and fired everything they had at the rebel on the Union horse. Their zealous firing blocked their ability to see the progress of Jackson's soldiers. The column safely made it to their battle lines and fought later the same day. Union soldiers eventually accomplished their goal. Union soldiers shot and killed Major Tracy before the end of the war, but he saved his own son's life first.<sup>127</sup>

After serving General Jackson and the soldiers of Gettysburg, Dr. Tracy was stationed in Raleigh at the Fair Ground hospital. When General Sherman made his way through the city, Major Tracy was already gone. He left the city moments before the Union forces arrived. As he rode west, he noticed a body lying in the mud. He dismounted his horse and approached the body. It did not take him long to realize the body was that of his son, Private Rush Tracy. Together they went to King's Mountain, the family's hometown, and Rush was nursed back to health.<sup>128</sup> Durham used these stories as the backbone of the Durham family history. Durham had a principle element of what he needed; he had heroes, but he still needed to reinforce the idea of bloodline transference.

Durham proudly shared this story with all who would listen. In a letter to Gamaliel Bradford, author of *Lee: The American*, Durham related a story about his grandfather. He told Mr. Bradford the story was meant to teach about the "small details upon which the fate of armies sometimes hang."<sup>129</sup> In reality, Durham tried to insert his grandfather into Bradford's project.

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<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> Durham, *Ancestry of Durham and Tracy*, undated. RLDP. DUA

<sup>129</sup> Durham to Gamaliel Bradford, January 27, 1931. RLDP. DUA.

In an unpublished volume of family history, Durham made the needed connections. Durham wrote, “Dr. Tracy’s inherent and *inherited* qualities undoubtedly were the making of his fibre and strength.”<sup>130</sup> On April 15, 1930, Durham wrote a letter to “Wright.” In part, Durham wrote, “[Plato] and Stonewall and I have so often speculated and tried to account for some of the things which always so impressed us about grandpa. What we knew of him and his history could not altogether account for his unusual qualities. Of course the Tracy blood was largely intermixed with other, but the Tracy personal tradition handed down from father to son...illuminates a great many things about our old granddaddy that are very dear to us.” This was the logic Durham needed. He emphasized the idea that Dr. Tracy was not the sole source of his greatness. Some of his character came through inheritance, blood. Durham also attributed the greatness of his father, Plato, to that of his paternal grandfather, but he ended his comments there. The natural implication was that Durham inherited the best qualities from both sets of grandparents by way of his parents, who were also great. Durham could not openly make this jump without appearing self-serving, and he was too humble for that. The “unusual” quality Dr. Tracy had been nobility.

In *The Mind of the South*, W. J. Cash explained why southern men tried to find relationships between southern aristocracy and English nobility.<sup>131</sup> He asserted that, in most cases, the relationship was fictional. Even though aristocratic connections were fictional, southerners believed it. Cash’s analysis of the connection showed that southern nobility were frequently the progeny of poor Irish and Scotch immigrants. Some immigrants were lucky enough to hit pay dirt and leave the lowest economic classes. These same immigrants earned enough money to give their children a new style of life. Eventually, the original immigrant

<sup>130</sup> Durham, *Ancestry of Durham/Tracy family*, undated. RLPD. DUA.

<sup>131</sup> Cash, *Mind*, 4-5, 56-57.

died and left a legacy far different from reality.<sup>132</sup> This legacy served as the foundation of social stratification that was familiar to the South. After relating a story of a poor Irishman, Cash wrote, “Such is the epic, in little, of the rise of the ruling class in the great South.”<sup>133</sup>

Both Durham’s family history and the legacy he chose to create confirmed Cash’s argument. Durham’s posthumously published autobiography, *Since I was Born*, was the product of almost twenty years of reinvention. Durham began it with his version of the family genealogy and Grandpa Tracy.<sup>134</sup> He dedicated the first few pages to settling a grudge and exposing a “skeleton in the family closet,”<sup>135</sup> Dr. Major James Tracy’s grandfather was a Connecticut Yankee. Durham wrote, “I wonder if he will admit that to me in Heaven.”<sup>136</sup> After stating that Plato Durham, Durham’s father, was great because Plato’s father was great, Durham needed to fill in the remaining genealogy in order to justify his continuation of the family legacy. According to Cash, the ancestors needed to be noble.

