



COL. L. L. POLK



*On July 28, 1926, at the North Carolina State College of Agriculture and Engineering, the new \$200,000 Animal Husbandry Building, named "Polk Hall" in honor of Colonel L. L. Polk, was dedicated. This sketch of his life and of his services in securing the establishment of the college was given as an address on that occasion.*

CITY people write our histories. And because city people write history, it is natural that they emphasize the parts played by city people—natural because those are the parts of which they see most, hear most, and read most. The farmers of North Carolina



CLARENCE POE

as a group have not perhaps made as important contributions to the state's history as they should, have not been so active as they should have been; but even the contributions they have made have too often been neglected by the historians.

One of the most striking illustrations of this fact comes to mind in connection with our meeting here today to dedicate, thirty-four years after his death, a magnificent building named in honor of Colonel Leonidas Lafayette Polk. It is unfortunately true that the average townsman of North Carolina, if asked to name the influences that brought about the establishment of the North Carolina State College of Agriculture and Engineering, formerly the A. and M. College, would mention only the Watauga Club. The Watauga Club was a small organization of patriotic young Raleigh men who banded themselves together forty years ago, and did indeed set an historic and fruitful example by showing what a small number of determined persons can do in the way of arousing public opinion in behalf of an important cause.

Furthermore, I should be the last man to wish to minimize the labors of the Watauga Club of the 80's. There are few men the memory of whose friendship I prize more highly than that of Walter H. Page, W. J. Peele, and others who helped to make the brief and brilliant record of the Watauga Club of the 80's; and I had the privilege some years ago of helping organize another group of leading Raleigh men who meet regularly as the successor of the original Watauga Club to discuss and promote matters affecting North Carolina progress.

### Farmers Started "State College"

NEVERTHELESS, while giving due credit to these young pioneers who early saw the need for establishing an industrial school in North Carolina, it is only the simplest statement of indisputable truth to say this: Their purpose was only to establish "an industrial school" in which "woodworking, mining, metallurgy" were mentioned as the three first important subjects, and that the fight to establish here a Standard Land Grant State College, "*an Agricultural and Mechanical College in accordance with the Land Scrip Act,*" was wholly the result of a movement of the organized farmers of North Carolina, led by Colonel Leonidas L. Polk, the state's first Commissioner of Agriculture and most distinguished agricultural leader.

In proof of this statement we should hardly need further testimony than the emphatic declaration by Mr. W. J. Peele, himself one of the foremost members of the Watauga Club. In a sketch published in June, 1892, Mr. Peele made this unequivocal statement about Colonel Polk:—

*"In 1884, 1885, 1886, and 1887, he was the most powerful factor in the establishment of an agricultural and mechanical college."*

Furthermore, as Mr. Peele said to me on September 16, 1901, (I was keeping a diary at the time and quote from the conversation as written down that day): "Colonel Polk deserves credit for getting from the University to the A. and M. College the big United States appropriation for agricultural education. And he alone could have brought about that great meeting of farmers' clubs and put it behind the movement; without this the bill would not have gone through the legislature."

It is indeed high time that everybody come to the realization of this important truth: The Watauga Club did indeed perform a great service by waking up North Carolina to the need for an industrial school emphasizing "woodworking, mining, metallurgy, etc." But what the farmers of North Carolina set out to do through their farmers' clubs and under the leadership of Colonel Polk was to get the establishment of a *real State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts* of the high rank and distinction which such colleges had already assumed in many other states; a college which should

have an assured income both from the Land Grant fund allotted to the various states by the federal government and from the State of North Carolina itself. Who can doubt but that the conception of the farmers was the larger conception and represents most definitely the great institution which has now been created as the fulfillment of their dreams?

Thus while the North Carolina State College of Agriculture and Engineering represents the merging of the Watauga Club movement of the 80's and the farmers' movement of the 80's, I submit that historians should give credit to North Carolina's agricultural population for having made the bigger fight, having fought against greater odds, and having proclaimed the larger aims and purposes.

Even if the Watauga Club had succeeded in establishing its school in which "instruction should be in woodwork, mining, metallurgy, practical agriculture, and such other branches of industrial education as may be deemed expedient," supported by an "authorized" (but not required) "\$5,000 annually of the surplus funds" of the State Department of Agriculture, it is very uncertain as to how much permanent success could have been expected from the movement. On the contrary, the farmers' plans for establishing a Land Grant College, or A. and M. College as they were then generally called, assured permanence and prestige from the outset. The Land Scrip Fund of \$7,500 per year was but the beginning of other similar contributions from the federal government in aid of agricultural and industrial education.

