

Wade Hampton III

James O. Farmer Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Farmer, James O. Jr. (2008) "Wade Hampton III," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol10/iss1/21>

Review

Farmer, James O., Jr.

Winter 2008

Ackerman, Robert K. *Wade Hampton III*. University of South Carolina Press, \$39.95 hardcover ISBN 9781570036675

The Life of Wade Hampton

Born in 1818 and living to see the turn of the twentieth century, Wade Hampton III epitomized the generation of natural leaders who helped define the antebellum southern aristocracy, led it manfully to its denouement at Appomattox, and tried to will its resurrection by political warfare against Yankee rule, only to be rudely cast aside by the demagogic leaders of the white masses. Scion of a family whose history reads like the many fictional southern sagas it has helped inspire, classically educated and a natural outdoorsman, he cut just the right figure to move easily in the society his ancestors had helped to create. As the Civil War neared his plantations were earning him as much as \$200,000 annually and he represented Richland County in the state House of Representatives. A progressive on several issues in the 1850s, including public education and popular election of presidential electors, his moderation is seen in his opposition to precipitous secession in 1860. Yet when war came he unhesitatingly volunteered, and largely outfitted a regiment, the Hampton Legion, from his own resources. As a cavalry commander in the Army of Northern Virginia, he rose steadily and took command of all of Lee's cavalry in the summer of 1864, following the death of J.E.B. Stuart. He ended the war as one of three Confederate Lieutenant Generals who had not attended West Point, commanding the defense of his state's capitol and resisting Sherman's march into North Carolina.

After a period of absence from South Carolina as he tried unsuccessfully to revive his Mississippi holdings, Hampton returned to lead the redemption of his state from the white nightmare of radical reconstruction, winning the governorship in 1876 in the most hotly contested campaign in the state's history. Grateful for the support of a portion of the black voters, he promised, and to

some extent delivered, a moderate administration, disdaining the extreme racial bigotry symbolized by his 1876 ally General Martin W. Gary, and instead adopting a relatively benign white paternalism. Reelected in 1878, he was quickly elevated to the United States Senate, serving in lackluster fashion until he was forced into retirement by newly elected Governor Benjamin Tillman in 1890. By then he was a genteel dinosaur in an age of rigid Jim Crow and rowdy politics. At his death in 1902, thousands paid their respects to one who had symbolized both the nobility and the detached traditionalism of his class and time.

Robert K. Ackerman has written the best biography of Hampton we are likely to have, especially considering the loss of most of Hampton's personal papers in three fires. Readers primarily interested in Hampton's military career may prefer Edward G. Longacre's book. Another recent work, Walter Brian Cisco's biography, is fuller, and an enjoyable read, but somewhat lacking in interpretation and too reverent. Ackerman's work is an old fashioned life and times study, strong on context, unencumbered by theoretical blinders or axe grinding, and displaying both a careful scholarship indicative of long hours in the archives and a clear perspective made possible by the passing of time. His cautiousness, and his somewhat stodgy style, may frustrate readers wanting bolder assertions and more colorful prose, but others will appreciate the careful reliance on available sources and the resulting circumspection. A slight irritation is the recurring redundancies, suggesting the need for one more draft. Nonetheless, this book serves its subject very well.

In the opening chapters Ackerman indicates the sources of Hampton's social position, personal gifts, and political views. His grandfather Wade Hampton I, a hard-driving entrepreneur, was General Thomas Sumter's cavalry commander, a member of the state House of Representatives during the War for Independence, and the first man in Richland District (County) to plant short-staple cotton. His father Wade Hampton II was involved in varied business endeavors and was an admirer of Whig leader Henry Clay. Unlike Wade I he was also known as a kind master to his many slaves. Ackerman notes that one of Wade III's professors at the South Carolina College, Francis Lieber, was a liberal thinker who probably helped shape his views on race, and especially his opposition in the 1850s to the reopening of the African slave trade. Wade III inherited a strong constitution, a sense of *noblesse oblige*, and great wealth, but his generous lifestyle and perhaps his lack of business acumen led to mounting debts which, Ackerman suggests, placed him a bit lower in the South's economic hierarchy than is often assumed.