Durham’s family tree supposedly began with Sire de Tracie, a Norman baron who was an army officer in the service of William, Duke of Normandy, who invaded England in 1066.<sup>137</sup> This Tracie fought in the battle of Hastings and a variation of his name appeared on the “Battle Abbey.” Durham also claimed that Sire de Tracie’s name was derived from the “castle and barony of Tracie in the Arrondissement of Caen.” Sire Tracie’s grandson was one of four knights who assassinated Thomas A. Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, under the direction of King Henry II. The assassin later repented, founded and endowed a chapel to the Archbishop in Tewksbury. This noble grandson, Sir William Traci, was one of

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<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-21.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>134</sup> Durham, *Since I Was Born*.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

the few rebellious barons who fought against the King in an effort to demand *Magna Carta*. After having his lands returned, King Henry III restored him to full honors.<sup>138</sup>

Durham's family history was an important element in his quest for reinvention. After providing some interesting, and undocumented, family information, Durham returned to his family narrative with Sir William De Tracy.<sup>139</sup> This nobleman was the Sheriff of Gloucestershire in the fifth year of the reign of Henry VIII. This particular relative met with a painful end. The Sheriff apparently declared that Jesus Christ, not the pope, was the mediator between the soul and God. He was burned at the stake for heresy. Durham wrote that those who knew him remembered Sir William De Tracy as, "A gentleman of excellent parts and sound learning, and is memorable for being one of the first who embraced the reform in religion in England."<sup>140</sup> There is no evidence to support this claim, but he was trying to make a religious point.<sup>141</sup> Durham and his family were faithful Methodists and rejected papal authority. Durham's intent was clear- to connect his ancestor's religious fervor clearly through the generations. Durham ended his genealogical tree at this point, which was approximately 300 years before the birth of his grandfather. Durham assumed a connection to nobility through Lt. Thomas Tracy of Connecticut. Lt. Tracy was a descendent of nobility

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<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16

<sup>139</sup> This is now the third variation on the original name, Tracie. "Six generations" is based on an average generation being twenty years. There is a one hundred and twenty year gap between the two mentioned progenitors.

<sup>140</sup> Durham, *Since I Was Born*, 16.

<sup>141</sup> Two books deny this claim. Lord Sudeley, "Becket's Murderer William de Tracy," in *The Sudeleys - Lords of Toddington* (London: Manorial Society of Great Britain, 1987). pgs., 77-8, 82, 88. And, N.B. Tracy, *Historical Address before the Fourth Annual Reunion of the Tracy Family at Gouldsboro, ME*, August 19, 1899 (Auburn, Maine: Palmer Print & Stamp Works, 1900). The first book claimed that Tracy died on his way to Jerusalem after being exiled by the Pope. The second book claims that Tracy lived for several years and was buried in front of the gates at the Temple in Jerusalem. Both accounts claim that Tracy sought forgiveness from the Pope.

and if Durham had Lt. Tracy blood, he would have noble blood, but he was not an heir of Lt. Tracy.<sup>142</sup> Durham did not have noble blood.

Durham followed the falsified genealogy with a series of vignettes designed to demonstrate his rural southern upbringing. Durham had a pattern. When discussing the greatness of his father and grandfather, he intentionally refused to connect himself directly. His writing style guided the reader into making the connection. When he wrote his memoirs, he focused on the actions of others. Durham intended to have readers understand that he learned his most valuable lessons from the actions of others. Interestingly, those actions were benevolent, giving, peaceful, and agrarian. Most of his stories dealt with his family's land, poverty, crops, bartering, and community. It is important to note that the narrative of his life ends with his time in college. Durham's personal quest prevented him from addressing the reality he was trying hard to deny. Durham could not continue telling his own story, even thru others, after his college years. Durham's story had to end for two reasons. First, if he continued, the incongruities of his fictional remembrance and actual life would have been apparent and, second, after he left school he was no longer a child. After leaving Trinity, he was a man capable of making his own decisions and an influencer, no longer the student.

Durham's personal transformation during the period of the New South reached its pinnacle with his autobiography and not everyone was pleased. In creating the fictional legacy, he condemned the very person he had become. His book painted him as a traditional agrarian. In reality, he had strayed from his rural roots while maintaining his racial ideology.

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<sup>142</sup> <http://www.rockystrickland.com/tracy.htm> This website is a personal genealogical source of documentation for the Strickland family. Robert Lee Durham was a cousin of Mr. Strickland and Mr. Strickland has documentation proving that Durham was not a relative of Lt. Tracy. This is a personal website and is therefore questionable as to its accuracy, but he does provide links to other relevant material in support of his claims.