### Demanding an Agricultural College in 1872

IN THIS connection, I am reminded of another incident that occurred at this North Carolina Farmers' Convention three or four years ago. Just out in front of the dining room I ran across Mr. F. F. Cohoon of Elizabeth City, for some time vice-president of this Farmers' State Convention. He stopped to talk with me about his interest in this college and to say that it represented the realization of a great hope in which he had been interested for nearly fifty years. He then told me how his interest started, and later gave me this statement in writing. Said Mr. Cohoon:

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in the fall of 1872 Col. L. L. Polk made the address and was introduced by Col. W. F. Martin. His first utterance was a request that he wished to know how many of his comrades in the late war were present and all present were asked to hold up their hands. In those days soon after the Civil War many were living and many were at this fair. The speaker requested all others to give way and let his comrades come nearest the stand."

Then, following an outline of the first part of this speech, Mr. Cohoon says that Colonel Polk made this the climax and main burden of his speech:—

*"Let's establish an agricultural college somewhere in North Carolina with its branch schools in every county as feeders to the main school."*

From this statement it will be seen that more than a decade before the Watauga Club was thought of, Colonel Polk was sowing all over North Carolina the seed that later ripened into the irresistible demand for a state agricultural college. As Mr. Cohoon says in conclusion: "I do not remember ever meeting Colonel Polk that he was not advocating the farmers' college."

#### **How America's Agricultural Colleges Were Begun**

**J**UST a little more of the history leading up to the establishment of the A. and M. College deserves to be mentioned in this connection. On July 2, 1862, the United States Government provided for a distribution of the public lands among the several states (including those then allied with the Confederacy), each state receiving 30,000 acres for each Senator and Representative in Congress. North Carolina's allotment was 270,000 acres. The requirement of Congress was that in each state the fund should be used "to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the states respectively may prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions of life."

On January 11, 1867, the Legislature of North Carolina accepted this fund and it was "transferred to the trustees of the University of the state for the purpose of effecting the object of this grant. . . . *Provided,*

that the University shall comply with the Act of Congress and make its leading object to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts without excluding other scientific studies and including military tactics."

Invested in special tax bonds later and lost, the Legislature of 1874-75 made good the loss to the University by issuing to it \$125,000 in 6 per cent Certificates of Indebtedness. From this time till 1889 the University of North Carolina thus received the \$7,500 a year of federal funds with what appears to have been the expressed and implied condition that it should become largely if not principally a college of agriculture, and mechanic arts. Without desiring in any way to detract from the glory of the great men of the University who piloted it through the dark days of the 70's and 80's, it must nevertheless be admitted that if any really serious effort was made to carry out the purposes of the Land Scrip Act, such an effort resulted in pitiful failure.

#### **Demanding a Real Agricultural College**

**W**ITH the first issue of *The Progressive Farmer*, February 10, 1886, Colonel Polk began through the printed word the same determined fight for the establishment of a real agricultural state college which he had previously carried on by word of mouth wherever his eloquence brought calls for him to address farmers. "We propose to continue this subject and follow it up until justice is done the people, or they know why it is not done," was the emphatic conclusion of one of his early editorials on this subject; and he made good his promise. Editorial after editorial he printed on this subject. He reported what Virginia was doing through V. P. I. He enlarged upon the great work of the Mississippi A. and M. College at Starkville under the leadership of his now famous Confederate comrade, General Stephen D. Lee. These and many examples of successful state agricultural colleges in the North were put before the farmers of North Carolina as illustrating the sort of institution they should have.

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chanic Arts," Colonel Polk said in *The Progressive Farmer* of August 25, 1886:—

"After a period of eleven years of laborious effort, and with an expenditure of \$82,500 of money given our people by the government, we have at last succeeded in getting a 'College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts'!

"It is a model of architectural beauty and admirably equipped in all its departments. It is located on the forty-eighth page of the catalog of the University. The catalog says that 'two courses are offered' in this elegant paper college. 'Offered' is a good word! These 'courses' we presume, have been 'offered' to our farmer boys for these eleven years, but we search the catalog in vain to find one who has availed himself of the offer.

