

The Hamburg Massacre and Pitchfork Ben

Written by Wendy Brinker Taylor
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The South Carolina statehouse and its grounds in Columbia are wrought with statues and memorials many could argue are tributes to slavery and the architects and champions of white supremacy. Sadly, children visit and play in the shadows of these monuments every day and are taught to revere these important men and their ideals that shaped their state.

Benjamin Ryan Tillman was born near Trenton, South Carolina in 1847. He left school in 1864 to join the Army of the Confederate States of America during the American Civil War, but was disabled by an illness that later caused the removal of his left eye; he never served in the Confederate Army. During Reconstruction, he became a paramilitary fighter in the struggle to overthrow the interracial Republican coalition in the state, dis-empowering the black majority.

He was present at the Hamburg Massacre on July 8, 1876 – 137 years ago today - during which black activists were murdered by Tillman’s fellow “Red-shirts”, a fore-runner of the Ku Klux Klan.

The Hamburg Massacre was a key event of South Carolina Reconstruction. Beginning with a dispute over free passage on a public road, this incident concluded with the death of seven men, and launched the Democratic campaign for South Carolina’s redemption or removal of the civil rights of the black population. Tillman bragged about his own role and used it to spur his campaigns for Governor and then Senator of South Carolina. He served as governor of South Carolina, from 1890 to 1894, and as a United States Senator, from 1895 until his death.

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Presenting himself as the friend of ordinary white farmers, Tillman took over the South Carolina Farmers Alliance, and used the organization as a platform for his political ambitions. He was elected Governor of South Carolina in 1890, and served from December 1890 to December 1894. He helped establish Clemson College and Winthrop College while in office. When the Alliance founded the Populist Party on the Ocala Demands, Tillman arranged for the South Carolina Democratic Party to adopt the platform wholesale. The strategy prevented the development of an independent Populist Party and the biracial politics of North Carolina, thus assuring white control through the dominant, white Democratic Party.

As governor, he shaped the state's 1895 constitution into a bulwark of white supremacy. He sought to divide blacks and whites and whites of differing economic and geographical backgrounds. Almost single-handedly, Tillman established the iniquities of Jim Crow that countless other Southern demagogues would imitate. As Tillman proudly proclaimed in 1900, "We have done our level best [to prevent blacks from voting]...we have scratched our heads to find out how we could eliminate the last one of them. We stuffed ballot boxes. We shot them. We are not ashamed of it."

He was re-elected to the United States Senate was re-elected in 1901, 1907, and 1913. He served from 1895 to his death in 1918. A hotheaded and intemperate debater, Tillman became known as "Pitchfork Ben" after a speech he made on the Senate floor in 1896. In this speech, Tillman made several references to pitchforks and threatened to go to the White House and "poke old Grover [Cleveland] with a pitchfork" to prod him into action.

In a March 23, 1900, speech before the U.S. Senate, Pitchfork Ben defended the actions of his white constituents who had murdered several black citizens. Tillman blamed the violence on the "hot-headedness" of Southern blacks and on the misguided efforts of Republicans during the Reconstruction era after the Civil War to "put white necks under black heels". He also defended violence against black men, claiming that southern whites "will not submit to [the black man] gratifying his lust on our wives and daughters without lynching him", an evocation of the deeply sexualized racist fantasies of many Southern whites.

Also in this infamous speech, he elucidates further his attitude towards African Americans having the right to vote and his reasons for killing them indiscriminately. "We were sorry we had the necessity forced upon us, but we could not help it, and as white men we are not sorry for it, and we do not propose to apologize for anything we have done in connection with it. We took the government away from them in 1876. We did take it. If no other Senator has come here previous to this time who would acknowledge it, more is the pity. We have had no fraud in our elections in South Carolina since 1884. There has been no organized Republican party in the

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State.”

“We did not disfranchise the negroes until 1895. Then we had a constitutional convention convened which took the matter up calmly, deliberately, and avowedly with the purpose of disfranchising as many of them as we could under the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments. We adopted the educational qualification as the only means left to us, and the negro is as contented and as prosperous and as well protected in South Carolina to-day as in any State of the Union south of the Potomac. He is not meddling with politics, for he found that the more he meddled with them the worse off he got. As to his ‘rights’ - I will not discuss them now. We of the South have never recognized the right of the negro to govern white men, and we never will. We have never believed him to be equal to the white man, and we will not submit to his gratifying his lust on our wives and daughters without lynching him. I would to God the last one of them was in Africa and that none of them had ever been brought to our shores. But I will not pursue the subject further.”□

In 2008, Representative Todd Rutherford introduced a Joint Resolution, H.4496, to the state legislature directing the office of General Services of the State Budget and Control Board to remove from the state house grounds the statue of Benjamin Ryan Tillman. The resolution takes effect upon approval by the Governor.

Rutherford has received mixed reactions from his proposal. Some are proud it’s there, others are congratulating him for his heroic stance. Rutherford first became aware of Tillman during the fight to remove the confederate flag in 2000. He feels it’s time for South Carolina to move on.

“This is a man who stood in front of Congress and basically called out for the genocide of African Americans standing up for their rights,” said Rutherford. “He has a memorial that talks about how good he was to farmers and nothing about the crimes he perpetrated against African Americans - with absolutely no remorse or willingness to stop.”