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"The Right Man in the Right Place:" J.F. Ensor and the South Carolina Lunatic Asylum, 1870-1877

Peter McCandless*

In 1877, Dr. Joshua Ensor summarized the experience of the South Carolina Lunatic Asylum during Reconstruction by claiming that "no other Asylum for the insane has ever passed through the fearful ordeal this one has during the past few years."¹ For seven years, Ensor had been a severe critic of the policy of the state's Reconstruction government towards the asylum. His strictures on the government's treatment of the insane were so harsh as to lend credence to what later became the traditional interpretation of Reconstruction in the state: that it was a dismal failure, an unrelieved morass of incompetence and corruption.²

Yet Ensor was no Redeemer. He was a Republican whom the Reconstruction government itself had appointed in 1870 as superintendent of the state asylum at Columbia. He was also a man of considerable ability and integrity who struggled against extremely adverse conditions to provide decent care for his patients. Looked at from the perspective of Ensor's

*Professor of history, College of Charleston. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Fifth Citadel Conference on the South, April 9, 1987. Research for this article was supported by NEH Fellowship FB-23394-85, by summer grants from the College of Charleston Research and Development Fund, and by a summer Fellowship from the Institute for Southern Studies, University of South Carolina.

¹South Carolina State Hospital, *Annual Report* (hereafter AR), 1876-1877, in *Reports and Resolutions of the General Assembly of South Carolina* (hereafter RR), 1877-1878, p. 463. Ensor's assessment was shared by other asylum superintendents. See *American Journal of Insanity*, 1875-1876, vol. 32, pp. 556, 1877, vol. 34, pp. 183; 1878, vol. 34, pp. 566-567.

²The traditional view of Reconstruction derives from the work of William Dunning and his students early in this century. See, for example, William Archibald Dunning, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic, 1865-1877* (New York & London: Harper & Brothers, 1907); Walter Lynwood Fleming, *The Sequel to Appomattox: A Chronicle of the Reunion of the States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919); Claude G. Bowers, *The Tragic Era: The Revolution After Lincoln* (Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1929). For the traditional view of Reconstruction in South Carolina, see J.S. Reynolds, *Reconstruction in South Carolina* (Columbia, S.C.: The State Co., 1905); D.D. Wallace, *South Carolina: A Short History, 1520-1948* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1951), chaps. 54-56. For a recent discussion of Reconstruction and its historiography, see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction, America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

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Top: J.F. Ensor. Bottom: South Carolina Lunatic Asylum.
Both photos courtesy of South Caroliniana Library.

record as superintendent, Reconstruction at the asylum appears in a more positive light than in traditionalist accounts. Ensor's career could be seen as a confirmation of the claims of revisionist historians that Reconstruction, despite some moral lapses, produced both positive achievements and able leaders.³

In a fundamental sense, however, the legacy of Reconstruction at the asylum was ambiguous. The Republican government deserves credit for appointing someone like Ensor as superintendent and keeping him there in spite of his attacks on its policies and personnel. Yet the government was also responsible for many of the problems he had to confront.

In the years after Reconstruction, traditionalist historians often cited the asylum as a prime example of the effects of Radical misrule. The traditional view was well summed up by one of the biographers of lunacy reformer Dorothea Dix:

[South Carolina] was under the control of a legislature packed almost solid with brutal plantation negroes. The influential leaders who swayed them were largely "carpet bag" politicians from the North.... What would be the inevitable policy of such a legislature and such leaders toward a State Insane Asylum can readily be conceived. It would be to put in some ignorant, thievish black as steward [and] some greedy, half educated white doctor as superintendent.⁴

There is no doubt that the asylum suffered from corruption and maladministration during Reconstruction. Conditions were often desperate during these years, and some of those appointed to administer the asylum's affairs may well have been incompetent and/or corrupt. Yet the view presented by traditional historians is both exaggerated and misleading. For one thing, the asylum's problems during Reconstruction were partly the result of the ravages of the Civil War and the economically depressed state of South Carolina in the post-war years. Moreover, conditions at the asylum did not improve after Reconstruction. Finally, as the career of Joshua Ensor illustrates, the persons the Reconstruction government appointed to administer the affairs of the asylum were not all greedy

³For examples of the revisionist view of Reconstruction in South Carolina, see Joel Williamson, *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina During Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965); Peggy Lamson, *The Glorious Failure: Robert Brown Elliott and the Reconstruction in South Carolina* (New York: Norton and Co., 1973); Thomas Holt, *Black Over White* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977).

⁴Francis Tiffany, *The Life of Dorothea Dix* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1890), p. 352. See also Dorothy Wilson, *Stranger and Traveler: The Story of Dorothea Dix, American Reformer* (Boston: Little Brown, 1975), pp. 313-315.

or incompetent.

Ensor was appointed superintendent in 1870 as the result of Radical demands for a Republican administration at the asylum. The end of the Civil War had not at first brought about any major changes in the personnel at the asylum. Here, as elsewhere in the state and in much of the South, former Confederates continued to hold authority.⁵ The asylum's superintendent since 1837, Dr. John W. Parker, remained in his position, as did the pre-war board of regents. Except for having to admit patients sent by the Federal military authorities and the Freedmen's Bureau, the asylum experienced little interference in the immediate post-war era.

