

THE SOUTH CAROLINA HISTORICAL MAGAZINE

JULY 2014

VOLUME 115 • NUMBER 3



Sponsors at the College of Charleston include:

Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture

Carolina Lowcountry and Atlantic World Program

Department of History

© 2014 South Carolina Historical Society

THE
SOUTH CAROLINA
HISTORICAL MAGAZINE

JULY 2014

VOLUME 115 • NUMBER 3

CONTENTS

ARTICLES

- “They Are Supposed to Be Lurking about the City”:
Enslaved Women Runaways in Antebellum Charleston
by Amani T. Marshall 188
- The Big House and the Madhouse: Institutional Reform
and the State in Tillman-Era South Carolina
by Kevin Krause 213

BOOK REVIEWS 241

ARCHIVES UPDATE 258

NEWS 272

THE BIG HOUSE AND THE MADHOUSE: INSTITUTIONAL REFORM AND THE STATE IN TILLMAN-ERA SOUTH CAROLINA

KEVIN KRAUSE*

ON DECEMBER 4, 1890, A THRONG OF ONLOOKERS BLANKETED the plaza of the State House in Columbia. Different faces—fewer elites and more of the up-country middling set—dotted the scene than in recent gubernatorial inaugurations. The new governor also had changed. His once bushy locks now trimmed, Benjamin Ryan Tillman sported a tailored coat and smart kid gloves. He uttered none of the vulgarities that had suffused his campaign. Tillman's transformed demeanor suggested that he was there on serious business. Soon, phrases like "better government" and "more efficient" framed the message. Tillman calmly charged that his predecessors' private agendas had impaired the function of state institutions. "Offices requiring high order of business talent are given to men who can speak well or who have rendered political services, while they are wholly lacking in administrative ability. This being the case, it is small wonder," he insisted, "that we so often find mismanagement in government business." Whether his critique of recent leaders was genuine or simply political is debatable. Beyond the rhetoric, however, Tillman's policies over the next four years would mark a significant divergence from South Carolina leaders' traditional doctrines of minimalist government.¹

Tillman's legacy is largely one of demagoguery and empty promises. In addition to exploring his place in the white supremacist movement, scholars have interpreted Tillman's administration as a political machine—one as conservative as that which he proposed to reform. There is sound reasoning behind much of this critique: Tillman co-opted the enthusiasm of the Populist Party, but refused to support its core plan for financial reform and federal intervention; he portrayed himself as a man of the people, but manned his political team with planters, merchants, and lawyers; and he thwarted any break from the Democratic Party by appealing to white solidarity. Even so, scholars have focused so intently on these aspects that they have overlooked another significant development of the Tillman era—a shift

* Kevin Krause is adjunct professor of history at the University of South Carolina-Upstate.

¹ Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 109. See also Francis Butler Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman, South Carolinian*, with a new introduction by Orville Vernon Burton (1944; repr., Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 133; Diane Peggy Neal, "Benjamin Ryan Tillman: The South Carolina Years" (Ph.D. diss., Kent State University, 1976), 212.

from elite leadership and limited state government toward an empowered state acting on behalf of white producers. Moreover, to achieve this end, Tillman considered it necessary to reform public institutions that damaged the credibility of the state government, including the penitentiary and the Lunatic Asylum.

Many scholars agree that state governments in the nineteenth century played a more dynamic role than the national state. According to historian Brian Balogh, "Americans were far more amenable to energetic government at the local and state levels." Yet in the Palmetto State, traditions of localism and personal influence had long restricted the scope of government. Elite antebellum planters, who considered themselves masters of extended families, felt the state should protect their privilege, but otherwise remain unobtrusive. That same paternalistic ethos influenced Conservative leadership following Reconstruction and retarded the active governmental mechanisms that other states developed.²

Long after the reports of Union guns had faded, many South Carolinians struggled to survive, much less prosper. Farmers grappled with falling crop prices, droughts, infestations, and a dearth of credit. Many white citizens blamed "Black Republican" rule for their plight. However, in 1876 when Wade Hampton III and white Democrats reclaimed the government, they made scarcely an attempt to ameliorate the situation. While some of the problems farmers faced such as inadequate supplies of currency and credit lay beyond the purview of state government, defective state institutions still begged for attention. The penitentiary and the Lunatic Asylum, in particular, epitomized outdated, inefficient, and inhumane relics. Conservatives did almost nothing to improve these symbols of regressive ideology. Despite their eagerness to encourage railroad construction and manufacturing, from a sociopolitical standpoint the Conservative regime looked backward. Enchanted by the Lost Cause, they set about to recreate the antebellum world of paternalistic leadership. It was a plan that neither worked nor secured their control of the state.³

² Brian Balogh, *A Government out of Sight: The Mystery of National Authority in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 6. See also Richard Franklin Bensel, *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America, 1859–1877* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Richard R. John, ed., *Ruling Passions: Political Economy in Nineteenth-Century America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

³ William J. Cooper Jr., *The Conservative Regime: South Carolina, 1877–1890* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), 201; Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 408–429; David Duncan Wallace, *South Carolina: A Short History, 1520–1948* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1951), 607–622.

Beginning in 1885, Benjamin Tillman, a foul-mouthed, one-eyed farmer from the up-country district of Edgefield, whipped up a storm of protest against the status quo. By inflaming common whites' resentment of the ruling class, Tillman won the governor's office in 1890 as a "Reform Democrat." Although unapologetically racist, the main thrust of his message was that leaders had not addressed the needs of farmers. Hailing from a slave-owning family that retained most of their land after the Civil War, Tillman was no average farmer. Yet as a product of the rough Edgefield environment, he identified more with farmers than the rarified circles of Columbia and Charleston. As historians have noted, Tillman implemented no radical or revolutionary programs as governor. As a matter of fact, by commanding the effort to disenfranchise African Americans through a new state constitution, he actually restricted the voting rights of many poor whites. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that even though he railed against "elites" from the campaign stump, Tillman never promised to be a radical.⁴

The Reform Democrats' platform advocated public schools, the adoption of party primaries, and the dismantling of corporate monopolies. The platform more closely resembled an early (and limited) southern version of state Progressivism than class warfare. Tillman perceived the state as a proper tool for combating the "enemies" of white farmers—greedy capitalists, bankers, and corrupt politicians. He preached reform and efficiency, never revolution. Through multiple projects, Tillman sought to restore the status of white male producers. He ended the Coosaw Mining Company's monopoly of the phosphate industry, restructured the Railroad Commis-

⁴ On Tillman and his administration as governor, see Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman*; Cooper, *Conservative Regime*; Stephen Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Edgar, *South Carolina*; Wallace, *South Carolina*; C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877–1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951). Edgar accuses Tillman of campaigning by pitting rich against poor and town against country, but once elected, he was not nearly as revolutionary as he had appeared. Edgar asserts that Tillmanism was a political machine, rather than a social or political revolution. Like Edgar, Kantrowitz argues that Tillman's primary motivation was to establish white supremacy firmly. On all other matters, Kantrowitz finds Tillman to be as conservative as his Bourbon predecessors. Cooper likewise contends that Tillman initiated no substantive plan of reform. He claims that Tillman's only worthwhile accomplishment came before his term as governor with his role in the founding of Clemson Agricultural College. Woodward maintains that Tillman could speak the "idiom" of poor white farmers, but he deserted his farmer supporters and grew increasingly conservative. Woodward lists trust busting, regulation of railroads through commissions, and penitentiary reform as defining elements of southern progressivism. Tillman made efforts to accomplish each of these goals, but Woodward does not include him as one of the progressive southern governors.

sion, and led the charge to found Clemson Agricultural College, which would train white men in scientific farming methods. The governor also helped to found Winthrop Normal and Industrial College for white women. Furthermore, the South Carolina Dispensary, a state-run liquor monopoly that many called "Tillman's baby," represented mammoth state regulation over economic and private life.⁵

Tillman did not share the goals of many "Progressives," but his perception of the state as a guiding agent squares with the methods of early Progressive politicians. Ultimately, though, labeling Tillman as Progressive, Conservative, or something in between accomplishes little. A more useful approach is reexamining the Tillman era as a period of transition from localism and dispersed power to centralized authority. Empowering the state was not automatic, however. From Tillman's perspective, it required a thorough cleansing of the state body, including the reorganization of inefficient institutions. If Tillman's constituency was to trust the authority of the active state, then that body needed to be healed of its festering sores.

