12-2015

Sons of Dear Old Clemson: An Examination of Clemson University's Most Influential Founding Fathers

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SONS OF DEAR OLD CLEMSON: AN EXAMINATION OF CLEMSON UNIVERSITY’S MOST INFLUENTIAL FOUNDING FATHERS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
History

by
Sally Mauldin
December 2015

Accepted by:
Dr. Alan Grubb, Committee Chair
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ABSTRACT

This thesis is designed to determine the roles played by three different men in the founding of the Clemson Agricultural College of South Carolina: Thomas Green Clemson, Richard Wright Simpson, and Benjamin Ryan Tillman. It examines primary sources generated by each man and attempts to reconstruct the events of the fall of 1886 through 1918 to validate the claims of Simpson and Tillman of their roles in realizing Clemson’s dream of founding an agricultural and mechanical college following Clemson’s death in 1888. Each played a vital role in the founding and establishment of Clemson College and derived much personal satisfaction from their parts in the school’s existence. Tillman has traditionally been credited with the founding of Clemson University due to his involvement in the passage of the Act of Acceptance while other equally important individuals, particularly Simpson, have been largely ignored in favor of Tillman and his personal version of events. This work attempts to find the truth and properly recognize the actions and accomplishments of each man.

This study also serves to explicate the related historiography to better understand how memory choices made in the years following Tillman’s death in 1918 have influenced popular recollections of the founding and early years of Clemson College. While prevalent thought in the Clemson community teaches that Clemson University would not exist without Ben Tillman, this is, in my view, only a partial truth. In reality, Clemson University owes its founding and survival to several individuals, chief among them Thomas Green Clemson as the benefactor, Richard Wright Simpson as the brilliant
legal scholar, and Benjamin Ryan Tillman as the enthusiastic advocate. Without any of
the three, Clemson University would not exist as it is known today.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to every man and woman who chooses to follow the dream of Thomas Green and Anna Clemson and matriculate at Clemson University. Through their generosity, the Clemsons have nurtured the talents of countless individuals who have positively impacted the state of South Carolina. Their selflessness is an inspiration to all who have found “something in these hills.” In death, Thomas and Anna finally realized their greatest hope of filling the acreage of Fort Hill with smiling children, a palpable thirst for knowledge, and a breath of new life into tired land.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the members of my thesis committee for the hours you spent reading drafts, elucidating my ideas, and guiding me on my quest to find historical truth. You inspired and challenged me beyond what I thought was possible. I would also like to thank the entire Clemson University Special Collections staff for their assistance in sorting through over a century’s worth of letters and documents. To all Clemson University employees, students, alumni, and friends who took an interest in my research, thank you for making this labor feel relevant. Finally, I would like to thank my husband for his support and encouragement throughout the entire process. He lent me courage when I needed it most.
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CHAPTER ONE
THE WILL OF THOMAS GREEN CLEMSON

THE PLAYERS

...history ought not be written until one hundred years
have elapsed since the event. ¹ –Richard Wright Simpson

Over 130 years ago, Thomas Green Clemson drafted a will with the help of his
attorney and financial advisor, James Henry Rion. It included provisions for the
establishment of a scientific institution at his home and was part of a dream he and his
deceased wife, Anna, had shared to improve the lives of farmers in South Carolina
following the destruction of the Civil War. Unsatisfied with the original will, Clemson
sought the input of several individuals to revise it to better reflect his wishes and ensure
its acceptance by the state. Among others, his counselors included Benjamin Ryan
Tillman and Richard Wright Simpson. Both men were named in the will as original
successor trustees for the institution, and both claimed to have influenced Clemson’s final
will, chiefly through discussions they had at a meeting at Clemson’s home, Fort Hill, in
1886. Upon Clemson’s death, both Tillman and Simpson fought their respective battles to
ensure that Clemson’s final wishes would be carried out despite legislative and legal
challenges. While their relationship was contentious at times, with Tillman taking center
stage over Simpson, theirs was a necessary partnership resulting in the oft-wished for
outcome.

What would later become Clemson University began as a few hundred acres and a
plantation house owned by the Calhoun family. Anna Maria Calhoun’s marriage to

¹ Quoted by William S. Morrison, History of Old Pendleton District (Anderson, SC: Oulla Printing &
Binding Company, 1913), 3.
Thomas Green Clemson in 1838 was the first step in more than a lifetime’s worth of hopes, dreams, and maneuvers to turn the land in upstate South Carolina into an agricultural college. Clemson, a Philadelphian, spent his life researching and writing about the benefits of promoting agriculture throughout the United States, even serving as the U.S. Superintendent of Agricultural Affairs from February 3, 1860, until the Civil War caused Clemson to resign his post to fight with the South. The native Northerner moved to the South following his marriage to Anna Calhoun, the daughter of political heavyweight John Caldwell Calhoun, a former United States Vice President. In doing so, Clemson chose to live as a Southerner and stood by his decision, following the South into the Civil War and remaining in South Carolina until his death in 1888.

