

Wade Hampton, III Biography

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Biography

Wade Hampton III (1818-1902) was a Confederate general, South Carolina governor, and U.S. senator. In the 1880s he dominated politics in his native state.

Wade Hampton III was descended from a prominent South Carolina family. Born on March 28, 1818, in Charleston, he graduated from South Carolina College. He took up law studies briefly but abandoned them for the life of a planter and became a typical antebellum Southern aristocrat, with large land-holdings, many slaves, and several terms in his state's legislature.

With the coming of the Civil War in 1861, Hampton raised and commanded the elite "Hampton's Legion." Although he was wounded in action several times, his valor and determination brought him steady promotion. By 1865 he was a lieutenant general. By war's end he was commanding all cavalry in Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Hampton was an expert horseman and renowned for his physical strength. An associate described him as "six feet in height, broad-shouldered, deep chested, ... with legs which, if he chose to close them in a grip, could make a horse groan with pain."

After the war Hampton encouraged Southerners to accept their defeat graciously. He set an example for better race relations by constructing a school and a church for emancipated slaves. He also led in advocating civil and political rights for freed slaves.

Hampton spent the Reconstruction period on his Mississippi plantation, meanwhile serving as vice president of the Carolina Life Insurance Company. In 1876 he ran for governor of South Carolina against the incumbent, Daniel Chamberlain, a Maine carpetbagger (a Northerner seeking private gain under the Reconstruction). Whites banded together behind Hampton and simultaneously wooed and coerced African American votes. More ballots were cast than there were voters; each side claimed victory and installed rival legislatures. The intervention of President Rutherford B. Hayes in 1877 finally enabled Hampton to begin his 2-year term in office.

Hampton was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1878 and served for 13 uneventful years. From 1893 to 1897 he was U.S. commissioner of railroads. He died on April 11, 1902, in Columbia.

Historian Douglas Freeman wrote of Hampton: "To strangers he was reserved though always courteous, the gentleman as surely as the aristocrat; with his friends he was candid, cordial and free of any suggestion of the Grand Seigneur."