Two of Tillman's lesser-known reforms involved the South Carolina Penitentiary and the South Carolina Lunatic Asylum. Apart from his annual addresses to the General Assembly, Tillman made few public announcements about either institution. Newspapers did not brim with rhetoric about these topics, and correspondence between Tillman and the superintendents and legislators concerning these facilities has not been well preserved. Still, institutional records and legislative journals reveal that under the Tillmanist regime, these facilities experienced significant transformations.

When Tillman took office, no concerns represented more of an unwanted burden on the state than the penitentiary and the Lunatic Asylum. To the public, both establishments seemed unfortunate but necessary depositories

⁵ "The Carolina Farmers," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 2, 1887; "Fun among the Farmers," *News and Courier* (Charleston, S.C.), August 7, 1885; Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman*, 93; "The Farmers' Ticket," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 28, 1890. Southern progressivism does not fit into any rigid definition. Dewey W. Grantham asserts that overall, progressive southern leaders were moderate: they promoted social order and economic opportunity, they were anti-monopoly, and they tried "to protect the weak and unfortunate in deserving cases." Southern progressivism did not include ideas of racial equality. According to Grantham, "Many southern progressives were willing to use racist means in their efforts to accomplish political and social reforms, and even the minority of whites that criticized repressive measures against Negroes were often motivated by a concern for whites rather than blacks." See Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), xvi, 231. See also Grantham, *The Regional Imagination: The South and Recent American History* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1979), 77-106. On the significance of "producerism," see Bruce Palmer, *Man over Money: The Southern Populist Critique of American Capitalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

for society's misfits. Due to discriminatory laws, African American males were the primary occupants of southern prisons, a fact that entrenched whites' resistance to funding the penitentiary. "Spending money on black criminals was at the bottom of every white taxpayers' list of priorities," summarizes historian Edward L. Ayers. The overwhelming sentiment was that state prisons should generate enough income to sustain their own operation. Therefore, the prisoners must work.⁶

Despite the pleas of many South Carolinians, a majority of legislators never approved the establishment of a state penitentiary prior to the Civil War. The reasons why reveal much about the antebellum planter-elite's ideology. One contemporary critic located the failure in single-minded opposition to centralized power. Benjamin F. Perry, a Unionist newspaper editor and state legislator who would serve briefly as governor in 1865, contended that since the nullification crisis, South Carolinians had been so consumed by their battle with the federal government, they had no energy left for updating their antiquated ways. It was shocking, Perry wryly remarked, that "such a people should be in favor of Rail Roads—they ought to stick to the old fashioned road wagon."⁷

Modern scholars offer differing viewpoints on antebellum lawmakers' reluctance to endorse the penitentiary. Edward Ayers suggests that the

⁶ Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction*, 15th Anniversary Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 154–155. See also Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 127–142.

⁷ John P. Altgeld, *Our Penal Machinery and Its Victims* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Company, 1886), 95–96; Jack Kenny Williams, *Vogues in Villainy: Crime and Retribution in Ante-bellum South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1959), 113; Frank Freidel, *Francis Lieber: Nineteenth-Century Liberal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1947), passim. Perry quoted in Lillian Adele Kibler, *Benjamin F. Perry, South Carolina Unionist* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1946), 231. For detailed analysis of convict leasing, see Matthew J. Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866–1928* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996). For focused discussion on convict leasing in South Carolina, see George Brown Tindall, *South Carolina Negroes, 1877–1900* (1952; repr., Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003). See also Matthew J. Mancini, "Race, Economics, and the Abandonment of Convict Leasing," *Journal of Negro History* 63 (October 1978): 339–352. Mancini argues that convict leasing was not merely a way to profit from the existence of prisoners, but a social system of subordinating blacks and effectually extending the institution of antebellum slavery. For a discussion on the laws employed by southern states to control black labor, see Mark Colvin, *Penitentiaries, Reformatories, and Chain Gangs: Social Theory and the History of Punishment in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 230–235. See also Jane Zimmerman, "The Penal Reform Movement in the South during the Progressive Era, 1890–1917," *Journal of Southern History* 17 (November 1951): 462–492; Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th-Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 35–39.

dearth of democracy combined with leaders' contrarian attitudes delayed establishment of the state prison. Between 1828 and 1832, when most southern states were busy erecting penitentiaries, South Carolina was facing off against President Andrew Jackson in a "high noon" test of bravado over nullification. The contest steered Palmetto State legislators down a path where they began "to define themselves in opposition to the values of 'progress.'" South Carolinians esteemed localism and personality over centralized authority and honor over institutions. "This faith," Ayers holds, "did not call for a penitentiary." Michael Stephen Hindus agrees with Ayers that state leaders preferred private and localized authority and also that South Carolina "lacked a culture of reform." Hindus insists, though, that conflated categories of race and class affected South Carolinians' perception of criminality per se. Leaders interpreted crime by whites differently than in other states. In South Carolina, the dominance of agriculture and the high percentage of property ownership among whites nurtured a distinct set of assumptions about the origins of and the appropriate responses to criminality. As opposed to black crime, which could be chalked up to inferiorities of race, and northern white crime, which might be a product of environment, white crime in South Carolina was explained as originating from passion.⁸

The notion that passion engendered white crime had three notable consequences for lawmakers. First, they thought crime was not a major threat to society, nor was it something they could remedy. The state could no sooner eliminate white crime than it could quench the invisible fire burning beneath a male Carolinian's breast. Second, state leaders assumed that there was no flaw within transgressors that could be corrected—vengeance was the proper objective of punishment. Finally, the dominant view among South Carolina officials was that reformation was pointless or even impossible. Hindus argues that this perception of the social order, in which black crime was controlled by slavery and white crime was not overly serious or fixable, precluded the penitentiary.⁹

Years of war and the change of leadership in South Carolina altered the prevailing wisdom. In 1866 the penitentiary was finally realized under the temporary governorship of Benjamin Perry. Early on, commentators praised the South Carolina Penitentiary as a symbol of economic efficiency and modern progress. According to the *Charleston Daily News*:

There can be no question that it is likely to become the most important of the kind in the Southern country. 1st. Its general plan, arrangement and

⁸ Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 58–59; Michael Stephen Hindus, *Prison and Plantation: Crime, Justice, and Authority in Massachusetts and South Carolina, 1767–1878* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 215–225, 242–243.

⁹ Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 58–59; Hindus, *Prison and Plantation*, 215–225, 242–243.

management are based upon the best models which the country affords. . . . and, therefore, the State is likely to derive benefit from this hitherto new and untried system of punishment, in the double sense that it will not only be self-supporting, but will supply a want that has been experienced ever since the change from the former condition of affairs.

What may be the effect of this enterprise, although penal in its objects, upon the prosperity of Columbia is yet to be determined. Possibly the development of the remarkable water-power of the Congaree River and the adjacent canal, in its application to the manufacturing purposes of the penitentiary, may direct to that locality the attention of capitalists abroad, and the consequent improvement of that portion of the City of Columbia. . . . Certainly up to the present hour the most remarkable success has attended the undertaking.¹⁰

This passage highlights the purpose of the penitentiary for postwar leaders in South Carolina—it would provide a means of social and racial control that was not necessary in the antebellum era. The “want” that had been prevalent “since the change from the former condition of affairs” was certainly that of a controlling authority for the emancipated population. Additionally, the writer hoped that the penitentiary would induce capitalists to invest in South Carolina. But this optimism was soon replaced with sobered dread. In 1873, as the country reeled from financial disaster, Governor Franklin J. Moses announced that it had “cost much more to maintain the State Penitentiary during the present year than at any former period.” The prison was not “self-supporting.” In fact, it was operating at a deficit of over seventeen thousand dollars. The Moses government was notorious for financial malfeasance, and the continuing construction project represented, in the words of historian Matthew J. Mancini, “a classic source of corruption and jobbery which ended up costing half a million dollars.”¹¹

In the 1870s and 1880s, the penitentiary brimmed with human misery. Unheated, overcrowded cell blocks, which lacked indoor plumbing and were filled with noxious fumes from kerosene lamps, plagued the institution. Neither the Reconstruction nor the Conservative regimes made any significant efforts at improvement. In 1873 Superintendent J. B. Dennis struggled to find funds with which to feed and clothe the inmates. Dennis declared the institution to be “in an exceedingly crippled and embarrassed condition financially—the indebtedness at the close of the last fiscal year being \$102,238.” The state legislature, still under Republican rule, showed no willingness to act. Ultimately, Dennis was forced to lease convicts to

¹⁰ “The State Penitentiary,” *Charleston Daily News* (Charleston, S.C.), February 5, 1868.