"We make no war upon the University. We want to see it rise until it shall stand the equal of any similar institution in all the land, but an earnest conviction of duty to the farmers of our state shall enlist our utmost effort until we see that justice is done them in this matter. We need an agricultural college for the practical training of the children of our farmers and other industrial classes, and there is but one way to get it—build it with the money given us by the government for that purpose. How are we to get it. *By electing a legislature that will give it to us?*"

Throughout the rest of 1886 Colonel Polk, through *The Progressive Farmer*, stressed and reiterated these facts—that a real land grant state agricultural and mechanical college, supported by state and national governments, was an imperative need of North Carolina and that the farmers' clubs, which had been largely organized under his leadership, should bestir themselves in behalf of this policy and elect a legislature favorable to it.

#### **How Organized Farmers Showed Their Power**

**T**HIS program was soon carried out, and with great success. A legislature largely composed of farmers was elected and two mass meetings of farmers held in Raleigh, January, 1887. The first of these, a voluntary and informal conference of farmers with the state board of agriculture, was captured by friends of the Polk movement, and Colonel Polk meanwhile had called for an official mass meeting of

all the organized farmers' clubs of the state, to be held in Raleigh, January 26, 1887. The *Raleigh State Chronicle* said of this meeting: "We doubt if ever before in the history of the state there has been so large a gathering of farmers. They were in Raleigh two days and their work reflects credit on them." Colonel Polk called the meeting to order and Elias Carr was elected permanent chairman.

The first important action of the convention was the introduction of a resolution by Colonel Polk declaring that "We should have an agricultural and mechanical college, which should receive \$20,000 annually of the funds of the agricultural department, \$25,000 annually from the state treasury, and the \$7,500 annually from the Land Scrip fund, now applied to the State University, to maintain said agricultural and mechanical college."

Later Colonel Polk was named on a committee to draft resolutions presenting this idea to the state legislature.

A correspondent of the *Tarboro Southerner*, January 24, 1887, had said of Colonel Polk and his mass meeting:—

"The main idea of Polk's meeting seems to be to organize an agricultural college. To do this, he proposes to take the Land Scrip fund away from the University and get whatever additional money that may be needed from the legislature. He will have no difficulty in passing any resolution he desires in his meeting, but his fight will actually begin when he undertakes to put it in the shape of legislation."

Of course, not a little fighting did remain to be done after the mass meeting of January 26, but the magnitude and vigor of that convention was plainly irresistible.

Colonel Polk had declared all along that the Watauga Club's proposed trade school for instruction in "woodwork, mining, metallurgy, practical agriculture, etc.," in some one city would be too seriously localized and too poorly supported to meet the state's need even for industrial education, the bill as passed in 1885 having made no direct appropriation whatever and having only "authorized" the board of agriculture to supply \$5,000 a year of its "surplus funds." Friends of in-

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It should also be said in this connection that the triumph of the North Carolina farmers in thus establishing their land grant college gave now hope and inspiration to Dr. Charles D. McIver in his fight for a normal and industrial college for women, just as it heartened Benjamin R. Tillman in South Carolina in his fight to establish Clemson and Winthrop, and it is to our so-called "farmers' legislature" of 1891 that we owe the establishment of our great North Carolina college for women at Greensboro; and also the establishment of the State Railroad Commission (now the State Corporation Commission) as the final culmination of a fight Colonel Polk began in the State Grange in its meeting in 1876 for state regulation of freight and passenger rates.

#### An Outline Sketch of Colonel Polk's Career

AND now just a few paragraphs by way of conclusion. My main thought today has been to present as briefly and vividly as possible the relation of Colonel Polk to the establishment of this institution. To a generation which has largely grown up since his death, however, it seems necessary to present in very brief outline his other important service to North Carolina and our agricultural interests. Born in Anson County, N. C., April 24, 1837, Leonidas Lafayette Polk grew up on the farm and studied such scientific courses at Davidson College as had some relation to agriculture. He married at the age of 20, and in 1860, at the age of 23, led the Whig ticket as a candidate for the legislature. Like Vance, he was elected as a Union man, but like Vance he promptly became a Confederate when Lincoln's call for troops was made on our people. Detailed under the commission of colonel to organize the Anson militia, he later served in the 26th and 43rd Regiments, was wounded at Gettysburg, was under fire forty-one times in a single summer, and while serving