Ackerman treats Hampton's mature life as a valuable window on the life of his state and region in the second half of the nineteenth century, during which crucial choices were made and tragic consequences followed. Although not at first an enthusiast for the Confederacy, he soon embraced the cause and offered to form a multi-purpose regiment, the Hampton Legion. This distinctive unit would not survive the reorganization of the Army of Northern Virginia following the Seven Days battles, but Hampton would emerge as an effective, if not flashy, cavalry leader. Ackerman considers Hampton's performance as a cavalry commander the greatest success of his life, but adds that he was sometimes resentful of others, especially General J.E.B. Stuart, and somewhat petulant regarding rank, apparently because as a non-West Pointer he was considered an amateur among professionals. He proved himself in the battle of Seven Pines, where half of his men were casualties and he received a serious foot wound but refused to leave the field. Ackerman approvingly quotes General Gustavus Smith, who wrote after that battle that Hampton had few equals and perhaps no superior in coolness and ability as a leader of men. He shows Hampton's sense of honor with his comment after the peninsula campaign that none of my name need be ashamed of me (36, 35).

With rifled weapons rendering cavalry charges obsolete in the Civil War, the army relied on Hampton's forces as their eyes and ears and in raiding behind enemy lines. Hampton led several successful raids, including the celebrated September 1864 beefsteak raid in which almost 2,500 cattle and 304 prisoners were taken. He favored the use of the saber, a weapon falling into disrepute generally, and showed its effectiveness at Brandy Station and on the third day at Gettysburg, where men under his command repulsed an attack by Union General George A. Custer's cavalry. Despite his annoying propensity to ignore the chain of command and make suggestions directly to Lee, Hampton continued to gain respect, and shortly after Stuart's death at Yellow Tavern he was made commander of all of Lee's cavalry. He showed his worth in defending Lee's right flank against Grant's repeated assaults in the march on Richmond, but Lee released him to return to South Carolina when Sherman's forces entered the state in early 1865. Ackerman notes his undoubted frustration at not having a command until the middle of February when he was promoted over Joseph Wheeler. By then it was almost too late to be of use in his state's defense. Relying on Marion Lucas's account, Ackerman finds sufficient excuses to largely absolve Hampton of responsibility in the debacle at Columbia. The burning of several Hampton homes, on top of the loss of a son and several other dear ones,

seems to have intensified his hatred of the enemy. He continued to fight to the bitter end, and was willing to go beyond what most saw as the end.

Although Hampton was out of his home state for most of the next decade, trying futilely to restore his property in Mississippi, Ackerman devotes a chapter to the drama of Reconstruction in South Carolina to set the stage for the state's redemption. Here, as throughout, he displays an even hand as he explores the performance of the radical governors and legislators, the political corruption that doomed the fusionist strategy, and the pugnacious straight-out Democratic strategy of Martin Gary. He reveals greater complexity than most students of this episode, acknowledges charges of Hampton's complicity in the Red Shirt campaign's seamier side (which he rejects), explores the question of how many black voted for Hampton, and shows how federal forces and president-elect Hayes contributed to Hampton's victory amid the chaos following the 1876 election. Breaking with Gary, Governor Hampton embarked on a relatively color-blind racial policy that, Ackerman suggests, might have saved blacks from untold misery and the state from more than a half century of mindless white supremacy. In this he agrees with Hampton Jarrell's 1950 book, *Wade Hampton and the Negro: The Road Not Taken*. But this study is considerably more insightful and nuanced than that work, and Ackerman points to the limits of Hampton's racial moderation as well as the fact that he was hopelessly outnumbered concerning race.

The reader who ponders these things longs for access to the inner thoughts of the man, and Ackerman does his best to suggest them. In addition to all available manuscript sources, he used newspapers, the accounts of contemporaries, and secondary works, to flesh the story out. But even with limited access to the inner man we see here that he was a tragic figure, suffering personal losses, aspiring to more than he could achieve, but facing life stoically and struggling heroically to do what he deemed his duty.

James O. Farmer, Jr., is the June Rainsford Henderson Professor of Southern and Local History at the University of South Carolina Aiken. He is the author of The Metaphysical Confederacy: James Henley Thornwell and the Synthesis of Southern Values and articles on the woman suffrage campaign and early civil rights movement in South Carolina, and the Civil War reenactment hobby, among others.