¹¹ “Annual Message of His Excellency Gov. F. J. Moses, Jr., Delivered to the General Assembly of South Carolina, January 14, 1873,” *Anderson Intelligencer* (Anderson, S.C.), January 23, 1873; Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 199.

private companies. The initial trial of leasing lasted under two years, as African American congressmen, shocked by the abuses, helped to overturn the lease law they had originally supported.¹²

Prisoners, of course, felt the lack of funds on their bare skins and in their empty bellies. As related by Dennis, the public credit was so damaged that "all the merchants applied to refused to sell goods on the faith of the state," and "there were among them [the prisoners] no shoes, blankets, or hats." In 1873 the state was either unwilling or unable to supply the inmates' basic needs. Fortunately, a Columbia merchant, Hardy Solomon, furnished the prison with provisions "at great personal sacrifice to himself." Governor Moses thanked Solomon for the "example of public spirit" that had prevented the possibility of inmates being turned out into the streets.¹³

After Wade Hampton and his followers "redeemed" the state in 1876, Conservative leaders did essentially nothing to remedy the conditions. In an attempt to defer costs and induce capital investment, the legislature sanctioned convict leasing in June 1877. Reformers and historians have offered varying interpretations for the causal factors of convict leasing. Julia S. Tutwiler, heiress to a former slaveholding family, located the germ in the breakdown of the master-slave relationship. Emancipated blacks, "suddenly freed from all restraints," had sunken into a state of criminality. Bankrupted states had no choice but to lease their prisoners. Even George Washington Cable, a rare white southern critic of racial subjugation, confessed that a "really tender and benevolent" bond of protection and dependency had existed between slaves and their owners. Although he deplored Jim Crow, Cable conceded that emancipation led to the "depravity of the negro." As historian Mary Ellen Curtin explains, by the 1880s even northern reformers in the National Prison Association agreed that blacks were biologically predisposed to criminality.¹⁴

In the 1940s, social scientists began analyzing statistical data to expose leasing abuses. Many of the works that followed also built upon C. Vann Woodward's *Origins of the New South*, in which he denounced conservative Democrats for perpetuating the system for personal gain. Woodward

¹² Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 198–199; *Transactions of the Third National Prison Reform Congress, Held at Saint Louis, Missouri, May 13–16, 1874*, ed. E. C. Wines (New York: Office of the Association, 1874), 3: 362.

¹³ *Transactions of the Third National Prison Reform Congress*, 3: 362.

¹⁴ Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 206–207; Paul M. Pruitt Jr., "The Trouble They Saw: Approaches to the History of the Convict Lease System," *Reviews in American History* 29 (September 2001): 395–402; George W. Cable, *The Silent South: Together with the Freedman's Case in Equity, the Convict Lease System, the Appendix to the 1889 Edition and Eight Uncollected Essays on Prison and Asylum Reform* (1889; repr., Montclair, N.J.: Patterson Smith, 1969), 14, 95; Mary Ellen Curtin, *Black Prisoners and Their World: Alabama, 1865–1900* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 170–172.

contended that "the convict-lease system did greater violence to the moral authority of the Redeemers than anything else." While Woodward primarily cited retrenchment, punishments for property violations, and greed as the reasons for convict leasing, more recent studies have followed the framework put forward by Edward Ayers. He and others analyze multiple factors: economy, politics, ideology, culture, and, of course, race. Despite variations, most historians agree on three basic factors that drove the system: the financial crisis following the war, the goal of recruiting industry with cheap labor, and the desire for a tool of social control to fill the vacuum left by emancipation.¹⁵

In 1878 the first shocking case of leasing abuse in South Carolina occurred at Camp Number Five, a barracks housing workers on the Greenwood and Augusta Railroad in Edgefield County. A state-appointed physician discovered moribund prisoners crowded together in a shack teeming with insects and rats. The superintendent ordered twenty-six of the sickliest convicts back to the prison. Nevertheless, thirty-nine inmates eventually died working for the Greenwood and Augusta. Being sent back to the prison was no guarantee of improved conditions. During the same year,

¹⁵ Revisionist works include Hilda Jane Zimmerman, "Penal Systems and Penal Reforms in the South since the Civil War" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1947); Blake McKelvey, *American Prisons: A History of Good Intentions* (Montclair, N.J.: Patterson Smith, 1977); Allen Johnston Going, *Bourbon Democracy in Alabama, 1874-1890* (Montgomery: University of Alabama Press, 1951); Mark T. Carleton, *Politics and Punishment: The History of the Louisiana State Penal System* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971). See also Woodward, *Origins of the New South*. For the "post-revisionist" perspective, see Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*; Ayers, *Promise of the New South*; Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*; Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (New York: Verso, 1996); Karin A. Shapiro, *A New South Rebellion: The Battle against Convict Labor in the Tennessee Coalfields, 1871-1896* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Martha A. Myers, *Race, Labor, and Punishment in the New South* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998); Curtin, *Black Prisoners*. For works that stress the primacy of racism as the major factor behind convict leasing, see Milfred C. Fierce, *Slavery Revisited: Blacks and the Southern Convict Lease System, 1865-1933* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Africana Studies Research Center, Brooklyn College, City University of New York, 1994); David M. Oshinsky, *"Worse than Slavery": Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Press, 1996); Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009). For a brief historiographical account of the interpretations of convict leasing, see Pruitt, "The Trouble They Saw," 395-402. While some scholars make the argument that leasing was simply another means of enslaving blacks, as Lichtenstein points out, this position does not account for the strenuous reform movements that appeared in the South at the same time racism was near its apex.

the physician found the penitentiary rife with dysentery and tuberculosis. As a result, over one-sixth of the entire prison population died in 1873.¹⁶

Conservatives failed to moderate the human suffering or the financial mess. In 1879 Superintendent Thomas J. Lipscomb reported that in the previous two years, eighty-two leased convicts had escaped and 153 prisoners had died. The following year, ninety-four inmates perished. Lipscomb hypothesized that the inmates would be better off as slaves. If they were property, he postulated, contractors "would look after them with greater zeal, and not leave them . . . to the ignorance, inattention, or inhumanity of irresponsible hirelings." Contractors subjected the leased convicts to endless work, near-starvation, and exposure. At times they tortured prisoners or killed them outright. In 1884 an overseer on the Savannah Valley Railroad beat convict Henry Porter almost to death. Lipscomb, who had served as superintendent for seven years by that time, told Governor Hugh S. Thompson that it was the worst case of individual cruelty he had ever witnessed. It was one of the "irresponsible hirelings," a white overseer from Georgia named A. W. Jackson, who had beaten the prisoner, and Lipscomb subsequently swore out a warrant for his arrest. In spite of the drawbacks of leasing, Lipscomb found no other way to meet the institution's financial needs.¹⁷

After the depression following the Panic of 1873, business owners began asserting more control in their contracts with states. Historian Rebecca M. McLennan notes that as large contractors began to monopolize prison labor and states began to consolidate prison contracts, "contractors were able to influence . . . the way things were done in prisons." She goes on to aver that costs were not the only factor involved in convict labor. It also ensured greater control of the work force. The 1870s and 1880s was a period of violent labor strikes, and the Knights of Labor were organizing the first significant national labor union. Convicts, on the other hand, could not bargain for better wages, unionize, or strike. They could not avoid certain jobs because of dangerous conditions. Prisoners could not move west in search of the main chance. Apparently, from many contractors' perspectives, convicts did not even need food or medicine. In financially devastated

¹⁶ Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 206–207.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 198–199; *Annual Report of the Board of Directors and Superintendent of the South Carolina Penitentiary, . . . for the Fiscal Year Ending October 31st, 1885* (Columbia, S.C.: The Board, 1885), 10–11 (Annual Reports of the South Carolina Penitentiary are hereinafter cited as ARSCP). Convict abuse on railroad work in South Carolina continued for several years, notably on the Blackville and Newberry Railroad, where in 1887 over one hundred prisoners were deemed to have been "ill-treated" and subsequently returned to the state penitentiary in Columbia. See "The Free Mail Delivery—Convict Lease Revoked," *Columbia in Paragraphs, Atlanta Constitution*, September 2, 1887. The extent of the prisoners' ill-treatment was not specified.