in the Army of Virginia in 1864 was elected to represent Anson in the State Legislature. In 1865 he was a member of the State Constitutional Convention. In the 70's he was active in the State Grange or Patrons of Husbandry and as chairman of the State Grange Committee on the subject, was the moving spirit in the establishment of our State Department of Agriculture, becoming in 1877 the state's first Commissioner of Agriculture. February 10, 1886, he founded *The Progressive Farmer*. On August 16, 1887, he was elected president of the Interstate Farmers' Association, being re-elected in 1887 and 1889. Meanwhile the Farmers' Alliance movement had begun in this state and at Shreveport, La., in 1887, Colonel Polk, being then secretary of the North Carolina organization, was elected vice-president of the national organization, becoming president December 7, 1889, and serving in this position until his death, June 11, 1892. The Farmers' Alliance became during this period the most powerful organization of farmers the United States has ever known, numbering two and a half million members. As Mr. W. J. Peele said of Colonel Polk:—

"He never joined any body of men where the people had full sway that he did not immediately begin to rise toward the top. A member of the Baptist Church and an active church worker, he was twice chosen president of the Baptist State Convention. An humble member of the Farmers' Alliance, he speedily became its head in the nation. An editor of a newspaper, he made it more influential and more widely circulated than any ever in the state before."

Some day it is to be hoped that some historian will prepare an accurate record of the nation-wide agrarian movement of the latter 80's and early 90's, in which Colonel Polk was for years the most remarkable figure. Of course, this movement was not always wise. Of course, at times, both before Colonel Polk's death and after his death, it was used by some men for unworthy ends. But on the whole, this great agrarian movement produced reforms whose good influences will last probably as long as our nation endures. Only last month in *Scribner's Magazine* Mr. William Allen White attributed to this agrarian movement the inception of the most significant national reforms brought about by William Jennings Bryan, Theodore Roosevelt,

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Woodrow Wilson, and Robert M. La Follette. I have myself heard Mr. Bryan bear similar testimony. North and South, East and West, but especially in the South and West, went Colonel Polk in these days, and wherever he went there was a shaking up of corporation-controlled political machines, railroad-owned legislatures, and of governors and lawmakers who were the puppets of special interests regardless of their party affiliations. Writing in the *Charlotte Observer* in 1902, Mr. C. S. Wooten said of Colonel Polk:—

“No man on earth ever achieved such a political revolution as Polk did in Kansas in 1890. The state had gone 80,000 Republican in 1888 and in 1890 went overwhelmingly for the reform movement, defeated Ingal<sup>o</sup>, the idol of Kansas, and at that time the most learned man in the Senate. Polk produced it by his eloquence. No man in this country ever equaled him in achieving such a victory. I was in Texas in 1891 and I heard a man from Kansas say that he had voted for Lincoln the first time, and had voted the Republican ticket ever since, but he said he could not help following Colonel Polk, for, said he, Polk is the greatest orator I ever heard and I want to see him President. Wherever he went over the state, the people flocked to hear him and were fascinated and charmed by his matchless eloquence. I never saw any man have such a winning smile when speaking. It is no wonder that he should have had such a power among the industrial classes. If ever you sat under the witchery of his eloquence, he would steal your heart away. He gave his life for the cause of oppressed humanity.”

The last sentence, “He gave his life for oppressed humanity,” might well serve as the epitaph of Leonidas Lafayette Polk. He could have said with John Massfield:—

“Not of the princes and prelates with periwigged charioteers  
Riding triumphantly laureled to lap the fat of the years,  
Rather the scorned—the rejected—the men hemmed in with  
the spears;

Not the ruler for me, but the ranker, the tramp of the road,  
The slave with the sack on his shoulders pricked on with  
the goad,

The man with too weighty a burden, too weary a load.

Of the maimed, of the halt and the blind in the rain and  
the cold—

Of these shall my songs be fashioned, my tale be told.”

The old battle for “Equality for Agriculture” led

by Colonel Polk in the 80's and early 90's still goes on. He may not have been wise in all the remedies he proposed, but of the value of his services to North Carolina agriculture and of his passionate, lifelong desire to help the farmers of our state and nation, there can be no doubt; and we may today conclude our brief tribute to his memory with the same thought which Mr. Wooten used in concluding his own tribute more than a score of years ago:—

“They never fail who die  
In a great cause; the block may soak their gore,  
Their heads may sodden in the sun; their limbs  
Be strung to city gates or castle walls,  
But still their spirit walks abroad. Though years  
Elapse and others share as dark a doom  
They but augment the deep and sweeping thoughts  
Which overspread all others, and conduct  
The world at last to freedom.”

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