He played a part in the founding of what would become the University of Maryland, so the idea of creating a state agricultural college in South Carolina was not his first foray into alternative education as a means of improving the economy and the lives of those involved. His “exact part in the founding of Maryland Agricultural College is unclear” although Clemson’s friend, Charles Benedict Calvert, was “largely” responsible for the establishment of Maryland Agricultural College. Following the utter decimation of the Civil War, Thomas and Anna both saw scientific education as a way to better the state’s situation and ease the suffering of many citizens. In a letter to his attorney dated April 27, 1883, Clemson explains his desire and its impetus:

I have long been convinced that nothing contributes so much to the advancement of a people in civilization as a knowledge of the natural sciences and their

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application to the practical uses of life and it is my sincere desire to aid in such a laudable object by founding at Fort Hill a Scientific Institute embracing the following departments or schools namely a department of Mathematics, a second department of Geology and Mineralogy with especial reference to the art of Mining, a third department of Chemistry as applied to Agriculture and the useful arts, lastly a department of Modern Languages….I hope I do not exaggerate the importance of such an institution in developing the material resources of the state…

Clemson saw potential in war-ravaged South Carolina and was determined to use the assets at his disposal to put his practical knowledge into action.

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4 Thomas Green Clemson Letter to James Henry Rion, April 27, 1883, Folder 21, Box 5, Thomas Green Clemson Papers, April 1864 – December 1886, Mss 2, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
It is important to note that Anna shared her husband’s dream, fulfillment of which would not have been possible without her family’s land at Fort Hill. Catherine D. Cornish testified in 1889 that Mrs. Clemson spoke to her about her wish to donate the land at Fort Hill to the state of South Carolina for the purpose of an agricultural college for the “benefit of the young men of the State as a fitting monument to the memory of her son.”

The Clemsons’ son, John Calhoun, died in a tragic train accident on the Blue Ridge Railroad in 1871. Cornish went on to testify in the court case surrounding the will that Mrs. Clemson “stated she desired such disposition to be made of Fort Hill property very ardently and very emphatically.” It was certainly a strong choice of verbiage, meant to underscore the fact that the Clemsons shared a dream.

Anna was unequivocally the favored child of her father. She traveled with him to Washington, D.C. and exchanged letters with him frequently until his death in 1850. Throughout the testimony acquired in multiple depositions, the image painted by neighbors and friends of Anna and of her wishes rarely changes. In fact, Reverend H. W. McLeae stated that he spoke to Anna about Fort Hill directly:

She wished it to go to the State of South Carolina for the purpose of founding a college for Agricultural instruction. She said that the boy part of the population of South Carolina suffered very much from want of knowledge, that they could not help themselves very much without it. That it was the oft repeated expression of

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5 Testimony and Evidence, Folder 20, Box 1, Floride Isabella Lee, By Her Next Friend, Gideon Lee, Complainant, Against Richard W. Simpson, Defendant, 1889 in the Circuit Court of the United States, for the Fourth Circuit-District of South Carolina: Documents, 1856 – 1894, Floride Isabella Lee Documents, Mss 256, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.

6 Holmes and Sherrill, Thomas Green Clemson, 32.

7 Testimony and Evidence, Folder 20, Box 1, Floride Isabella Lee, By Her Next Friend, Gideon Lee, Complainant, Against Richard W. Simpson, Defendant, 1889 in the Circuit Court of the United States, for the Fourth Circuit-District of South Carolina: Documents, 1856 – 1894, Floride Isabella Lee Documents, Mss 256, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
his father John C. Calhoun that we should educate the boys, and that after they
had grown old enough to go to college they could educate themselves. During her
lifetime there was an effort made to start such an institution on Fort Hill. The
annexed circular was issued during her lifetime, with her knowledge and
approval.8

His testimony points to several extraordinary facts. It is unusual that Anna was so
involved in efforts to begin a college before her death. While it is accepted that she stood
by her husband and supported him in the dream to found a school, this testimony would
suggest that Anna played an active role in the early days of gaining traction for the idea.
For a woman to be so innovative is not unusual; for a man to recognize a woman’s
intellectual prowess and respect her opinion was highly unusual in 19th century South
Carolina. Thomas Green and Anna’s father, John, were exceptions as he wrote his
daughter in 1831, “I am not one of those, who think your sex ought to have nothing to do
with politics.”9 Both her father and her husband sought Anna’s advice and confidence,
and the testimony of McLeae illustrates that Anna was not simply deferring to her
husband’s wishes. She was actively engaged in formulating plans for meaningful
progress in South Carolina.