South Carolina, Conservative politicians for a time bowed to the demands of contractors to ease some of their burden.¹⁸

Hiring out convicts may have helped railroad and canal builders clear profits, but it hardly allowed the penitentiary to function self-sufficiently or maintain suitable conditions. Between 1885 and 1890, the prison's Board of Directors pleaded with Governor John P. Richardson III to overlook the existing debt and purchase a large plantation where convicts might be usefully employed. They also stressed overcrowding and the need for a sanitary plumbing system in the prison building. Inadequate funding remained the core problem. After a decade of atrocious death rates, in 1884 the General Assembly required that state-employed guards supervise convicts, rather than contractors. Additionally, all contracts would establish clear requirements for the lessee to provide adequate feeding, lodging, and clothing as well as "humane treatment." The legislature and prison officials intended these measures to improve conditions for leased convicts. But the plan meant expenses, and contractors frowned on the regulations. Subsequently, in 1885 the superintendent declared it "almost impossible" to find companies willing to hire out the convicts, and lawmakers repealed the regulations. Inmates would again labor outside of the state's watch.¹⁹

By 1887 the penitentiary still owed the state twenty-five thousand dollars, yet the board petitioned the legislature for an additional one hundred thousand dollars for critical improvements to the prison house. While leasing convicts had resulted in deaths, the prospect of being unable to lease the prisoners posed other difficulties. Businesses opting out of their contracts resulted in more inmates being housed in the actual prison building. The structure was already cramped when hundreds of prisoners were working and residing outside of the walls. The drying up of leasing contracts meant a severely overcrowded, unsanitary prison and a nightmare for the physician.²⁰

In the late 1880s, the prison began working some convicts on several small farms. In agreement with penal authorities across the South, officials opined that agricultural labor would prove both more healthful and more profitable. Convict farming in South Carolina never reached the magnitude that it did in Louisiana and Mississippi, where the prison farm became the core of the penal system. The problem during Conservative rule in South Carolina was organization. In 1888, out of a total population of one thousand,

¹⁸ Rebecca M. McLennan, *The Crisis of Imprisonment: Protest, Politics, and the Making of the American Penal State, 1776-1941* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 106-111.

¹⁹ "The State Legislature," *Daily Register* (Columbia, S.C.), December 10, 1884; Albert D. Oliphant, *The Evolution of the Penal System of South Carolina from 1866 to 1916* (Columbia, S.C.: State Company, 1916), 8.

²⁰ ARSCP, 1885, 10-14; *ibid.*, 1887, 11-14.



Late-twentieth-century photograph of the interior of the South Carolina Penitentiary's North Wing Cell Block. Completed in 1886, the five-story, granite building was designed to house 250 convicts. Aside from the grating on the catwalks opposite the cell doors and the small room in the foreground, the photograph reveals very few alterations to the original construction. Courtesy of the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia.

the prison had 358 inmates laboring on four private farms and one state-owned farm. The system was plagued by two major issues, however—one of nature, and one of design. The penitentiary did not hire inmates out for fixed wages. Instead, prisoners worked for shares of crops harvested on private lands. Unfortunately, the late 1880s was a period of unusually low crop prices and droughts. A second major obstacle was the location of the farms near the confluence of the Saluda and Broad Rivers. Year after year, the superintendent's report stated that freshets from the overflowing rivers had destroyed large portions of their crops. In a cruel twist of irony

and shortsightedness, the penitentiary had attempted to raise revenue by turning their inmates into sharecroppers in a flood zone.²¹

Penitentiary officials routinely petitioned the governor and the General Assembly for the purchase of a large plantation outside of the flood zone along with the erection of a new hospital building. In 1887 Superintendent Lipscomb attempted to purchase a farm in close proximity to the penitentiary, insisting that it was necessary for the health of the convicts, but the legislature blocked the plan. There is no record of their specific reasoning, though it seems that outstanding debt was likely the obstacle.²²

Thwarted in their plans, prison officials faced the bleak task of managing the cold, dark, dirty, severely overpopulated prison. In 1885 Lipscomb had pleaded to the governor for a new ward. The current building, he insisted, housed four hundred men over its intended capacity. According to the surgeon of the penitentiary, the situation represented a "violation of all sanitary rules." By 1889 physician Dr. D. S. Pope issued a special report stressing the urgent need for a larger and better-equipped hospital building. He noted the prevalence of measles, dysentery, and pneumonia that had caused eighty-six deaths during the previous year. Overcrowding had led directly to a death rate of 9 percent.²³

Lipscomb and Pope's petitions went largely unanswered. Conservative lawmakers never moved to ameliorate the institution's ills. However, when Tillman ousted the Conservative faction in 1890, the situation soon started to change. Penitentiaries were a key issue for southern reformers in the early 1890s. Tillman approached the penal system with two clear objectives: to make the prison economically self-sufficient, even profitable, and to eliminate inhumane conditions by upgrading the sanitation and restructuring the labor system to prevent mistreatment.²⁴

Tillman argued that convicts had for too long been leased for agricultural share work. He wanted prison laborers to be used on public projects, but when working for private interests, he insisted that they be hired out to the highest bidder. Furthermore, Tillman recommended that the

²¹ ARSCP, 1887, 2-4; *ibid.*, 1888, 3-4, 6; Zimmerman, "Penal Reform Movement," 463-467.

²² ARSCP, 1887, 8; *ibid.*, 1888, 4.

²³ ARSCP, 1885, 12; *ibid.*, 1889, 9, 44.

²⁴ Among the southern politicians who took up prison reform was Mississippi state representative James K. Vardaman. Vardaman, a champion of white supremacy who later became governor, openly expressed admiration for Tillman. He overhauled Mississippi's penal system, which had been the cruelest and most corrupt in the country, by orienting it completely around a state-operated farm. Although Tillman did not steer South Carolina in exactly the same direction, the two leaders shared many reform ideas. See William F. Holmes, *The White Chief: James Kimble Vardaman* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 86, 150-177, 390.

penitentiary continue to provide food, clothing, and guarding for leased convicts in order to prevent mistreatment. His plan conformed to that of reformer Enoch Cobb Wines, secretary of the National Prison Association. Under the "contract system," only the labor of the prisoner was hired out, while the prison still managed the feeding, clothing, sheltering, and guarding. Contrarily, in Wines's estimation, under the lease system "the whole control and management of the prison . . . is turned over to the lessee, who is . . . always a party whose object is to make money." As Wines saw it, "the system is injurious to the prison, because the lessee . . . thinks only how he can use him [the prisoner] to the greatest pecuniary advantage, and he cares little whether the gains are made to the profit or prejudice of the discipline and good order of the institution." During the first year of his second term, Tillman pushed the legislature into enacting the contract system. The 1893 statute required that all labor contracts would stipulate hours of work, only state officers would supervise and punish convicts, and no labor would proceed until the state physician had inspected the site and deemed it safe and healthy.²⁵

Tillman was determined to reorganize the penitentiary and make it profitable, and he started at the top. He replaced Superintendent Lipscomb with W. Jasper Talbert, a former Confederate officer and loyal Tillmanite. Although little correspondence between Tillman and Talbert is extant, it seems clear that Tillman picked the new superintendent with particular reform ends in mind. The two were political allies: like Tillman, Talbert was a Farmers' Alliance leader from Edgefield, and in 1892 Tillman sent Talbert to represent the state at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Talbert's appointment might have seemed to critics like blatant cronyism, but he did increase the penitentiary's profits while promoting more humane care of the prisoners. In 1891 there was little room for change in the prison's finances due to the necessary fulfillment of pre-existing contracts for the Columbia Canal and share work on various farms. Still, Tillman managed to force through legislation stipulating that the Board of