The institution had, however, deteriorated considerably during the 1860s. South Carolina had suffered staggering economic losses as a result of the war. Many of her citizens were impoverished by the accumulation of debt, loss of property, slaves, and the breakdown of traditional patterns of trade and agriculture.⁶ This economic decline placed severe strain on the financial condition of the asylum. The number of paying patients, whose higher fees previously had subsidized the care of pauper patients, dropped from eighty-eight in 1860 to fifty-two by 1868. At the same time, the pauper patients (whose fees were paid — when they were paid — by the counties) increased from 106 to 152.⁷ Many families who had previously paid for their relatives' care either removed them or transferred them to the pauper list. In either case, the asylum lost revenues and the situation was worsened by its inability to collect payment for many of the paying and pauper patients who remained. By the end of 1870, the counties owed the asylum \$23,500 for the maintenance of beneficiary (pauper) patients. Unable to obtain sufficient revenues from either the patients' families or the counties, the asylum's officers turned in 1866 to the state for help.⁸

But the post-war state government showed itself either unwilling or unable to solve the asylum's financial problems. The legislature had begun making annual grants for maintenance during the war, and continued to make them afterwards, but the amounts were insufficient to keep the institution out of debt. The asylum's authorities kept it running only by putting off badly needed repairs and improvements and by withholding employees' salaries. By the late 1860s, the asylum had deteriorated to the

⁵John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction: After the Civil War* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 30-35, 42-44; Michael Perman, *Reunion Without Compromise: The South and Reconstruction, 1865-1868* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

⁶Franklin, pp. 2-6; James L. Roark, *Masters Without Slaves* (New York: Norton and Co., 1978), ch. 1; E. M. Lander, *A History of South Carolina, 1865-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), pp. 3-5.

⁷ARs, 1860, in RR, p. 256; 1868, p. 6.

⁸AR, 1866, p. 5; 1870, pp. 43-45.

point where various observers declared it a scandal to the state.⁹

By this time, South Carolina had embarked on the experiment of Radical Reconstruction. Protected by Federal troops, Republicans took control of the state government with the support of the newly enfranchised black majority and a minority of whites. The state's traditional leaders watched in outraged disbelief as its constitution was rewritten and its government taken over by the Radicals. The asylum was soon affected by this revolution, for the new constitution gave the governor the power to appoint the superintendent and all "other necessary officers and employees," including the regents.¹⁰ (Previously, the regents had essentially controlled all appointments, including filling vacancies in their own ranks.) Before the new governor, Robert K. Scott, was even inaugurated, members of his party were pressuring him to replace the asylum's officers with Republicans. Scott initially resisted these efforts, but at the end of 1869, he bowed to political pressure and replaced the existing regents with members of the ruling party. Six of the new board were black and three white.¹¹ For several months more, Scott continued to oppose the removal of Parker, who had the support of both the old elite and the most influential asylum reformer of the day, Dorothea Dix. In the end, however, the demands of party proved more powerful, and during the summer of 1870, Scott agreed to remove Parker.¹²

The changes at the asylum enraged and alarmed many conservative whites. When the new regents were appointed, the *Columbia Daily Phoenix* accused the legislature of sacrificing the insane to the political spoils system and putting their care into incompetent hands.¹³ At bottom, the conservatives' objections to the new regime were based on racial fears as much as on medical concerns. Many whites feared that the new board, with its black majority, would use its power to mix the races and put the white patients under the control and care of blacks. These apprehensions seemed realized when the new regents quickly appointed a black assistant physician and a

⁹AR, 1866, pp. 5-9; South Carolina State Hospital, Minutes of the Board of Regents (hereafter MBR), February 2, March 2, 1867, South Carolina Archives (hereafter SCA).

¹⁰Constitution of 1868, Art. 11, ss. 2, 6; *Statutes At Large of South Carolina*, vol. 14 (1868), p. 24.

¹¹Of the original Reconstruction board, the blacks were W. Beverley Nash, B.A. Boseman, Jr., Joseph Taylor, S. B. Thompson, R.C. De Large, and Robert B. Elliott. The whites were Dr. A. G. Mackey, Henry Sparnick, and Joseph Crews.

¹²*Journal of the South Carolina House of Representatives*, 1869, pp. 27-28; *Columbia Daily Phoenix*, November 25, 1869; Wilson, pp. 313-315; Reynolds, pp. 123-125.

¹³*Columbia Daily Phoenix*, January 18, 1870.

black steward.¹⁴

The ouster of Parker aroused similar concerns. The conservatives were convinced that the position of superintendent would inevitably be filled by a party hack who would turn the asylum into another means of humiliating the white race and securing its subordination to Negro rule.¹⁵ As early as March 1868, one of Parker's supporters wrote that the superintendent's removal was to be anticipated at some time, "but then with a Government and Legislature of South Carolina's we would have had the assurance that his place would have been filled by one who at least was a Gentleman, a qualification which I am loath, sweeping as the charge may be, to grant to any Radical." From a government dominated by "Baboons and Pickpockets," it was not to be expected that anyone but a coarse, ignorant rascal would be appointed.¹⁶

Dr. Joshua Fulton Ensor, the man who replaced Parker, was a Republican, but by no means a hack. Born in Maryland in 1834, Ensor had received his medical training at the university of that state. During the war he had compiled a good record as a surgeon in the Union Army. Although he does not seem to have had experience in the care of the insane prior to his South Carolina appointment, Ensor had been in charge of military hospitals. His selection as superintendent seems to have been a compromise between Scott and some of the legislators who favored another candidate. Ensor quickly proved himself a man of ability, integrity, and courage.¹⁷

When Ensor assumed his duties at the asylum, he was appalled by its condition. The buildings were badly overcrowded and lacked essential facilities for the insane. The original building, erected in the 1820s, was "a shame upon the humanity of the age." Its rooms were "mere cells or chinks in the walls, dark and illy ventilated," and those on the ground floor were "so damp and unhealthy that it would be the grossest inhumanity to require the patients to occupy them." The only means of heating the old building was with fireplaces, which was inconvenient, dangerous, and expensive. The sanitary and bathing facilities were totally inadequate, there was no adequate means of classifying patients, no library, clinical ward, amusement hall, or chapel. Some of these facilities had existed at one time, but had

¹⁴MBR, February 24, May 10, June 4, 1870; Reynolds, pp. 123-125; Henry Thompson, *Ousting the Carpetbagger from South Carolina* (Columbia, S.C.: R.L. Bryan, 1926), p. 67.

