
Few, if any, North Carolinians can equal Josephus Daniels (1863-1948) in length and level of leadership in the public affairs of the state and nation. As owner and editor of the Raleigh *News and Observer*, he transformed a small, struggling newspaper into the most politically influential in the state. A forceful advocate of early twentieth-century Progressive causes, including public education, women’s suffrage, prohibition, and anti-trust laws, he was also a no-holds-barred leader of white supremacy forces in the post-Civil War South. He served two presidents in key administrative positions in Washington and was appointed by a third to a sensitive ambassadorial post. Although a quasi-pacifist, as Secretary of the Navy during World War I he led the rapid development and deployment of a two-ocean navy. An outspoken anti-imperialist, as Secretary he directed a numerous American military interventions in Latin America.

Such a complex, multi-faceted life, with so many prominent contradictions and inconsistencies, would give pause to any would-be biographer—and has, until now. With *Josephus Daniels: His Life & Times*, by Lee A. Craig, Alumni Professor of History and Chair of the Department of Economics at North Carolina State University, we finally have a thoroughly researched, engaging story of a man “arguably the mightiest man in North Carolina following the white supremacy campaigns of 1898 and 1900.” Daniels would remain a dominant public figure for the rest of his life.

Born in 1862 in “Little Washington” in eastern North Carolina, Daniels grew up with few economic advantages. Family connections helped his widowed mother secure appointment as postmistress in Wilson in 1866. This exposed young Josephus to the leading citizens of the community, since the front room of the Daniels family home served as the post office for the next sixteen years. Bright and inquisitive, Josephus listened to the locals argue politics and discuss public affairs and eagerly skimmed the out-of-town newspapers that arrived each morning. In 1878, he co-founded his own weekly, an ambitious first step for a sixteen-year-old. But soon his ambitions turned to Raleigh, where in 1894, he achieved his dream, ownership of the *News and Observer*, the capital city’s leading daily.

Daniels was an innovative, even transformative, figure in American journalism, Craig argues. He was among the first newspaper publishers outside a few big cities to recognize the importance of separating news coverage from editorial content. Strong community news would draw subscribers even if they disagreed with editorial stances. As his papers’s circulation figures grew, so did Daniels’s wealth. By 1914, he was clearing about two million dollars a year in today’s money.

Through his newspapers, Daniels became an increasingly influential figure in state politics. Determined to end Republican power, which he felt was corrupt and an impediment to economic and social progress, he and his allies targeted African American voters, nearly all of whom voted
Republican. Appealing to racial prejudice in inflammatory, provocative language which at times justified violence, he led Democrats in uniting most whites behind them in the elections of 1898 and 1900. Because of the statewide influence of his *News and Observer* and his leadership of the Democratic Party, Craig believes that Daniels “more than any other individual was responsible for the disenfranchisement of the state’s African American citizens.” Craig also makes the case that Daniels, as Secretary of the Navy, was a key figure in the emergence of the United States as a modern naval power, successfully challenging ages-old traditions and a rigid hierarchy against strong resistance.

*Josephus Daniels: His Life & Times* is a story well told of an individual notable in the history of North Carolina and the nation. It would be an appropriate acquisition for academic and larger public libraries in the state.

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