By the mid-1940's, Durham had spent more than ten years working on his family project. In that time, his friends and family learned of the project and knew he was whitewashing his past. There is no record of his family suggesting he stop, but they did suggest he become what he portrayed himself to be. Durham's brother and cousin urged him to progress beyond the racist social views Durham's father held, especially toward African Americans. His brother, Stonewall, told him that his history was wrong and misleading because it altered the reality of the situation and their grandchildren would not know the truth. Durham's cousin, Dowd, thought Durham's hardline attitude toward African Americans was no longer socially acceptable and archaic.

In December 1944, after Durham suffered from serious health issues, his cousin wrote him a letter.<sup>143</sup> He told him he needed to repent and change his ways. Dowd was referring to Durham's attitude toward African Americans. Durham's cousin touched on issues that Durham had based his entire life on. Dowd used religion and the military to suggest to Durham that he needed to change his opinion of African Americans. In the letter, Dowd explained to Durham that his son has served alongside African Americans in training and in war and they were honorable and brave. He goes on to write that an ex-slave of his childhood home was kind and gracious enough to write a kind letter after Dowd's father died. The slave, Squire, was the student of Dowd's grandmother. She taught Squire to read. Squire had never forgotten the service the Dowd family had given him. Throughout this letter, Dowd continually reminds Durham of the Christmas season and argues that Christ came "to teach

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<sup>143</sup> Dowd to Durham, December 22, 1944. RLDP. DUA.



the world a better way of life.”<sup>144</sup> He also noted that the “manuscript” Durham was working on would not convince the world of Durham’s virtue. Dowd wanted Durham to change.

In response, Durham reminded Dowd that “good” southern men credited Durham with addressing and solving the “negro question” thirty years earlier. His father and grandfather understood the proper relationship between the races and he was committed to carrying that legacy. The irony was that Durham openly admitted to hostile feelings towards African Americans founded in his father’s animosity towards them, but there are no African Americans in *Since I was Born*. Durham obviously considered his racial attitude as an inheritance and a responsibility, but he also understood that he could not pass that element of his character down to his grandchildren.

Durham’s next significant effort to solidify the greatness of his father happened in 1945. He wanted to present the Law School at North Carolina with a portrait of his father, Captain Plato Durham CSA. As soon as Durham verified his father’s attendance at North Carolina’s Law School, he approached the school with the gift idea. Durham thought the school could hang it in the main room of the Law Library, facing the entryway.<sup>145</sup> A Durham associate advised Durham to use Dr. Roulhac Hamilton’s connections at the university. Dr. Hamilton taught at the Horner Military Academy, where Durham’s stepfather served as superintendent. Durham’s stepfather hired Dr. Hamilton before retiring. Durham hoped Dr. Hamilton would be sympathetic to the cause. Initially, the University respectfully denied the opportunity to hang the portrait, but Durham did not give up.<sup>146</sup> After a steady campaign of approximately one letter every two weeks for three months, Library Director Charles E.

<sup>144</sup> Dowd to Durham, December 22, 1944. RLDP. DUA.

<sup>145</sup> Durham to Dr. Roulhac Hamilton, October 1, 1945. RLDP. SVU.

<sup>146</sup> Charles E. Rush, Director of Libraries, to Durham, November 19, 1945. RLDP. SVU.

Rush, consented to hang the portrait and said, he “would be honored to have the portrait in his library.”<sup>147</sup> Even though Plato Durham only attended The University of North Carolina for two semesters, the faculty and staff of the Law Library hung his portrait on June 9, 1946. Durham accomplished his last significant goal in solidifying his father’s legacy, which in combination with his article “Remembering One of Our Great Heroes,” solidified his own.

In the end, Durham succeeded in his personal reinvention. In January of 1949, Robert Lee Durham died. He was survived by his wife, daughter and younger brother Stonewall Jackson Durham. His students and family genuinely loved him. Durham’s personal changes during the New South created a very different man from his father, but his family, friends and students remembered him as an example of tradition. Students remembered him as an author, man of science and educator, but primarily as a southerner. Today, his family considers him one of the “great men” of their family.<sup>148</sup>

The students of Southern Seminary Junior College for Girls, which Durham served as President, ran a special edition of the *Virginia Reel*<sup>149</sup> commemorating Durham’s life. The edition ran in March of 1949, just two months after his death. His thirty-year career at the

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<sup>147</sup> Charles E. Rush to Margaret Durham Robey, January 1946. RLDP. SVU. There were several other sets of correspondence that are relevant to the portrait: Charles E. Rush to Margaret Durham Robey, April 16, 1946, April 19, 1946; and May 4, 1946. RLDP. SVU. After Durham secured the portrait, Margaret took over the project. In December, Durham became severely ill again and was not expected to make it to the ceremony, but did at the last minute.