²⁵ *The Revised Statutes of South Carolina* (Columbia, S.C.: Charles A. Calvo Jr., State Printer, 1894), 2: 455; *Journal of the Senate of the General Assembly of the State of South Carolina, Being the Regular Session, Commencing November 25, 1890* (Columbia, S.C.: James H. Woodrow, State Printer, 1890), 90 (the *Journal of the Senate* is hereinafter cited as *JS*); E. C. Wines, *The State of Prisons and of Child-Saving Institutions in the Civilized World* (Cambridge, Mass.: University Press, 1879), 111-112. Matthew Mancini warns that accepting contract and lease practices for what they proposed to be obscures the fact that they were in actuality, very similar. He suggests that contract labor, supervised by state officers, was still a system of exploitation and abuse. However, the evidence suggests that in South Carolina, the switch to the contract system did largely improve prisoner conditions. See Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 20.

Directors was "instructed . . . to hire or work the same [convicts] on farms in healthy locations and which are exempt from danger of overflow."²⁶

Talbert immediately began to revamp prison operation according to Tillman's wishes. He started by contracting the convicts at fixed wages instead of on a share basis. He also leased for twenty-five thousand dollars annually the institution's newly constructed dam and hydroelectric plant on the Congaree River to the Columbia Electric Street Railway, Light and Power Company. In addition, during Tillman's first year the state finally purchased a large prison farm. Talbert sent many of the convicts from the penitentiary to work on this plantation in Sumter County, known as the DeSaussure Place. By the end of 1892, it was clear that the Tillman-Talbert strategy was improving the penitentiary. In 1891 the Board of Directors reported that convict labor had resulted in revenues of \$25,922; the report for the following year showed earnings of \$39,681. The DeSaussure Place produced ample amounts of corn and cotton for market together with vegetables for internal consumption. In a single year, the penitentiary's revenue from labor alone increased by over thirteen thousand dollars. Notably, this spike in income did not result from budget cutbacks. In 1892 expenditures on food increased from \$13,232 to \$17,169, while funds for clothing climbed dramatically as well, from \$542 in 1891 to \$2,334 in 1892. The House's Committee on the Penitentiary praised Superintendent Talbert and Governor Tillman when it reported in 1892 that "the institution [was] well kept and in excellent condition, . . . more than self sustaining, . . . [and that] the health of the prisoners, for the past year, has been unusually good and the death rate considerably less than that of previous years."²⁷

Despite the seeming success story, cries of corruption soon followed. In 1891 Narciso G. Gonzales charged in the *Columbia State*—a newspaper created specifically to denounce Tillman—that some prisoners were claiming they had insufficient food, clothing, and medical care. If the governor refused to look into the matter, Gonzales proclaimed, then it would prove that he had a "flexible and adjustable conscience." The Board of Directors investigated for several months and exonerated prison managers of any

²⁶ JS, 1890, 90; *Acts and Joint Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of South Carolina, Passed at the Regular Session of 1891* (Columbia, S.C.: James H. Woodrow, State Printer, 1892), 1080–1081 (the *Acts and Joint Resolutions of the General Assembly* is hereinafter cited as AJRGA); JS, 1891, 15–16; *Journal of the House of Representatives of the General Assembly of the State of South Carolina, Being the Regular Session Commencing November 22, 1892* (Columbia, S.C.: Charles A. Calvo Jr., State Printer, 1893), 16–17 (the *Journal of the House* is hereinafter cited as JH).

²⁷ The revenues and expenditures for the penitentiary are itemized in JS, 1891, 14–15, and JH, 1892, 16–17. The confirmation of the penitentiary's contract with the Columbia Electric Street Railway, Light and Power Company is in AJRGA, 1892, 94–95, and JH, 1892, 411–112.

misdeeds. The inquirers concluded that inmates were not lacking in any essentials, especially the quality or quantity of their food. They noted the significant decline in the death rate as well, which suggested the effectiveness of the Tillman administration's reforms.

In 1890, the last year of Conservative rule under Governor Richardson, the penitentiary's death rate peaked at 13.1 percent, representing 111 deaths in a prison population of 846. After four years of Tillman and Talbert's leadership, the death rate had dropped to 4.8 percent, with only fifty-one deaths out of a prison population of 1,042. Board chairman T. J. Cunningham asserted in his report that "the Board never at any time had occasion to find fault with . . . [Superintendent Talbert's] management of the institution." Upon Tillman's departure from office, he too praised Talbert: "While I do not take any credit to myself for this altogether creditable showing, as a part of the Reform administration, the present Superintendent and Directors of the Penitentiary can well challenge comparison with their predecessors and merit the well done of the people."²⁸

Tillman's reforms should not be confused with either single-minded humanitarianism or compassion for criminals. Curbing prisoner abuse and enhancing overall welfare eventually made more productive workers. What is more, Tillman did nothing to change the justice system that meted out long sentences to petty offenders and resulted in a prison population that was well over 90 percent African American. However, it seems evident that improving the health and treatment of the convicts was a goal in itself. The quest for efficiency primarily guided Tillman's actions. By decreasing corruption and promoting what modern politicians would call "transparency" while bettering prisoner treatment, Tillman shared some characteristics of early Progressive leaders. Within that framework, though, he also was drawing a line of distinction between previous Conservative leaders and his own administration: he employed convicts as a tool of the active state machinery, not a cheap labor pool for private businesses. Whether prisoners worked at Clemson and Winthrop or on state-owned farms, their labor under the Tillmanist government primarily benefited the state, not railroads and other corporate interests as it had during Reconstruction and the Conservative period.

While the penitentiary represented an undesirable, albeit necessary, expense to the public, one "advantage" to operating the prison was that it was full of workers who could earn at least a modicum of revenue. The South Carolina Lunatic Asylum did not have the same advantage. The

²⁸ For Narciso Gonzalez's critiques of Tillman and Talbert, see "To Governor Tillman," *State* (Columbia, S.C.), June 13; "Beginning to Sour on the Governor," *ibid.*, June 22, 1891. Improvements to the institution are detailed in: *JH*, 1891, 38-39; *ARSCP*, 1892, 4-6; Neal, "Benjamin Ryan Tillman," 237-238; *JS*, 1894, 47.

asylum in nineteenth-century America held a different position in the public mind than the penitentiary. Asylum patients were to be pitied, not despised like prisoners. For many reformers, the asylum was an important symbol of modern civilization. Historian Peter McCandless points out that in South Carolina, the asylum was "as much an expression of civic pride as of humanitarian, medical, or social-control arguments." Nevertheless, as an institution that required public funding—in a state where money was scarce—it suffered many of the same problems that plagued the prison.²⁹

Lawmakers established a mental hospital several decades before they approved the penitentiary, but the Lunatic Asylum materialized more from the efforts of tireless promoters and good timing than the legislature's benevolence. Since colonial times, local officials had faced the challenge of dealing with insane citizens whose families could not provide for their supervision. Parish courts often ordered a "lunacy commission" to investigate cases in which an insane person's property needed to be protected.