¹⁵Reynolds, pp. 123-124.

¹⁶S. Sumter to John Waties, March 29, 1868, Waties-Parker Family Papers, South Caroliniana Library (hereafter, SCL).

¹⁷J.F. Ensor, "A Biographical Directory of Contemporary American Physicians and Surgeons (Philadelphia, 1880); obituary of J.F. Ensor, *Journal of the South Carolina Medical Association*, 1907; David Duncan Wallace, *The History of South Carolina* (New York: The American Historical Society, 1934, 3 vols.), vol. 3: pp. 280-281.

been abandoned or turned to some other purpose, such as accommodating the increasing numbers of patients. (The patient population, which had dropped from 192 to 128 during the war, had expanded to 245 by 1870. It would increase to slightly over 300 during Ensor's tenure.) In addition to these problems and a \$20,000 debt, the asylum buildings were badly in need of repair and new furniture was needed.¹⁸

Ensor did not blame his predecessors at the asylum for the conditions he encountered. Given the privations of the war and its aftermath, Parker and the other officers had done "all that men in their position could do." The source of the asylum's problems, Ensor argued, had been the general unenlightened conservatism of South Carolina's antebellum leaders.¹⁹ The solution lay in the new Republican regime. It had introduced a new "spirit of enterprise" which would soon turn the institution into an "ornament" to South Carolina.²⁰

If Ensor really believed his own rhetoric, he was quickly disappointed. The Republican government, although willing to spend money on a variety of dubious projects and financial schemes, was less willing or able to provide adequate support for the asylum. During his tenure, the institution was almost always critically short of funds. Sometimes this was because of an inadequate appropriation by the legislature, but more often it was because the appropriation was never fully allocated or was allocated months after it was due. As a result, Ensor found himself forced to support the asylum on credit received from merchants and banks and at times had to pledge his own salary and personal credit as collateral.

At the session of 1870, the legislature failed to provide the support Ensor considered necessary to solve the asylum's financial problems. After it ended, Ensor informed Governor Scott that the condition of the institution was critical and appealed for emergency aid. Because of the officers' inability to collect the arrears of the counties for pauper patients, the asylum's debts had continued to mount. Loans from local merchants had allowed the asylum to continue operation, but its credit with these men had reached its limits. Many of the employees had not been paid for more than a year and some for as much as two years. Apologizing to Scott for his gloomy message, Ensor nevertheless vowed to conduct the asylum "upon principles of a broad and liberal humanity."²¹

Scott did not provide the aid Ensor requested, and during 1871 the financial position of the asylum worsened. At the 1870 session, the legisla-

¹⁸AR, 1870, pp. 3-11; MBR, August 20, 1870. Patient statistics from ARs, 1860, 1865, 1870, 1876-77.

¹⁹AR, 1870, pp. 3-5, appendix, 2.

²⁰AR, 1870, p. 12.

²¹AR, 1870, appendix, 1-3.

TABLE I
STATE SUPPORT FOR MAINTENANCE AT
THE SOUTH CAROLINA LUNATIC ASYLUM
1871-1877

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>AM'T REQUESTED</u>	<u>APPROPRIATION</u>	<u>AM'T REC'D</u>
1871	\$60,000	\$30,000	\$38,121
1872	\$92,000	\$92,000*	\$34,807
1873	\$60,000	\$60,000	\$92,193
1874	\$75,000	\$65,000	\$85,950
1875	\$75,000	\$65,000*	\$58,650
1876	\$75,000	\$65,000	#
1877	#	#	\$52,000
TOTALS			
1871-1875	\$422,000	\$377,000	\$309,721

Source: South Carolina State Hospital *Annual Reports*, 1870-1878

* The exact appropriation for 1872 and 1875 could not be ascertained but seems to have been at least the amounts indicated.

These amounts could not be ascertained because there was no *Annual Report* for 1876 due to the political crisis which followed the election of that year.

ture, at Ensor's request, had passed an act to transfer responsibility for pauper patients from the counties to the state. But this act did little to help the asylum, for the General Assembly appropriated only half the sum Ensor considered adequate for the patients' support (Table I). As a result, the asylum's indebtedness increased to over \$30,000 during 1871. The situation had been exacerbated by the fact that the state treasurer, Niles G. Parker, had failed to pay the institution's appropriations on time. Once again the asylum had to rely on "the charitable indulgence" of Columbia's merchants and "the personal credit of the superintendent." If proper provision were not soon made for the maintenance of the institution, Ensor warned, it would have to close its doors and send the patients home.²²

By the end of 1871 Ensor was becoming disillusioned with the government for which he had held such high expectations. The financial embarrassment of the asylum, he charged, coincided with a generous use of public funds for less worthy causes and the superintendent was not reticent in

²²AR, 1871, pp. 5, 30-32.

noting the connection: "These are unpleasant facts, and are not creditable to the humanity of the State, especially when we remember with what an unstinted hand the public money has otherwise been used."²³ Ensor's remarks about the state's legislators, which he sometimes recorded in the press, became increasingly bitter and sarcastic. In a letter to the *Columbia Daily Union*, he accused those opposed to a higher appropriation for the asylum of barbarism and inhumanity.²⁴

The ostensible reason for the legislators' opposition to higher appropriations for the asylum by 1871 was the need for retrenchment. The government's extravagance over the previous several years had outraged many citizens and led to the organization of a Taxpayer's Convention in May 1871. Gov. Scott, while conceding the needs of the asylum in his annual message at the end of 1871, cautioned the General Assembly "against making more liberal appropriations than the income of the State at present justifies."²⁵ Ensor showed no patience with this argument. South Carolina's insane, he claimed, were already supported more cheaply than those of other states and would continue to be even if the legislature granted all that he had requested. Retrenchment was overdue, but to accomplish it by neglecting the needs of the insane showed "littleness of soul" on the part of legislators who had been "wonderfully lavish with the public money for other less worthy purposes."²⁶