<sup>148</sup> D’Ann Stoddard, e-mail message to author, September 21, 2010. In this e-mail, D’ Ann related to me that in 1995 one of her aunts passed away. This aunt was the official expert on Durham. The aunt had told D’ Ann that Durham was the greatest man in the Durham family.

<sup>149</sup> The *Virginia Reel* was the school’s local newspaper. The *Virginia Reel*, 1, no.2 [March, 1949]. One important note is that the authors of the several articles were not named. This creates an identification issue, but not a retrieval issue. This issue, along with dozens of others, is found in the special collections case in archive room of Southern Virginia University. The newspapers are not cataloged, nor are they in sequential order.

school connected him to thousands of students. The special edition acted as a death notice for the alumni and some current students had the opportunity to write about Daddy Durham.<sup>150</sup>

The special edition of the *Virginia Reel* opened with an anonymous student's observations of Durham.<sup>151</sup> This particular student wrote that Durham was a "distinguished-looking gentleman with a twinkle in his eye." She went on to extol his kindness, his attention to the girls individually, and his singing voice at the age of seventy-one. The author admitted that most of her opinion was reliant on those that knew him before he became ill. She continued, "Daddy Durham had the air of a man who was gentle...and sympathetic to all men." She then related the high points of his life: Shelby, North Carolina, Duke University, politics, his service in the Spanish-American War and his teaching career. She continued through his religious activities and his other various achievements. Other articles from students and parents were included in the school paper, but none mentioned his inventions, patents, or efforts at publishing.<sup>152</sup> A father of a Seminary girl wrote, "The passing of your honorable and distinguished father brought sadness to all of us." Of course, the special edition of the school paper was designed to remember the best of Durham, but the dozens of personalized letters from alumni and family that arrived at Southern Seminary were similarly touching.

After hearing of Durham's death, Mrs. Betty Young Meissners wrote, "I can't say any more about his virtues than have already been said."<sup>153</sup> Virginia Price's message was similar.

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<sup>150</sup> These sources lack a certain degree validity. I would take a rare individual, whose rarity would disqualify them, to write something negative. It is the thesis of this paper that Durham succeeded in being remembered the way he wanted to be remembered. For this reason, I have chosen specific letters and notes in order to demonstrate my point. None of the surviving letters were negative.

<sup>151</sup> Student, "Daddy Durham," *The Virginia Reel*, 1, no.2 [March, 1949]. RLDP. SVU.

<sup>152</sup> All of the authors in this special edition are anonymous, except Margaret Durham Robey.

<sup>153</sup> Betty Young Meissners to Margaret Durham Robey, April 6, 1949. RLDP. SVU.

Her message read, “I remember him vividly and how close he was to all our hearts.”<sup>154</sup> Joan Wilson’s opinion of Durham was of a noble man. Joan Wilson also wrote that Durham was honorable and “I have never known anyone more widely esteemed.”<sup>155</sup> “Daddy Durham’s sweet, kind face was always with a big smile and a kind welcome. He taught my sisters and me the right way to be. He was an example of the right kind of living.”<sup>156</sup> The author of the newspaper article summed up the general attitude toward Durham the best. She wrote, “But to those who ever knew him, even slightly, he will never really die. His principles are the basis for our school; his spirit will live here, and in our hearts, forever.”<sup>157</sup> In the end, Durham received what he desired most, his friends, family, and students remembered him as something he was not.

<sup>154</sup> Virginia Price to Margaret Durham Robey, April 21, 1949. RLDP. SVU.

<sup>155</sup> Joan Wilson to Margaret Durham Robey, April 30, 1949. RLDP. SVU.

<sup>156</sup> Marybeth Frisse Spencer to Margaret Durham Robey, undated. RLDP. SVU.

<sup>157</sup> This is a small sample of the letters sent to the Durham and Robey Family. There are many more stored in the Southern Virginia Archive room. For a complete analysis, researchers should go there.

