

Benjamin Ryan Tillman Papers

Ms 80

Repository: Clemson University Libraries Special Collections
Dates: 1767-1950
Extent: 44.5 cubic feet
Creator: Benjamin Ryan Tillman
Language: English

Biographical and Historical Note

Benjamin Ryan Tillman (1847-1918), governor and U. S. senator, was born in Ropers, Edgefield County, South Carolina on Aug. 11, 1847. He was the son of Benjamin Ryan and Sophia (Hancock) Tillman, grandson of Frederick and Ansebell (Miller) Tillman, and great-grandson of George Tillman. His father was a farmer. Benjamin R. Tillman was educated at home under tutors and at public school in Liberty Hill, South Carolina. In 1864, he was stricken by an illness that resulted in the loss of his left eye.

In 1866 and 1867 he managed an unsuccessful farm in Florida. After his marriage in 1868, he returned to Edgefield County to farm the family plantation for the next twenty years. For some time he was a member of the Sweetwater Saber Club, a local military company, and from 1884 to 1890 he was captain of the Edgefield Hussars, another militia group. In 1876, with the former group, he took part in the Hamburg riot across the Savannah River from Augusta, Georgia. Some two weeks later, he was involved in the Ellenton riot in which many blacks were killed.

The riots brought Tillman into closer contact with political matters, and he began to write for agricultural papers regarding the needs of farmers in South Carolina. He stressed that the farmers had been defrauded and that they were not receiving a scientific and practical education at the State College. In 1885, before the South Carolina State Agricultural and Mechanical Society and State Grange at Bennettsville, South Carolina, he made a speech in which he advocated establishing an experimental farm, turning South Carolina College (later the University of South Carolina) into an actual agricultural institution. He advocated placing more farmers on the board of trustees of that institution, enlarging the South Carolina State Board of Agriculture, and establishing farmers' institutes.

His campaign on behalf of the farmers led to the Farmers' Movement in South Carolina. In 1886, that movement took form as the Farmers' Association. It adopted a platform demanding the founding of an industrial school for women and a separate agricultural college. In November of that year, the Winthrop Training School for Teachers was organized in Columbia, South Carolina. In 1887, the state legislature voted an appropriation for the support of one scholarship from each county, an event that marked the beginning in South Carolina of aid to the education of women.

The quest for an agricultural college then became Tillman's principal aim. In 1887 he was instrumental in persuading Thomas G. Clemson to modify his will so that after Clemson's death his estate would be used for an agricultural college. After Clemson died in 1888, the state

legislature accepted the bequest, and Clemson Agricultural and Industrial College (later Clemson University) was established in 1889.

Invited to run for governor of South Carolina in 1888, Tillman refused the offer, but in 1890 he accepted the reform-group nomination and was elected to office on the Democratic ticket. Re-elected in 1892, he remained governor until 1894, the year in which he was elected to the United States Senate, where he served until his death on July 3, 1918.

At the South Carolina Constitutional Convention of 1895, he was chairman of the committee of suffrage that framed the article providing for an educational and property qualification for voting, a measure that eliminated most of the black vote.

One of the notable acts of Tillman's career as governor was the establishment in South Carolina of the direct primary system for naming candidates for election. Another measure enacted during his tenure was the Dispensary Law under which the state took over the manufacture and distribution of alcoholic beverages. In the beginning the law enriched the state financially, but later the management of the dispensary fell into corrupt hands, bringing the institution into disrepute. Further achievements of Tillman as governor included the assessment of taxes on railroads and other corporations and the victory of the courts in compelling the assesses to make payment; the refunding of the state debt, which saved \$78,000 a year in interest; and the election, by the public, of railroad commissioners.

Soon after Tillman entered the Senate, he was placed on the committee on naval affairs. As a member of that committee one of his major efforts was to compel the manufacturers of armor plate to sell the product to the government at reasonable prices. In 1902 he conceived the idea of a great navy yard of the Atlantic coast in the South, and his quest was realized when such a station was established in Charleston, South Carolina.

In 1906, when Tillman was a member of the committee on interstate and foreign commerce, the Republicans on the committee disagreed among themselves as to which individual should handle the Hepburn Rate Bill on the floor of the Senate. Rather than see certain members of the Republican faction placed in charge, several Republicans joined with Democratic members and placed Tillman in charge. This was one of the first instances in which a member of the minority party was given the task of handling important majority legislation.

The later years of his career in the Senate, when he was chairman of the committee on naval affairs, were concerned with his interest in strengthening the U. S. Navy, and among the successful projects in which he was involved were the arrangements for the construction of submarines.

From 1896 to 1908 his services as a speaker were sought by managers of lecture bureaus, and for six months in 1907 he spoke almost daily. The demand on his time, coupled with his senatorial duties, brought on a paralytic stroke in 1908. After that he retired from public speaking.

He was married in Elbert County, Georgia, Jan. 8, 1868, to Sallie, daughter of Samuel C. Stark of that place, and had six children: Adeline; Benjamin Ryan; Margaret Melona, who married

Charles Sumner Moore; Henry; Sophia, who married Henry W. Hughes; and Sallie May, who married John Shuler. Benjamin R. Tillman died in Washington, D. C.

This biographical essay was based largely on an entry in *The National Encyclopedia of American Biography* 60, p.147-149. See also *Dictionary of American Biography* IX, p. 547-549.