The conditions which sparked these harsh words remained much the same throughout Ensor's tenure at the asylum. The asylum's financial problems after 1871, however, were caused less by low appropriations (see Table I) than by the fact that Ensor was seldom able to get the state treasurer to disburse the money on schedule. In his annual report for 1875, Ensor summarized the intolerable financial situation he had had to endure for five years:

"Every year a large part of the money due the institution has had to stand over till January of the next year. During the fiscal year of 1870-'71 the institution received no money from the State Treasurer after July, the balance of the appropriation not being paid till the end of February, 1872. Scarcely any of the appropriation for 1872 was paid till the middle of January, 1873, there being due of this appropriation on the 31st of October, \$67,170.24. The appropriation for 1873, after a deduction of \$8,182.16, made by the State Treasurer on account of an over-payment on the appropriation of 1871, netted the asylum but \$51,788.56, of which \$22,915.70 was not paid

²³ AR, 1871, p. 19.

²⁴ AR, 1871, pp. 37-38.

²⁵ *Journal of the South Carolina Senate, 1871-72*, p.43; Wallace, *South Carolina: A Short History*, p. 584.

²⁶ AR, 1871, pp. 37-39. For similar charges from some of the regents, see AR, 1872, pp. 7-8.

till the middle of January, 1874. That year we received no money from the State Treasurer, after the third of June, till the following January. A large amount of last year's appropriation was not paid till January of the present year. \$18,000, or nearly one-third of this year's appropriation, is still unpaid, and will have to carry over till another tax levy shall have been collected, which will not be before the middle of next winter. No part of any appropriation for any year has been collected before the 1st of March. Practically, therefore, the institution has been without money nine out of the twelve months every year for the last five years."

Nearly every year the asylum had to survive for months on credit, and credit, as Ensor frequently pointed out, was "an expensive article" which increased the costs of running the institution and aggravated its already dire financial condition.²⁷ Credit was also often difficult to procure in the depressed economy of post-war South Carolina. At times Ensor was reduced to virtual begging on the streets of Columbia and Charleston in attempts to secure credit or loans. Often he had to offer his own salary as collateral.²⁸ On at least two occasions he traveled to Philadelphia to seek assistance because state merchants were unable to extend further credit. At one point, he had spent \$7000 of his own money to keep the patients fed.²⁹

Keeping the asylum operating under these conditions often required extreme measures of retrenchment. In addition to holding back employees' pay, the staff was cut back to the point where at times there were no subordinate officers between the superintendent and the attendants. For months or years Ensor performed the duties of the secretary-treasurer, steward, and assistant physician in addition to his own. In order to relieve overcrowding and cut down on the number of patients he had to feed and clothe, Ensor returned many chronic pauper patients to their counties and discouraged probate judges from sending new patients unless they were acute and dangerous.³⁰

Despite the asylum's financial difficulties, Ensor insisted on implementing numerous improvements he considered essential to bring it up to the standards of similar institutions elsewhere.³¹ According to his own figures the asylum spent about \$25,000 between 1870-74 on central heating, indoor plumbing, underground sewers, furniture, carpeting, and new dining and bathing facilities. Pianos were purchased for the parlors, and

²⁷AR, 1874-75, pp. 20-21.

²⁸Columbia *Daily Phoenix*, May 8, September 8, 1872; AR, 1872, pp. 27-37; Charleston *Daily News*, September 19, 1872.

²⁹MBR, November 11, 1875, May 26, 1876.

³⁰MBR, May 6, 1871, April 4, May 4, 7, June 4, August 6, September 6, October 1, 1874, February 4, 1875; AR, 1870, app. 2, 1872, pp. 7-8; 1874-75, pp. 20-21.

³¹Ensor to the Board of Regents, December 1877, in Gov. Hampton's Correspondence, SCA.

games and books for the patients' amusement.³²

The asylum's problems ultimately had important political repercussions. The fact that Ensor aired his grievances in the press as well as in his annual reports was a decided embarrassment to the Republican regime. Ultimately it aided the conservatives in their bid to overthrow the Reconstruction government.³³ Conservative papers gave much publicity to the asylum's plight, for it seemed to provide manifest evidence of the government's ineptitude and corruption. The Charleston *Daily News*, for example, subtitled one article on the asylum "A Sad and Shameful Picture of the Results of Extravagance and Maladministration."³⁴ The Columbia *Daily Phoenix* noted that the previous government had handed the asylum to the Radicals "intact" (conveniently forgetting its accumulated debts and run-down condition at the end of the war). Yet the Republican government had allowed the institution to descend to a level where its superintendent had to take to the "streets in the quest for food." The government, the paper claimed, could not adequately support the asylum because it had squandered the state's revenues to pay largely fraudulent legislative expenses. The *Phoenix* expressed incredulity that men who had "so grossly and criminally defrauded" a charitable institution could consider themselves entitled to reelection.³⁵

Given Ensor's sharp criticism of the Republican government and the publicity the asylum's problems received in the conservative press, it may seem surprising that he was not removed. There was, indeed, at least one attempt to discredit him and force his resignation. In the spring of 1873, rumors circulated that the cause of the asylum's financial problems lay in extravagant and illegal use of its funds by those in charge. At one point the board of regents asked Governor Franklin Moses to appoint a committee to examine the asylum's accounts.³⁶ Ensor defended himself vigorously in the press and in his reports. In a letter to the Charleston *News and Courier*, he conceded that the expenses of the asylum had been higher than normal. But this, he wrote, was the inevitable result of two unusual circumstances. The first was that he had inherited an institution which had deteriorated so badly that extensive repairs and improvements could no longer be delayed. The second arose from the delays in securing appropriations. This had forced the asylum to exist on "long credits, which begat exorbitant prices and heavy rates of interest that ate up a large portion of each year's

³²AR, 1873-74, pp. 48-49.