²⁹ Peter McCandless, *Moonlight, Magnolias, and Madness: Insanity in South Carolina from the Colonial Period to the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 40–41. See also Barbara Bellows, "Insanity Is the Disease of Civilization": The Founding of the South Carolina Lunatic Asylum," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 82 (July 1981): 263–272. Even though "Lunatic Asylum" seems not only outdated but also offensive, it is historically accurate. Therefore, it will be used frequently in this discussion. Replacing the nineteenth-century name of the institution with a modern, politically correct one would be anachronistic. Historiographical trends and interpretations have changed over time regarding the study and treatment of insanity. In the first half of the twentieth century, several scholars portrayed the creation of lunatic asylums as symbols of humane and modern progress. See Albert Deutsch, *The Mentally Ill in America: A History of Their Care and Treatment from Colonial Times* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1937); Gregory Zilboorg, in collaboration with George W. Henry, *A History of Medical Psychology* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1941); Franz G. Alexander and Sheldon T. Selesnick, *The History of Psychiatry: An Evaluation of Psychiatric Thought and Practice from Prehistoric Times to the Present* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966). In the 1960s and 1970s, revisionist scholars attacked the previous view, insisting that mental hospitals and mainstream psychiatry were regressive and even cruel, and mental illness itself was a construct of the power structure intended to control and imprison people whose actions society deemed as outside of the realm of sanctioned normality. See Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961); Thomas S. Szasz, *Ideology and Insanity: Essays on the Psychiatric Dehumanization of Man* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970); R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise* (New York: Penguin Books, 1967). Gerald N. Grob believes that neither of these views is sufficient. Instead, he contends that asylums were ever changing according to contextual politics and social ideas. Hence, they were never either totally hospitals or completely prisons, but changed based on sociopolitical climates and historical variables. See Grob, *Mental Illness and American Society, 1875–1940* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983). For a thorough exploration of the historiography of insanity and institutional treatment, see McCandless, *Moonlight*, 1–11.

These commissions sometimes appointed legal guardians to ensure that the person in question did not squander his or her own assets and become a burden on the parish. However, the most common interaction that the colonial government had with the mentally ill was through the poor law.³⁰

Colonial South Carolina's poor law stipulated nothing regarding the mentally ill, but insanity routinely impoverished the afflicted. The assembly enacted the first colony-wide poor law in 1695 to assist citizens incapable of supporting themselves, including "the sick, lame, impotent, old, blind, and such other persons being poore." Then, in 1712 Carolina lawmakers embraced the English model and transferred responsibility for poor relief to individual parish vestries. Poor-law officers distributed money, food, and medicine to paupers in their own homes, a system known as "out-door relief." In 1738 the first example of "indoor relief" began when the tax-supported Charleston Work House opened. Although its conditions compared favorably to many contemporary institutions, the mentally ill intermixed in cramped quarters at the Work House with what one critic described as "rouges, vagabonds . . . drunkards, common night walkers, [and] pilferers."³¹

In the early nineteenth century, an alliance of upper-class physicians, attorneys, educators, legislators, and social reformers campaigned to found a state lunatic asylum. Invigorated by the initial waves of the Second Great Awakening and informed by French physician Philippe Pinel's writings on humane treatment (or "moral management") of insanity, South Carolina activists led by Colonel Samuel Farrow sponsored legislation to found an asylum in 1809 and 1813. Two years after these unsuccessful attempts, Farrow, a Revolutionary War veteran from Spartanburg, apparently relinquished his seat in Congress to lead the effort in the South Carolina General Assembly. A staunch Calvinist, Farrow reminded fellow legislators of man's innate depravity, insisting that the state was obligated to act as moral custodian for its citizens. Through modern, humane treatment, Farrow contended, a state hospital could rehabilitate those "curable" patients and protect other "hapless victims themselves from the dangers of life and from the selfish contempt of our unruly world." His obsessive devotion to the cause led one colleague to remark that whenever the asylum opened, Farrow "ought to be the first inmate."³²

Notwithstanding the ardor of its devotees, the asylum movement never gained mass appeal. Moreover, after the Panic of 1819, politicians in Columbia abandoned a brief frenzy of spending on internal improvements that had followed the War of 1812. Prospects for the asylum appeared

³⁰ McCandless, *Moonlight*, 19–20.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 20–21.

³² Bellows, "Insanity Is the Disease," 263–236, 270; McCandless, *Moonlight*, 41.

to have suffered a serious setback when Farrow lost his seat in the state House of Representatives in 1820. However, a Harvard-educated legislator from Charleston, William Crafts Jr., immediately assumed leadership of the cause in the state senate. Capitalizing on a momentary economic upswing, Crafts, a longtime advocate for public schools and education for the disabled, ensured the passage of an asylum bill in 1821 through what one observer described as rhetorical "zeal and earnestness." South Carolina became only the second state, after Virginia, to establish a publicly funded hospital for the mentally ill. Unfortunately for asylum proponents, the celebration would not last long. As the agricultural economy again slumped, so too did legislators' will to fund a new institution. According to historian Barbara Bellows, "the Asylum was conceived in the spirit of enlightened philanthropy and optimism, but was born into a world dominated by retrenchment and fiscal conservatism." Indeed, seven years passed before the hospital received its first patient, a young girl from Barnwell. By then, both Farrow and Crafts were dead.³³

Over the next few decades, the number of patients increased significantly, but state funding failed to keep pace. During multiple trips to South Carolina in the 1840s and 1850s, the country's most famous advocate for mental health care, Dorothea Dix, told asylum leaders that the legislature's provisions for the insane lagged behind those of any other state she had personally witnessed. In 1847 head physician Dr. Daniel H. Trezevant began a decade-long campaign to relocate the asylum outside of Columbia's city limits. One reason was Trezevant's adoption of contemporary theories that insanity could be treated or cured within a stable, ordered environment away from the chaos of the modernizing world. Another more practical reason was that the building in Columbia had simply run out of space. Governor John H. Means agreed with Dix and Trezevant.³⁴ In 1852 he implored the General Assembly to address the asylum's worsening conditions:

The buildings are now not only full, but crowded. . . . They are altogether too much confined either for the comfort of the patients, or the degree of exercise which might conduce to their final cure. . . .

. . . All must feel it to be the duty of a State to provide for that unfortunate class of our fellow creatures who have been deprived of reason. Yet none can feel that duty with the degree of intensity which their helpless and deplorable situation demands, but those who have been brought in contact with them. I am sure, if you all could be eye witnesses to their sufferings, you would feel yourselves called upon by every consideration of humanity and Christianity, to place within their reach all the means that

³³ McCandless, *Moonlight*, 45–46; Bellows, "Insanity Is the Disease," 264, 267.

³⁴ Dorothea Dix to Francis Lieber, June 23, 1850, box 2, folder 34, Francis Lieber Papers, 1808–1969, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia.

science has discovered for their cure, and to make your Institution not merely a prison house, but really an Asylum.³⁵

In spite of Means's plea, the assembly approved no significant appropriations for the asylum in the 1850s. The situation worsened, of course, when the state seceded and mobilized for war. During the Civil War, the asylum, like the population at large, struggled with material scarcities, inflation, and mounting debts. Unlike southern families, though, asylum officials also bore the burden of first housing Union prisoners of war and later sheltering hundreds of South Carolinians fleeing General William T. Sherman's army. One Yankee soldier commented on the "numerous doleful sounds" emanating from the asylum's packed patient wards.³⁶

The Civil War nearly destroyed the asylum, and it fared little better during Reconstruction. Despite the insistence of postbellum Democrats that Republican corruption—instigated by nefarious carpetbaggers, scalawags, and inept African American legislators—lay behind the state's overall desperation in the 1870s, much of the asylum's problems could be traced to the war, continuing economic depression, and decades of neglect. In 1870 Republican governor Robert K. Scott, noting that thirty-one out of 322 patients had died the previous year, declared that the Lunatic Asylum, "which, at its establishment stood at the head of similar institutions in this country, has entirely lost that proud pre-eminence, and now lags lamentably in the rear." Still, whether through "misrule," lack of resources, or the urgency of other priorities, Governor Scott and other Reconstruction leaders made no notable improvements to the asylum. Besides appointing Superintendent Joshua F. Ensor, whom even Democrats acknowledged as honest and highly competent, Reconstruction-era Republicans deprived the asylum of desperately needed appropriations. After the Redemption campaign of 1876, Conservatives carried on that trend.³⁷

³⁵ JS, 1852, 22–23.

³⁶ McCandless, *Moonlight*, 216.