Scope and Content

The Benjamin Ryan Tillman Papers has twelve series. The Papers consist primarily of material from the years when Tillman served as Governor of South Carolina (1890-1894) and then U.S. Senator (1895 - 1918). It includes substantial amounts of routine correspondence related to speaking engagements for the years prior to Tillman's stroke in 1908, requests for pensions, requests for help by individuals seeking jobs, and letters from citizens on a wide variety of subjects which they wished to bring to the Senator's attention. Mixed in with this correspondence are substantive matters related to South Carolina and national politics, the development of Clemson and Winthrop Colleges, and the personal life of the Tillman family.

Several later accessions have been incorporated into the Tillman Collection. The photographs series now includes accession 73-2. The Thach donation (79-4) has been incorporated into the oversize series. There are separate series for the material (85-66) which Ms. Pat Kohn donated and of which Ms. Mary Tillman Snead permitted the libraries to make copies. A Tillman autograph book given to Senator Strom Thurmond and donated to Special collections in accession 93-15 has been placed in the P.U. Series.

The Kohn, Snead and Benjamin Ryan Tillman, Jr. series represent a small portion of the collection, but contain important information regarding Tillman and his family. They contain material apparently not available to Francis Butler Simkins when he wrote his biographies of Tillman. The Benjamin Ryan Tillman, Jr. Series also contains a draft of an unpublished biography of Tillman written by his son.

There are also a series of scrapbooks, photographs, stenographer's notes and extracts from the *Congressional Record*. The series are not complete, but do provide a good overview to Tillman's public career. There are approximately four hundred photos in the photograph series. Tillman and family members are the primary subject. There are several related to Tillman's visit with Thomas Alva Edison and to Clemson College.

Oversize material has been separated from the collection and placed in map files and oversize boxes. This oversize series includes about twenty scattered issues of newspapers from South Carolina, 1833-1893. It also includes early documents such as deeds from Edgefield County, South Carolina and Habersham County, Georgia; records of the Tillman, Pickens and Dugas families; and a variety of business papers.

Benjamin Tillman Jr. also donated his book collection to the Clemson Library at the time of his death in 1950. The majority of the collection has been added to the Library's circulating collection although there are a few items in Special Collection. There are copies listing this collection in the donor and reference files in Special Collections.

Arrangement

In the collection's three main series, Outgoing, Incoming, and PU, the papers are arranged in strict chronological order within the series. The original arrangement of the collection included categories for fragments of letters, and undated material. Some documents that were not strictly correspondence were placed at the end of dated material in the Incoming, Outgoing, and PU series. The original box and folder numbers are listed as well as the current numbers. During the reprocessing of the collection, a variety of items on deteriorating paper were photocopied. A separate file of "bad paper" items was kept for awhile. This file has been discarded although some items have been returned to their proper place in the collection.

Material in the Kohn, Snead, and Benjamin Ryan Tillman, Jr. series are organized as subject files and chronologically within each folder.

Custodial History

The papers of Benjamin Ryan Tillman have a somewhat unusual history. During the early 1930's, Dr. Robert L. Meriwether convinced Benjamin Tillman, Jr. to deposit his father's papers at the University of South Carolina's Library. The papers apparently had been stored in the carriage house at the Tillman home at Trenton, South Carolina for a number of years. These records were supplemented by other materials which Tillman received from a Mr. McCain and then passed on to Meriwether. For a while, Meriwether stored the papers at his home until facilities were available to house them at the University of South Carolina.

The University of South Carolina organized the papers during the late 1930's according to standard archival practices of the time. The original organization of Tillman's files, if one existed, was replaced by chronological arrangement of series of incoming and outgoing correspondence. A third major group of records, primarily incoming correspondence from the 1890's, was apparently acquired at a later date. These were housed in boxes labeled "P-U", an abbreviation for "Personal Papers, Unprocessed". All of these records were stored in kraft folders and cardboard boxes. Other parts of the collection include scrapbooks, photographs, and miscellaneous printed material.

The papers were open to researchers and the historian Francis Butler Simkins used them to write two books about the life of Benjamin Tillman. These works motivated Benjamin Tillman Jr. to attempt to write his own biography of his father. For this project, he turned to the University Library and would occasionally borrow material to use in his research. In 1947, Tillman, Jr. decided that he wanted to have his father's papers transferred to Clemson College because he was then living in Clemson. The collection was removed from the University of South Carolina and placed in the Clemson Library. In 1947, Tillman also indicated that Clemson College would become the owner of his and his father's papers upon his death.

In 1983, the Cooper Library at Clemson received from the University of South Carolina's Caroliniana Library one box of material which Mrs. S. Tucker McCravy had given to the Library. Mrs. McCravy's mother, Mrs. Robert Gordon Thach (née Douschka Pickens Tillman) had received the material from her father, Benjamin Tillman Jr. This box apparently included items which Tillman Jr. had borrowed from his father's papers as well as some of his own papers. In 1984, two boxes of envelopes which had been separated from the rest of the Tillman

Collection were transferred from the Caroliniana to Clemson. In 1985, Pat Kohn, a great-granddaughter of Benjamin Tillman, donated approximately one hundred letters which she had gathered from relatives. In 1986, Mary Tillman Snead, granddaughter to Tillman, permitted approximately seventy-five letters to be photocopied.

Restrictions

There are no restrictions on the use of this collection beyond those of Clemson University Libraries Special Collections and those dictated by United States Copyright Law.

Administrative Information

Work on refolding the collection began in 1982 under the supervision of Jan Bzdyl and continued through 1987 under the supervision of Jan Gambrell. Parts of this register were prepared by Jan Gambrell in 1987 with further work done by Michael Kohl in 1989 and 1990. Karen Bates supervised the creation of the finding aid in 1990. Jennifer Bingham revised the finding aid and James Cross made an addition to it in 2010.