³³Williams, pp. 55, 426-427.

³⁴Charleston *Daily News*, December 5, 1872.

³⁵Columbia *Daily Phoenix*, April 19, May 2, August 11, December 7, 1872; Charleston *Daily News*, September 19, 1872.

³⁶MBR, May 3, 1873.

appropriations."³⁷ Elsewhere, Ensor charged that the attack on his management of the asylum was simply an attempt by corrupt politicians to deflect attention from their own malfeasance:

"It has been insinuated if not openly charged, that the expenses of this institution are unnecessarily large, and even fraud and speculation have been hinted at by some whose own craven natures are so corrupt that they can't see anything but dishonesty in others, and they are always nosing around with an eye of suspicion to see if other people are not stealing as well as they ... thieves, like misery, love company; and they like to drag everyone down to their level."³⁸

The attempt to discredit Ensor failed completely. Individuals and newspapers of both parties leaped to the superintendent's defense. The conservative *Charleston News and Courier* denounced what it claimed was a "treacherous and secret effort to injure [Dr. Ensor's] fair fame."³⁹ The *Aiken Tribune*, a Republican paper, attributed the attack on Ensor to "a spirit of retaliation created by [his] refusal to lend himself and his influence to the successful perpetration of schemes led by a set of heartless plunderers, intent upon robbing the grand and noble charity, in common with other institutions of the state."⁴⁰ One of Ensor's strongest defenders was Dr. Maximilian Laborde, a professor at South Carolina College who had served on the board of regents of the asylum for thirty years before the Radicals removed him in 1870. In a letter to the press, Laborde noted that he continued to visit the asylum occasionally and found it to be well managed. Dr. Ensor, Laborde concluded, deserved the trust of the state's citizens. He was not only a worthy successor to Superintendent Parker but in every respect "the right man in the right place."⁴¹

Ensor's disgust with the corruptionists led him to join a Republican reform movement which was emerging by 1872. He supported the election of the reformer F. L. Cardozo as state treasurer in 1872.⁴² Later, in 1874, he served as campaign manager for the successful reform candidate for governor, Daniel H. Chamberlain, who had previously served for a time as one of the asylum's regents. Together, Cardozo and Chamberlain managed to eliminate much of the corruption in the Reconstruction regime.⁴³ Ensor

³⁷*Charleston News and Courier*, May 7, 1873.

³⁸AR, 1873-74, pp. 49-50.

³⁹*Charleston News and Courier*, May 28, 1873.

⁴⁰*Aiken Tribune*, quoted in *Charleston News and Courier*, May 28, 1873.

⁴¹*Charleston News and Courier*, May 156, 1873, reprinted from *Columbia Daily Phoenix*, May 6, 1873. Ensor almost always received a good press. See, for example, *Abbeville Press and Banner*, January 29, 1873, clipping in Waring Historical Library, Medical University of South Carolina; *Charleston News and Courier*, May 2, 1876.

⁴²See *Charleston News and Courier*, September 21, 1872.

⁴³Williamson, pp. 390-391, 397-403.

expected that the asylum would benefit from the advent of more honest and less wasteful leadership, and to some extent he was correct.

In April 1875, he informed the regents that the asylum's "prospects are brighter than they have been for many years:" "I have collected \$30,000 from the State Treasurer ... the last of our indebtedness for salaries and wages has been paid, and we are able for the first time in ten years to start on a new year with a clean sheet, so far as this expense is concerned."⁴⁴ Yet he had to endure many of the same financial woes under the reformers as he had under the corruptionists. Appropriations for the asylum after 1871 more closely matched Ensor's requests (see Table I), but he continued to have difficulty in getting what was appropriated. The source of the problem was no longer government extravagance but economic depression. As a result of the Panic of 1873, state revenues declined in the last years of the Republican regime. At the same time, reformers like Cardozo and Chamberlain remained determined to bring government spending into line with revenues and expected all state institutions to share in the burden of retrenchment. This goal brought them into conflict with Ensor, whose first concern was the condition of his institution. Soon after Cardozo became treasurer at the end of 1872, he issued \$60,000 in appropriations for the asylum. But before long the treasury was empty and he refused to issue more funds. By May 1873, Ensor and Cardozo were openly clashing over the issuance of appropriations, with the treasurer claiming that the asylum had been overpaid, and Ensor vehemently denying it.⁴⁵

Ensor came into conflict with Chamberlain soon after the governor was elected. The new governor was determined to reduce government expenditures not only as a measure of reform but also as a means of attracting Democratic support for the Republican reformers.⁴⁶ In his message to the legislature in January 1875, he conceded the asylum deserved "generous support" and praised its condition. But he announced that he could not recommend the increased appropriation Ensor and the regents had requested. The tax levy for the support of public institutions had fallen short of receipts of the previous year by \$40,000 and a recent law made it a felony for any public official to spend in excess of appropriations. This was sufficiently bad news for Ensor, but he was infuriated by another part of the governor's speech. In referring to the accumulated debt of the asylum, Chamberlain implied that the superintendent himself was partly to blame

⁴⁴MBR, April 1, 1875.

⁴⁵*Columbia Daily Phoenix*, January 25, 1873; *Charleston News and Courier*, May 7, 1873; Ensor to the Board of Regents, December 1877, in Gov. Hampton's Correspondence, SCA.