³⁷ JS, 1870, 44–45. The earliest history to condemn South Carolina's Reconstruction government was James S. Pike, *The Prostrate State: South Carolina under Negro Government* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1874). Dorothea Dix echoed Pike's claims that black South Carolinians in the state legislature had debased proper government. See Francis Tiffany, *The Life of Dorothea Lynde Dix* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1890), 352. These views became crystalized and widely accepted through the writing and teaching of William A. Dunning. See Dunning, *Reconstruction: Political and Economic, 1865–1877* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1907). In the 1960s and 1970s, revisionist historians posed serious challenges to the Dunning school of thought, arguing that African Americans and white Republicans were no more corrupt than the vast majority of American legislators of the Gilded Age, and they produced many positive improvements, especially for formerly enslaved southerners. For specific revisionist studies of South Carolina,

Wade Hampton and subsequent Conservative leaders made little effort to alleviate asylum deficiencies. They preached retrenchment at the same time that the asylum's situation grew more acute. Emancipation had exacerbated overcrowding by opening the doors to many African Americans whose mental issues previously had been "managed" within the plantation system. Predictably, the burden of overcrowding fell heaviest on African American patients. Black men resided in a wooden building separated from the main structure, and in 1881 the superintendent found it necessary to "construct a cheap, single story lodge for the colored women." In many instances, two black women occupied rooms that were designed for a single patient. The superintendent informed Governor Hugh S. Thompson that "the danger of fire is a source of constant anxiety." To be sure, African American patients received inferior housing compared to whites, but no patient was spared the misery of overcrowding and outdated facilities.³⁸

During each year of Conservative rule, spending on patients decreased significantly. In 1876 the per-capita cost had been \$202. By 1888 that number dipped to \$137. In an effort to persuade the legislature to approve new appropriations, the asylum's Board of Regents drew up a list of comparative spending for state asylums across the country. South Carolina expenditures were well below the annual average per-capita figure of \$158 in the southern states and far behind the \$295 averaged in New England. Due to the meager funding, asylum officials were forced to cut back on staff and put capable patients to work in the laundry, kitchens, and sewing rooms. During the 1880s, female patients produced almost all of the clothing for the resident population. Conservative leaders actually applauded the cutbacks. Governor Richardson boasted that for only thirty-seven cents a day, each patient was provided "food, lodging, clothing, light, fuel, washing, medicine, and medical attention." This was significant, he added, because the asylum housed a population that was "peculiarly destructive." Richardson stated that in contrast to the Reconstruction government, "there can be no possible ground for the charge of extravagant management." Conservatives never reversed the decreasing trend in per-capita funding for the asylum, and sadly for the patients, neither would the Tillman administration.³⁹

Although the legislature never increased per-capita expenses during Tillman's tenure, the new governor did correct serious defects in the hospi-

see Thomas Holt, *Black over White: Negro Leadership in South Carolina during Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977); Joel Williamson, *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina during Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965).

³⁸ *Fifty-Ninth Annual Report of the South Carolina Lunatic Asylum for the Fiscal Year 1881-82* (Columbia, S.C.: The Asylum, 1882), 12, 21 (Annual Reports of the South Carolina Lunatic Asylum are hereinafter cited as ARSCLA); *ibid.*, 1887-88, 12-13.

³⁹ *JS*, 1890, 35-36; ARSCLA, 1887-88, 15, 17.

tal's administration and system of admission. In addition, state government approved funding of one hundred thousand dollars for general upkeep of the main hospital building, one thousand dollars to improve the sanitary conditions of the bathrooms, and \$150 for the asylum's library. Tillman did not call for cutting allotted funds, which he contended was "about one-fifth of our entire State expenditure." Instead, he envisioned a different strategy for caring for the state's mentally ill, which he maintained society must do "for the sake of humanity." Tillman concluded that two points were certain: "(1) There are people in the Asylum who ought not to be there because they can be more economically supported elsewhere; and (2) A change should be made in the law so as to require each County to support its own insane." Tillman's proposal would ease the asylum's overcrowding and cut expenses by shifting needy but harmless individuals to county homes or poorhouses. Under the Tillman plan, the state could provide more than adequate care for the remaining patients, without increased appropriations or higher taxes.⁴⁰

Tillman faulted the system on two other points as well. First, he insisted that many patients who were capable of paying for their care were actually living off of the state because their families had taken advantage of the patient's property. The law read that "lunatics who have property shall be supported out of the income therefrom." Tillman said he knew of cases in which family members had taken the property of patients, while "the County Commissioners whose duty it is to prevent it, have either been imposed upon or have winked at the wrong to please some friend, and curry favor with an influential voter." The next problem was the procedure for assigning members to the Board of Regents. At the time, all six regents were appointed simultaneously for six-year terms, at the expiration of which they were replaced by a new group. Tillman complained that this was an inefficient practice because there was no chance of "injecting new blood into these important administrative positions" during their tenure. Also, there was the risk of "abrupt change" when replacing the entire board.⁴¹

During his first year in office, the only measure that Tillman was able to pass addressed the structuring of the Board of Regents. On December 5, 1891, lawmakers endorsed a measure that permitted the governor to reduce the board to five regents, and those individuals would subsequently draw lots whereby two would serve for two years, two would serve for four years, and one, for six years. When Tillman asked four of the regents to resign, the entire board quit. He considered this proof that they were

⁴⁰ *JS*, 1890, 86-87.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 87-88.

unwilling to help the state in needed reform. The new system ensured that the board would continuously profit from both new ideas and experience.⁴²

Replacing the asylum's top officer would prove to be Tillman's most enduring reform. In April 1891, a legislative committee began investigating serious charges of corruption and patient neglect; the source of the allegations was undisclosed. The committee interviewed several employees and found, among other "reprehensible irregularities," that one inmate had been permitted to carry a pistol. The asylum also employed this patient, referred to only as "Milne," as a carpenter and painter. Milne had a key giving him access to the entire building, including the female rooms. As reported in the committee's findings, the enabling of potentially violent inmates to mix unrestrained with the other patients had resulted in injuries and at least one death. Moreover, a number of interviewees claimed that the superintendent made only infrequent and irregular visits, and he had supplied an additional male inmate with a key to the female wards. When Tillman later learned that the armed inmate had killed one of the attendants, he recalled the committee to address the problem. Committee members Dr. T. J. Strait, a state senator from Lancaster, and Dr. H. P. Goodwin, a representative from Greenville, joined Tillman and a stenographer in conducting another series of interviews with both staff members and patients. The committee determined there had been "very lax discipline and negligence, attributable to the Superintendent, Dr. P. E. Griffin."⁴³

Repudiating all of the charges levied against him, Griffin demanded that he be given a formal hearing before the senate or the Board of Regents. On May 18, 1891, Tillman ordered Griffin to resign after he declined to defend himself to the governor in person. In July, Tillman appointed Dr. James W. Babcock to succeed Griffin as superintendent. Tillman's Conservative foes claimed that it had been his intention all along to oust Griffin and replace him with a political friend. While this may have appeared to be a legitimate complaint, Babcock's record proves that he was a highly skilled physician and genuinely concerned with running a modern and humane institution.⁴⁴

Originally from Chester, Babcock had won the highly esteemed Story Scholarship at Harvard University. He also served as an assistant physician at Massachusetts's most acclaimed mental health institution, McLean Hospital. In spite of the doctor's impressive qualifications, Tillman's appointment of

⁴² McCandless, *Moonlight*, 64; *AJRG*, 1891, 1117.

⁴³ *JS*, 1891, 12-13; McCandless, *Moonlight*, 239; "Light upon the Lunatics," *News and Courier*, April 3, 1891; "Dr. Griffin Officially Removed," *State*, May 21, 1891.

⁴⁴ The correspondence between Tillman and Griffin, which primarily took place between May 5 and May 18, was printed in "Dr. Griffin Asked to Step Down," *State*, May 19, 1891, and "Griffin and the Governor," *News and Courier*, May 19, 1891. See also "Dr. Griffin Officially Removed"; McCandless, *Moonlight*, 242.