## Conclusion

Durham was a complicated man living in a complicated time. The changes Durham underwent brought him from his rural childhood home in western North Carolina during reconstruction, through the progressive era, the roaring twenties, a Great Depression and two World Wars. As a child, he learned his family's brand of southern from his community, which included his family, friends and neighbors. Durham's childhood version of being southern meant he was poor, lived in a rural community and hated African Americans.

Some have tried to understand Durham, but no one has taken a wide-angle view of his entire life. Without a detailed investigation of Durham's life, he has been misunderstood and simplified. Only through his biography can historians understand Durham's personal transition as a man of the New South. He changed from a humble child who was thankful for a thin slice of cream cheese into a man whose greatest desire was public recognition of his self-conceived importance. The small decisions Durham made during his elementary years, college experience and early adulthood changed him. The choices he made, which were based on the environment he confronted, culminated in an artificial autobiography designed to deceive his grandchildren. As a child, he lived in the shadow of his father. The men of his town constantly reminded him of their memories of his father and they taught him to be like his father. By age 30, his life still held some resemblance to his father's life. By the time he turned fifty, Durham clearly removed himself from the legacy of his father and by sixty, he had to fictionalize his family's history in order to bridge the widening gulf between who his father was and what Durham became. In 1949, only racism held Durham to his father.

Durham reinvented what it meant to be southern, but only insofar as it pertained to him. Durham's southern condition was a mix of southern tradition and industrial ideology, which reflected the transformations of the New South. Durham's new definition was a blend between his father's traditional racial philosophies and his industrial capitalist desire for wealth and recognition. His life span went beyond the era of the New South, as most historians defined the period. Although he reinvented his version of southern, he never disassociated from the southern culture.

Durham's personal transition of the New South took time. Durham was always a southern man, but as time and tradition passed, the label "southern" implied a diminished set of qualities every year. Traditional definitions became invalid. Populism, Jim Crow segregation, northern social advancements, the shift in policy for the national Democratic Party, the Great Depression and the expansion of the industrial machine influenced Durham's decisions. Through Durham, and those like him, historians have the opportunity to understand the confusion during this time of transition.

The New South left people like Durham metaphorically homeless. By the turn of the century, Durham's social, cultural, economic, and political views forced him into a gray area between the North and the South. Durham was far from alone. Historians study the New South because it was an intense time of change and the people of the New South facilitated the political, social, and industrial conversions that defined the period. Durham's story is compelling because he was conscious of his decisions and understood that his personal growth removed him from an ideal he assumed a responsibility to protect. In this, he had less company. The network of friends he wrote numbered in the dozens, but he did not discuss his situation with any of them in a way that suggested they were experiencing the same

difficulty. Durham was homeless. He did not fit into his environment the same way others seemed capable.

Durham recognized he was nothing like his father when he wrote *Since I was Born*. His awareness compelled him to lie to his grandchildren in order to obtain what he viewed as necessary. He knew he was different, but he also knew the source of his difference. Durham understood that he was a part of a revolution and he identified when the revolutionary process began.

“Reconstruction. The Blood of the after-birth not only stained the hands, but also colored all the thoughts and emotions of those of the South who lived through the struggle. Even the recital of the stories of the war by them to their children set many young minds awry. Now, however, most of us of that following generation have recovered quietness for nerves shaken by personal or congenital shocks. We are beginning to look with philosophical detachment on our States-Rights fathers and grandfathers in their losing fight against the extension of human liberty to the negro. Secession is dead and there are few of us Southern Sons ‘so poor as to do it reverence,’ although we will stand forever at high salute as we cover its casket and its memory with immortelles in honor of the magnificent courage and deathless fame of the grey-clad men who carried on their shining bayonets its flags in glory four years to Appomattox.”<sup>158</sup>

Robert Lee Durham lived as a man in transition, but wanted his grandchildren to remember him as a son at “high salute.” He blamed Reconstruction for the trial of his life. For Durham, Reconstruction forced an end to the philosophy of States-Rights and the artificial rise of the African American to the level of “human.” Durham argued that the freedom pushed on African Americans caused his father to take up arms in defense of the South and his father ultimately died defending other defenders. At the end of his life, Durham recognized that he was in a minority, but he found a certain pride accompanied his position. He accepted secession was dead. This realization presented him with only one option, incorporation. By Durham’s graduation from Law School, he understood that the

<sup>158</sup> Durham, *Since I was Born*, 113.

South lost the cause, but he blamed Radical Reconstruction for ending hope. Durham was a true product of the New South.



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