⁴⁶Holt, p. 181; Williamson, pp. 402-405.

for the situation.⁴⁷

Ensor was disappointed and stung by Chamberlain's speech. He complained bitterly to the regents that on the amount of money the governor was willing to give the asylum it could only be kept open by running it like a county poorhouse. As far as the debt was concerned, the governor's charge was hypocritical: Chamberlain, Ensor charged, was well aware of "the compulsory nature" of the asylum's indebtedness, for he had approved much of it himself while a member of the asylum's board of regents. Ensor believed that Chamberlain was making him a scapegoat for the past excesses of the Republican regime.⁴⁸

During the following months Chamberlain tried to placate Ensor. At the end of 1875, the governor made a strong appeal to the legislature to provide greater support for the asylum. He admitted that the asylum's debts were the result of inadequate and irregularly paid appropriations. The legislature responded with a \$65,000 appropriation. But a few weeks later Chamberlain announced that state spending would have to be slashed in order to balance the budget and recommended a series of drastic cuts in the funding of public institutions; the asylum's appropriation was to be reduced to \$40,000. The legislature seems to have prevented the cuts from being fully implemented, but it is not clear what proportion of the original appropriation for 1876 the asylum received (see Table I).⁴⁹

Despite his conflicts with Chamberlain and the asylum's continuing financial difficulties, Ensor supported the governor's reelection in 1876. In October, Ensor attended the annual convention of the asylum superintendents and told them that the situation of the insane in South Carolina was improving under the Chamberlain regime: "We have at last gotten an honest and able Governor who takes an earnest interest in all that concerns the welfare of our State, and as we are almost certain to reelect him for another term, I begin to feel hopeful."⁵⁰

The outcome of the election was far different from what Ensor had predicted. After a violent and disputed election, Chamberlain and the Democratic (conservative) candidate, Wade Hampton, each formed rival governments. Chamberlain was forced from office in April 1877 when President Hayes ordered the removal of Federal troops from South Carolina, assuring the victory of the Democrats. Hampton had by this time virtually seized control of the state anyway, for he had been able to prevent

⁴⁷Walter Allen, *Governor Chamberlain's Administration in South Carolina: A Chapter in the Reconstruction of the Southern States* (New York & London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1888), pp. 51-52.

⁴⁸MBR, February 4, 1875; AR, 1874-75, pp. 5, 20-21; 1875-76, pp. 20-21; MBR, April 1, 1875.

⁴⁹Holt, pp. 181-183; Allen, pp. 175-176, 245-246.

⁵⁰*American Journal of Insanity*, 1876, vol. 33, p. 179.

the Chamberlain government from collecting enough revenue to sustain the operation of its institutions.⁵¹

As a result, the financial situation of the asylum had become critical by January 1877. Ensor told the regents on January 4 that he had no money or food and that the merchants who had been supplying credit were threatening to shut it off. For a week, the patients had been on half rations, and for two weeks no laundry had been done, since he had been forced to release many of the employees, including the washerwomen. A few days later Ensor appealed to Hampton for emergency aid and received it. As he later explained, it was the only rational thing to do: "To have relied upon the Chamberlain government under the circumstances that then surrounded us would have been ample evidence of our own insanity."⁵²

By his act, however, the superintendent had given the Democratic government its first recognition of legitimacy by a state official. The fact contained an irony one of Hampton's supporters could not overlook: "It was one of the many absurd pranks of fate in the 1876 revolution that Hampton's first and strongest claims on the governorship went to him through the lunatic asylum and the penitentiary — and he backed by the best and clearest brains and highest character of the country."⁵³

Although he remained a Republican, Ensor seemed willing to continue in office under the Redeemers. Given his experiences under the Reconstruction government, he may have believed that the Democrats could not do much worse. Moreover, he had won the respect if not the friendship of some Democrats. He welcomed the new government in terms reminiscent of his first favorable comments on the Republican regime. A "new era" had "dawned upon the fortunes of the State," he proclaimed in his annual report, and a "higher plane of politics has been inaugurated." He praised the Democrats for having saved the asylum's patients from starvation and from "a reign of profligacy and corruption unparalleled in the experience of man."⁵⁴ Such language seems like a fawning attempt to curry favor with the Redeemers, but Ensor was not the fawning type. He may have been simply expressing the disillusionment with Reconstruction that many Republicans felt by the time it came to its inglorious end.⁵⁵

⁵¹Robert J. Moore, "Governor Chamberlain and the End of Reconstruction in South Carolina," *Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association*, 1977, pp. 20-21; Williamson, pp. 406-412.

⁵²AR, 1876-77, p. 463.

⁵³Williams, p. 427.

⁵⁴AR 1876-77, in RR, p. 463; MBR, July 5, October 6, 1877.

⁵⁵William Gillette, *Retreat from Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 1979, pp. 346; Avery Craven, *Reconstruction: The Ending of the Civil War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969), pp. 302-307; Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1970), pp. 204-211.

There was, in any event, little chance that the Democrats would retain Ensor as superintendent. Having finally seized power from the hated Reconstruction regime, they were determined to remove its appointees from positions of power and to replace them with loyal Democrats and former Confederates. In June 1877, Hampton replaced the Republican regents with men of his own party. In November, the new board requested Hampton to remove Ensor in favor of Dr. Peter Griffin, a native South Carolinian who was a Confederate veteran and Hampton supporter. Ensor submitted his resignation a few weeks later.⁵⁶

The decision to remove Ensor seems to have been purely political. No one brought any charges against him. A legislative commission appointed by the Hampton regime in 1877 to investigate the state's charitable and penal institutions not only absolved Ensor of any wrongdoing during his tenure, but commended his faithful and efficient administration of the asylum.⁵⁷ The fact that several traditionalist historians later praised Ensor indicates that he had the respect of at least some of the Redeemer leaders.⁵⁸

