

Kirk-Holden War ^[1]

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Kirk-Holden War

by Michael Hill

Research Branch, NC Office of Archives and History, 2006.

<https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program> ^[2]

See also: [George W. Kirk](#) ^[3]; [Holden, William Woods](#) ^[4]

The [lynching](#) ^[5] of Wyatt Outlaw on the courthouse square in Graham in 1870 continues to reverberate across the generations. The consequences for North Carolina were profound, leading to the first impeachment of a governor in U.S. history. Outlaw's death, like that of State Sen. [J. W. \("Chicken"\) Stephens](#) ^[6] in the basement of the [courthouse in Caswell County](#) ^[7], in part precipitated the "Kirk-Holden War."

Carole Troxler, [Elon University](#) ^[8] professor, has examined the historical record concerning Outlaw. Biographical details, gleaned from Congressional investigations into the 1870-71 [Ku Klux Klan](#) ^[9] "outrages" and transcript of the impeachment trial of Gov. [W. W. Holden](#) ^[10], are spare. Outlaw, likely the offspring of white merchant Chesley Faucett and Jemimah Phillips, a free black, served in the Union army, in the 2nd Regiment U.S. Colored Cavalry, first in Virginia with a later posting in Texas along the Rio Grande. On his return home, he opened a woodworking shop on North Main Street in Graham, repairing wagons and making coffins, in addition to specialty trimwork. (Troxler believes it likely that he trained with [Thomas Day](#) ^[11] of [Caswell County](#) ^[12].) In 1866 he attended the second freedmen's convention in Raleigh and soon after organized the [Union League](#) ^[13] in Alamance as well as a school and church. Gov. Holden in 1868 appointed him as a town commissioner in Graham and he was elected to the post the following year. That board in 1869 organized an armed night patrol in response to the activities of the Klan.

On Feb. 26, 1870, Outlaw became the target for a Klan mob of 70-100, selected because he was an effective leader, able to work with both races. Seized in his house (over the cries of his young son), Outlaw was hanged from the limb of an elm tree which pointed to the courthouse. His mouth was slashed and a note pinned to his body: "Beware you guilty both white and black." Another target of intimidation left town that night. Gov. Holden, acting on authority of the [Shoffner Act](#) ^[14], declared [Alamance](#) ^[15] and [Caswell](#) ^[12] to be in a state of insurrection, setting in motion a sequence of events leading to his impeachment and removal in 1871. In 1873 eighteen men were charged with the murder but ex-Gov. Holden, among others, pleaded for their release and charges were dropped. [Albion Tourgee](#) ^[16] used details from Outlaw's life in composite characters in his Reconstruction novels.

Educational Resources:

Grade 8: Law Enforcer or Law Breaker? Governor Holden & the Kirk-Holden War. North Carolina Civic Education Consortium. https://database.civics.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2014/06/KirkHoldenWar_11.pdf ^[17]

References:

Jim D. Brisson, "'Civil Government Was Crumbling Around Me': The Kirk-Holden War of 1870," *North Carolina Historical Review* (April 2011): 123-163.

Carole Watterson Troxler, "'To look more closely at the man: Wyatt Outlaw, a Nexus of National, Local, and Personal History,'" *North Carolina Historical Review* (October 2000): 403-433.

Otto H. Olsen, *Carpetbagger's Crusade* (1965).

Horace W. Raper, *William W. Holden* (1985).

Additional Resources:

"The Kirk-Holden War of 1870." Documenting the American South, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. https://docsouth.unc.edu/highlights/holden_kirk.html [18] (accessed April 11, 2013).

Tomberlin, Jason. "June 1870 — The 'Kirk-Holden War'," *This Month in North Carolina History* (blog). North Carolina Collection. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. LearnNC.org. June 2006. <https://portal.ed.unc.edu/business-operations/edit/learn-nc-archive/> [19] (accessed April 11, 2013).

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