Babcock prompted accusations of corruption and political bossism. Babcock had been in Massachusetts during the rise of the Tillman movement, but his family members in South Carolina were open Tillman supporters. *State* editor Narciso Gonzales protested that the charges against Griffin were never satisfactorily proven. James C. Hemphill of the *Charleston News and Courier* echoed Gonzales's sentiment, accusing Tillman of acting illegally in Griffin's dismissal. Tillmanites, for their part, were adamant that the dire situation at the asylum called for an immediate change in leadership.⁴⁵

While it is impossible to determine beyond doubt Tillman's personal motivations for replacing Griffin with Babcock, it seems probable that he desired to take advantage of the latter's impressive education and training at a leading northern hospital. During his administration, Tillman willingly adopted other "progressive" programs that he deemed successful. This was the case with the controversial dispensary, which Tillman modeled on similar schemes in Gothenburg, Sweden, and Athens, Georgia. While he realized that the South Carolina asylum could not reach the funding level of McLean Hospital, Tillman believed that the former could benefit from implementing the latter's programs of operation. Babcock was no political puppet either. Indeed, he argued against Tillman's plan to send many patients to county facilities, a measure that never passed. Moreover, Tillman had no reason to malign former Superintendent Griffin or invent accusations. He had summarily replaced the penitentiary superintendent, Thomas Lipscomb, with no concomitant scandal.⁴⁶

Superintendent Babcock proved to be more than qualified for the position. Dealing with the same scant funding that had bedeviled his predecessor, Babcock fundamentally improved operations by establishing a nurse-training school structured on principles of modern health care. He found the proficiency of the present nursing staff to be wholly inadequate. Before Babcock's appointment, the asylum had no system of education or training for the people who cared for patients. In 1891 Babcock established the South Carolina Lunatic Asylum Training School for Nurses, a two-year program that would prepare nurses especially in the care of patients with mental afflictions. The school's charter expressed its intent to train students in the following practices:

The general care of the sick, the managing of helpless patients in bed, in moving, changing bed and body linen, making of beds, etc.; giving baths, keeping patients warm or cool, preventing and dressing bed sores;

⁴⁵ McCandless, 244; "Dr. Griffin Asked to Step Down"; "Off with His Head," *State*, May 21, 1891; "The Asylum Investigations," *News and Courier*, May 22, 1891; Neal, "Benjamin Ryan Tillman," 236.

⁴⁶ ARSCLA, 1894-95, 14. For discussions of the South Carolina Dispensary, see Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman*, 234-261; Neal, "Benjamin Ryan Tillman," 328-354;



Early-twentieth-century postcard view of the campus of the South Carolina State Hospital for the Insane, formerly known as the South Carolina Lunatic Asylum, from the intersection of Elmwood Avenue and Bull Street. Originally called the "New Asylum" and later the "Male Asylum," the building in the background was constructed in four phases between 1857 and 1885. It was eventually named in honor of Governor Benjamin R. Tillman's appointee as superintendent of the Lunatic Asylum, Dr. James W. Babcock, who held the position from 1891 to 1914. From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston.

bandaging, applying of fomentations, poultices and minor dressings; the preparing and serving of food, the feeding of helpless patients and those who refuse food; the administrating of enemas and the use of the catheter; attendance upon patients requiring diversion and companionship; the observation of mental symptoms, delusions, hallucinations, delirium, stupor, etc.; and the care of excited, violent, and suicidal patients.⁴⁷

In the first year of the school's operation, the Board of Regents commended Babcock's initiative and foresight. The twenty-three students gave "every evidence of securing to the Asylum and to the State more skilled and efficient nurses." By 1895 officials stated that the training school had proven "each year to be not only a benefit, but a necessity to the proper care of the insane." The training school laid the foundation for what Tillman

John Evans Eubanks, *Ben Tillman's Baby: The Dispensary System of South Carolina, 1892-1915* (Augusta, Ga.: Tidwell Printing Supply Company, 1950).

⁴⁷ ARSCLA, 1891-92, 75-76.

and Babcock envisioned the asylum would become, a modern institution that was no longer a black mark on the state.⁴⁸

Overhauling the negligent management of the hospital, including the laxity that had led to alleged rapes and a death at the hands of a pistol-packing inmate, also proved a major challenge. To rectify the slipshod oversight, Babcock implemented a detailed catalog of rules and regulations. The new list of procedures contained guidelines and proscriptions of behavior for every asylum employee, from the superintendent to the laundry attendant. Babcock's rules clearly stressed that heedless supervision of employees would no longer exist. All nurses and attendants would be subject to frequent inspection and surveillance, and failure to comply with the new rules would result in immediate termination. Under the preceding administration, several male employees and even inmates had unrestricted access to the female wards, a problem that Babcock specifically addressed:

No male employee shall visit the wards of the women's department, nor any female employee the wards of the men's department except by special permission. Any work in the women's department requiring a male employee must be reported by the Matron, and will be provided for by direction of the officers. When assistance is required in the management of difficult or intractable patients, the Assistant Physician of the department in which it occurs must be applied to, and he will render the necessary aid and direct the proper course to be pursued.⁴⁹

Additionally, Babcock emphasized the necessity of treating patients with kindness and respect in every section of the rules manual. All of the superintendent's reports expressed the idea that concern for the patients' welfare, happiness, and recovery should guide the asylum's procedures.

As he left office, Tillman declared that the penitentiary and the asylum were "both in a better condition, as regards their buildings, sanitary arrangements and their entire administration, than ever before in their history. It is no vain boast to say that they will compare favorably with any institutions of their class in the United States." The latter claim may have been wishful thinking, but the former rang true. Neither facility emerged as a paragon of enlightened modernity during the Tillman era. Both still suffered from insufficiencies of space and funding. Even though Tillman appropriated significant funds that improved the physical structures, the state's per-capita allotment to wards of each institution continued to rank among the lowest in the country. Tillman's reforms were not revolutionary, but they

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 66; *ibid.*, 1894-95, 7.

⁴⁹ *Rules and Regulations for the Government of the Lunatic Asylum of South Carolina, Compiled by the Superintendent and Adopted by the Regents* (Columbia, S.C.: Presbyterian Publishing, 1891), 11, 12, 17.

were transformative in the sense that the fundamental operations of each establishment had been remarkably altered. The asylum's budget did not increase, but the governor did introduce essential changes that dramatically elevated the skill and efficacy of employees and the treatment of patients. In doing so, he capitalized on the education and talent of an individual who had been molded by pioneering universities and hospitals in the North. Tillman's actions proved to be much more reformatory than anything the Conservative regime ever attempted.⁵⁰

Likewise, the penitentiary, which had stagnated under Conservative control, benefited greatly during Tillman's tenure. The contract system resulted in fewer cases of abuse and a much lower death rate. The new state farm and the upgrading of cell blocks meant greater revenues and increased supplies of food and clothing as well as improved living conditions. In addition, because the prison farm generated these new funds, Tillman could honestly tell voters that he had trimmed the penitentiary's percentage of state expenditures. Yet as in the case of the asylum, reform to the penitentiary only went so far. A truly enlightened reformer might have challenged laws that targeted African American men and sentenced them to lengthy terms for minor offences. While Tillman did issue pardons for individual blacks at times, in no way did he seek to make the justice system more racially equitable.

Nonetheless, the Tillman administration's penal reforms definitely marked a significant divergence from its Conservative predecessors. Whereas Conservatives readily exploited the prison population for the sake of enticing corporate investors, Tillman used the penitentiary to promote the state government and hopefully reduce the financial burden on white taxpayers. The changes he instigated may not have directly affected many of his core constituents, but they were important symbols of the health of the state machinery as a whole. The state, for Tillman, was a vital tool in maintaining social order, offsetting the volatile force of markets, and boosting the status of white producers. If the new public colleges, the strengthened Railroad Commission, the dispensary, and state authority over monopolies were to function as Tillman desired, then the state itself must be cleansed. The Lunatic Asylum and the penitentiary had been lesions on the state's body—so long as they continued to fester, they would limit the state's influence in multiple capacities. From Tillman's point of view, by correcting abuses in state institutions, he was attempting to shore up the state's "moral authority," which the Conservatives had done much to undermine. That said, though, Tillman also made permanent consignment of African Americans to muddisill status a primary objective for his "morally

⁵⁰ *JS*, 1894, 45.

sanctioned" state. Ironically, it was this very reasoning that obscured his more laudable measures as governor in the eyes of modern observers and sealed his legacy as one of moral bankruptcy.