Conservative admiration for Ensor, however, was not due simply to his honest and capable administration of the asylum. Some conservatives viewed him as the man who prevented the Radicals from carrying out a "nefarious" plan to institute racial equality and race mixing at the asylum. One conservative historian claimed that Ensor forced the ouster of Dr. Harris, the black assistant physician, because he was "distasteful" to the white patients.⁵⁹ This may well be true but is difficult to verify. Ensor certainly favored the removal of Harris, although whether on grounds of race or incompetence or both is not clear. In any case, the regents, a majority of whom were black, had the final say. What Ensor's racial views were at that time are uncertain. His only public statement on the matter came near the end of his tenure. In his annual report for 1876-77, he noted that experience had convinced him that black and white patients ought not to be mixed together because of the "mutual antagonism of the races." On the other hand, Ensor's reports were filled with bitter complaints about the inadequate facilities the asylum provided for the black patients, whose numbers had grown from five in 1865 to seventy-five in 1871. He referred to the wooden buildings constructed for the blacks since the war "as miserable cattle stalls" which were "a cruel imposition upon humanity, a

⁵⁶MBR, July 5, November 13, December 6, 1877.

⁵⁷*Report of the Commission Appointed to Examine into the Condition of the Penal and Charitable Institutions of the State, RR, 1877-78, p. 814.*

⁵⁸Williams, p. 427; Thompson, p. 67; Reynolds, p. 125; see also Wallace, vol. 3, pp. 280-281.

⁵⁹Thompson, p. 66; Reynolds, p. 125.

reproach to the Republican party, and disgrace to the state."⁶⁰

Whatever his racial attitudes, there was little chance that the Redeemers would keep Ensor at the asylum. To do so would not only have been an affront to Democratic stalwarts but would have conspicuously contradicted the Redeemer claim to have saved South Carolina from a thoroughly corrupt and incompetent regime. Ensor may have been an asset to the Democrats during Reconstruction, because he had repeatedly exposed the problems of the asylum in the public prints. But he was now a liability and had to be sacrificed to the Redeemer campaign to condemn Reconstruction *in toto*.⁶¹ Ensor was acutely aware of this, and expressed a fear that his resignation would be interpreted as a confession of guilt. He was particularly concerned about his reputation, he claimed, because he had no intention of leaving the state: "I have earned a reputation here for honesty under the most adverse circumstances that almost ever encompassed a Public Officer ... and I do not propose now, at this critical moment, to fritter that boon away, among the people with whom I expect to live and die, sharing their fortunes and misfortunes, to gratify the caprice of anybody."⁶²

To the Democrats, Ensor's removal was politically necessary for another reason. The Redeemers' program, like that of Gov. Chamberlain before them, included a pledge of retrenchment in state spending. The asylum, as one of the most expensive of state institutions, was going to have to bear some of the pains of fiscal conservatism. Indeed, during the following decades, per-capita expenditure on South Carolina's insane was to be driven ever lower. Ensor had shown himself adept at economizing when he had no choice, but he had never accepted it graciously. His reports were peppered with references to the "niggardly" and "illiberal" provision the Reconstruction government had made for the insane.⁶³ Despite his welcome to the new regime, Ensor quickly made it clear that he was not willing to acquiesce in a program of retrenchment that would jeopardize what he had achieved since 1870. His first monthly report to the new Democratic regents consisted largely of a list of needed improvements and complaints about the "scanty appropriation" the Democratic legislature had given the asylum, along with statistics showing the superior facilities and more generous support North Carolina and Georgia provided their insane. In his annual report a few months later, he set forth a plan for the

⁶⁰AR, 1871, p. 18; 1872, pp. 24-25; 1876-77, in RR, pp. 460-461; MBR, February 24, May 10, June 4, 1870, January 14, 1871; John W. Parker to Dorothea Dix, October 20, 1870, Dix Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

⁶¹Williamson, pp. 414-415; Martin Abbott, "The Freedmen's Bureau and its Carolina Critics," *Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association*, 1962, p. 23.

⁶²Ensor to Board of Regents, December 1877, Gov. Hampton Correspondence, SCA.

⁶³MBR, February 4, 1875, May 6, 1876; AR, 1875-76, p. 11.

improvement of the asylum, which he admitted would require large annual appropriations. But, he added, "If the State of South Carolina intends to make the provisions for the care and treatment of the insane that are being made in every other part of the world, and which an enlightened humanity demands, we may as well make up our minds at once that we will be obliged to spend annually a considerable sum of money for this noble charity."⁶⁴ This was not what the new rulers of South Carolina wanted to hear.

After leaving the asylum, Ensor remained in South Carolina until his death in 1907. He continued to be a member of the Republican Party and held several Federal posts, including postmaster of Columbia and chief raiding officer for the Internal Revenue Service. In this latter post he even won the admiration of the men he was employed to prosecute. According to A. B. Williams, Ensor was the "idol of the moonshiners because he never was afraid of them and never broke his word or was harsh or unfair. He could go into the most dangerous places, arrest the most dangerous men, alone and without show of weapons, and never was even fired at."⁶⁵

The career of J. F. Ensor at the South Carolina Lunatic Asylum should caution us against any simplistic interpretation of the effects of Reconstruction on southern institutions. That the Reconstruction government often treated the asylum shabbily is undeniable. Yet it was the Reconstruction government which placed Ensor in the post of superintendent and kept him there despite his public and often acerbic criticism of Republican officials.

That Ensor was an honest and able administrator, and that he fought valiantly against extremely difficult conditions seems undeniable. It is more difficult to judge his ability as a physician. Recovery rates during his tenure were certainly lower than under his predecessors (Table II). But this may have been due as much to different conceptions of what constituted a "recovery" as to any failing of Ensor's. Some of the decline may have been the result of the deplorable financial situation which the asylum had to endure during these years. Certainly the fact that he had to devote so much of his time to keeping 300 patients fed, clothed, and warmed probably left him without much time to pursue active therapeutics. As was mentioned above, he often filled other offices at the asylum besides his own, including treasurer, steward, and assistant physician. Moreover, the patients who came to the asylum after the war seem to have been more impoverished and physically run-down than those of the antebellum period. Finally, as Table II shows, recovery rates continued to drop under Ensor's successors, Drs. Peter Griffin and James W. Babcock.

