

North Carolina: The Point Zero One Percent

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Introduction

In May of 1861, one hundred and twenty white men, 0.01% of the population of North Carolina, signed a secession declaration which moved the state into the U.S. Civil War.

They believed it necessary to join the other southern states which had already seceded. They also believed that the Federal government would not make a strong commitment to maintain the Union and that, if it did, the Federalists (the North) would not win. They were wrong, and their decision to sign had dramatic consequences. The Federal government did fight to keep the country unified in a war which lasted five years and killed more Americans than all of America's other wars combined. The latest and most comprehensive scientific study concludes that the war killed 752,000 people in total, and perhaps as many as 851,000. *(1)*

When the war ended, North Carolina and its allied states were in ruins. The signers lost wealth and power, but they regained much of it when they were allowed to keep much of their land and to lease the farmland to sharecroppers (their former slaves). The social and economic consequences of their decision to sign are still evident in the United States more than a century and a half later.

The signers—racial, political, and economic demographics

The 120 men who voted to secede controlled the future of a state population of more than almost one million. They constituted 0.01% of the population. On a per capita basis, each was signing for the future of 8,272 people. Although the signers were white men, more than a third of the state's residents were black, and most of those were slaves.

North Carolina population, 1860 (2)

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>
White	629,942	63.5%
Slave (black or mulatto)	331,059	33.4%
Free colored	30,463	3.1%
Indian	<u>1,158</u>	<u>0.1%</u>
Total	992,622	100.0%

The North Carolina Constitution of 1776 was in effect, with an 1835 amendment which had taken away the right of free non-white men to vote. (3)

Only some white men could vote or hold state office. In 1860 less than 15% of the state's entire population consisted of white men over the age of twenty; these men could vote only if they were 21 or older, owned at least fifty acres of land (to vote for state senators), and had paid public taxes (to vote for state representatives). The remaining 85% of the population couldn't vote at all. This included slaves (almost one-third of the population), any free men who were not white, women of any race, anybody under the age of 21, or poor white men. A white man had to own at least fifty acres of land to be able to vote for state senators, and have paid public taxes to vote for state representatives. Thus, less than one of every seven residents could vote.

Even fewer residents could be elected. Eligibility required owning land—at least three hundred acres to join the state Senate, one hundred acres for the House of Commons.

Wealth was concentrated in slave-owners, mostly in the eastern half of the state in agriculture, logging, and industry. Statewide, three of every four families did not own slaves. Almost 97% of the state's total population consisted of people who did not own slaves or who were themselves enslaved. There were many poor whites—it was difficult to earn a living. Slaves were available for unskilled manual labor, and many slaves worked for their owners, or were rented out, in skilled jobs.

Slave-owners essentially ran the state, and most of the state's residents had no voice in the secession decision. Still, secession was still a controversial subject, so the General Assembly decided pass responsibility for the decision to a special convention of more than one hundred county delegates. Larger slave-dependent counties had multiple delegates, and some delegates were assigned to speak for more than one county. They were, overwhelmingly, men who depended on slavery for their wealth. Together, they unanimously decided that North Carolina would secede. A majority vote by the convention on a motion denied the state's small base of voters a chance to ratify (or oppose) the decision to secede.

The signers—conscription, fighting, and survival

As the war began, legislation made all healthy white men between the ages of 18 and 35 subject to conscription into the Confederate Army. As the war continued and the death toll rose, the age limit was raised to 45. State officials and large land/slave owners remained exempt from conscription, however.

Eighty-six percent of the secession signers never enlisted to fight for secession. Sixteen of the secession signers were of service age but only two joined up, as officers. Fifteen older signers also joined the officer ranks.

The average mid-19th century American could expect to live for a bit over forty years, but 96% of the signers exceeded that. Almost half reached seventy, and one in five lived into their eighties or nineties. Eleven lived into the twentieth century. Of the seventeen signers who joined the fight, two were wounded and five died.

Forty thousand North Carolinian soldiers died from combat, wounds, or disease—27% of the state's army, or one of every four white men age 18-45 in the state. Some volunteered and many were conscripted, even though most didn't own slaves, couldn't run for office and, often, couldn't vote. More soldiers from North Carolina died in the Civil War than from any other state, and the Civil War killed more North Carolinian soldiers than all of America's other wars put together.

We could, thus, say that each of the 120 signers of North Carolina's secession declaration is directly tied to the deaths of 333 soldiers from his state.

Despite the unsuccessful deaths of forty thousand soldiers, the secession signers were, and are, memorialized at one of the state's most significant public sites—the flagship place of higher learning, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Secession signers Battle, Manning and Ruffin each have a building named for them.

Pettigrew Hall is named for the brother of a signer, and Venable is named for a relative of Abraham Venable, a Granville County signer.

Fifteen other buildings are named for slave-owning families, including Avery, Caldwell, Carr, Davie, Gerrard, Mangum, Manly, Mitchell, Murphey, Person, Phillips, Smith, Spencer (named for Phillips' daughter), Swain, and Vance (for Zebulon Vance, the state's governor during most of the war).

Sources

- (1) Hacker, J.D. 2011. A Census-based count of the Civil War dead. *Civil War History*, Vol. 57, No. 4, pp. 307-348.
- (2) U.S. Census, 1860.
- (3) North Carolina Constitution of 1776.