Ensor's reports show him to be conversant with contemporary theories about the kind of facilities needed for the care of the insane. But neither they

⁶⁴MBR, July 5, 1877; AR. 1876-77, in RR, 1877-78, p. 460.

⁶⁵Williams, p. 427; see also note 15.

TABLE II
RECOVERY RATES
AT THE SOUTH CAROLINA ASYLUM
FOR SELECTED PERIODS

<u>YEARS</u>	<u>ADMISSIONS</u>	<u>RECOVERIES</u>	<u>% RECOVERED ON ADMISSIONS</u>
1835-52	596	260	44
1853-60	521	222	43
1861-69*	467	298	64
1870-77#	830	256	31
1878-86	1942	497	26
1893-1900	3044	711	23

SOURCE: South Carolina State Hospital, *Annual Reports*, 1853-1900.

* 1867 missing; no *Annual Report*.

#1876 missing; no *Annual Report*.

nor the asylum's case records tell us much about his efforts to treat the asylum's patients. What evidence there is makes clear that Ensor's views on the treatment of insanity were similar to those of most American alienists at the time. He considered insanity to be a physical disease requiring the care of a physician. But that did not make him an advocate of vigorous medical therapy. Medicine, he declared firmly, had "a very narrow sphere in the treatment of insanity." Like most contemporary alienists, he rejected the "heroic" medicine of the antebellum era with its copious bloodletting and drastic purging. The decline of such depletive measures left little in the medical armory besides tonics designed to build up patients' strength and sedatives to calm their excitement or anxieties. Thus, it is not surprising that the few references to medical treatment in Ensor's case reports are to the use of tonics and sedatives such as Potassium Bromide.⁶⁶

Medical treatment, however, was only one part of the nineteenth-century asylum's therapeutic armory. Moral treatment comprised the other part, and it was to this that Ensor, in common with many other alienists, looked "for the largest measure of success." Moral treatment, which had

⁶⁶ARs, 1872, p. 25; 1874, p. 40; South Carolina State Hospital, Case Histories III, Nos. 2772, 2805, 2815, 2816, 2825, 2831. On the decline of heroic therapy for insanity in America, see Samuel B. Thielmann, "Madness and Medicine: Trends in American Medical Therapeutics for Insanity, 1820-1860," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 1987, vol. 61, pp. 25-46.

emerged at the end of the eighteenth century, was based on the belief that insanity frequently arose from adverse environmental conditions, and that it could therefore often be cured by the establishment of a more supportive milieu. It encompassed virtually all the non-medical aspects of therapy, including classification, seclusion from the sources of excitement, and occupations and amusements designed to divert the patient's "mind from its gloomy or fantastic thoughts." Ensor, like other asylum superintendents, promoted moral treatment through the provision of such things as concerts, lectures, dances, games, musical instruments, reading matter, and agricultural and other employment. Providing proper facilities for moral treatment was expensive, however, and it was Ensor's insistence on doing so that led to many of his conflicts with the state government. In his view the lack of proper facilities for patients contributed to low recovery and high mortality rates. As he wrote of the black patients in 1872, "These people are placed in the Asylum to be cured of insanity, and with proper facilities for their treatment, fifty per cent of them may be cured. But with the present imperfect accommodations, we cannot hope to cure any of them."⁶⁷

Although Ensor claimed that it was from moral therapy that the best results were to be expected, he may not have held out much hope that active treatment of any kind would benefit his patients. By the 1870s, asylum doctors were turning away from the therapeutic optimism which had marked antebellum efforts to deal with the insane. They were coming to believe that a large proportion of the insane suffered from organic and hereditary disorders that would not yield readily to any known therapeutic measures. Many superintendents had already concluded that the asylum's main function was to provide humane custodial care rather than to cure large numbers of patients.⁶⁸ That Ensor may have shared this outlook is

⁶⁷AR, 1872, p. 25; 1871, pp. 20, 22; 1873, in RR, pp. 475, 499. For fuller discussion of moral treatment, see William F. Bynum, "Rationales for Therapy in British Psychiatry, 1780-1835," in Andrew Scull, ed., *Madhouses, Mad-doctors, and Madmen* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), pp. 35-57; Eric T. Carlson and Norman Dain, "The Psychotherapy that was Moral Treatment," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 1960, vol. 117, pp. 519-24; Scull, "Moral Treatment Reconsidered: Some Sociological Comments on an Episode in the History of British Psychiatry," in Scull, ed., pp. 105-120; J. Sanbourne Bockoven, *Moral Treatment in Community Mental Health* (New York: Springer, 1972).

⁶⁸The decline of therapeutic optimism among American alienists is discussed in GERALD GROB, *Mental Institutions in America* (New York: Free Press, 1973), chaps. 7-8; DAVID ROTHMAN, *The Discovery of the Asylum* (Boston: Little Brown, 1971), chap. 11; and CHARLES ROSENBERG, *The Trial of the Assassin Guiteau* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), *passim*.

indicated by the relative absence of discussion in his reports about therapeutics and the fact that he diagnosed most of his patients as incurable.⁶⁹ On the other hand, Ensor showed repeatedly that he was determined to provide high quality care for his patients and not let the asylum deteriorate to "the level of a county poor house."⁷⁰ In this respect if no other he was indeed "the right man in the right place."

⁶⁹For the years 1873-77, Ensor estimated that over 90 per cent of his patients were incurable. See ARs, 1873-74, Exhibit 16, 1874-75, Exhibit 18, 1876-77, Exhibit 20.

⁷⁰*Charleston News and Courier*, May 7, 1873.