However, Anna was not to live to witness her dreams realized. She died
unexpectedly in 1875, and her will left her holdings at Fort Hill to her beloved husband.
This was not the first tragedy to strike the Clemson patriarch and his wife; the Clemsons
buried three children in their lifetimes – first, Cornelia in December 1858; then, Floride
in July 1871; and finally, John Calhoun in August 1871. It is these facts that set the scene

8 Testimony and Evidence, Folder 20, Box 1, Floride Isabella Lee, By Her Next Friend, Gideon Lee,
Complainant, Against Richard W. Simpson, Defendant, 1889 in the Circuit Court of the United States, for
the Fourth Circuit-District of South Carolina: Documents, 1856 – 1894, Floride Isabella Lee Documents,
Mss 256, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
9 Quoted by Holmes and Sherrill, Thomas Green Clemson, 15.
for a grief-stricken, elderly, and quite lonely Thomas Green Clemson on the eve of his great benevolence – a sizeable bequest of land and money to the state of South Carolina for the purposes of founding an agricultural and mechanical college.

Without any family save a grandchild in New York, Clemson found himself occupying Fort Hill almost entirely on his own except for the companionship of his loyal housekeeper, Mrs. Prince, and her daughter. It was this environment that Richard Wright Simpson walked into in 1886. Simpson acted as Clemson’s attorney and his most trusted advisor in the last years of the recluse’s life. Simpson was well educated, a practicing Methodist, and a Confederate veteran.10

A resident of nearby Pendleton, Simpson had the geographical proximity to witness the birth of the revolutionary idea of Clemson College. In a biographical sketch of Thomas Green Clemson published in 1897, Simpson wrote of the “long time the writer was intimately associated with him” and explained that he had the “privilege…to visit him frequently during the last two years of his life.”11 Of the other contributing founders of the school, Simpson is perhaps the only one who can boast of such a close relationship. He went on to characterize his dearly departed friend and employer:

I was his confidential attorney and managed all of Mr. Clemson’s affairs for two years preceding his death. I visited him once every week, and spent the day with him and he lived the life of a dignified, heart broken hermit.12

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11 Biographical Sketch of Thos. G. Clemson, Folder 7, Box 1, James Corcoran Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, South Carolina.
12 Thomas G. Clemson by Col. R.W. Simpson, Folder 7, Box 1, James Corcoran Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, South Carolina.
In the days before automobile travel, even a three and a half mile trip to Fort Hill once a week for two years would have required quite a commitment to Clemson on Simpson’s part.

Simpson kept a diary of his visits to Clemson from October 1887 until April 1888. His notations include bills paid on Clemson’s behalf and the health and spirits of Clemson on each visit. In one entry, he wrote, “All this is extra to what I promised Mr. Clemson to do for him. I would not mind it so much if he did not undo my work as fast as I did it. I get so worn out with the great amount of labor and the strain on me I sometimes wish I had never undertaken his business.”\textsuperscript{13} Clemson kept Simpson quite busy and was a somewhat difficult personality for whom to work. Yet Simpson continued to visit the gentleman faithfully until his death.

\textit{Richard Wright Simpson. Photo, Series 100, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.}

\textsuperscript{13} Richard Simpson Diary, Box 1, Richard W. Simpson Papers, Mss. 96, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
The number of hours he spent with the higher education visionary was substantial and certainly worth consideration when exploring which of the individuals around Clemson had the most impact on the final outcome of Clemson’s will. Clemson himself stated that Simpson “had been kind to him and had assisted him in caring for his business when he ‘had no other friend to help.’” With Clemson directly acknowledging Simpson’s involvement in his affairs and the affection he held for him, it becomes even more perplexing why someone so close to Clemson personally and professionally would be deemed largely as a secondary person of interest in the history of the university.

Simpson’s father is also a figure of note when examining his son’s involvement with Clemson. It is evident from Ernest McPherson Lander’s 1989 book, *The Calhoun Family and Thomas Green Clemson*, that familial relationships were important to South Carolinians in the 19th century. Lander explores the complex relationships within the Calhoun and Clemson families and makes it clear that both families valued and tended to conduct business with relatives or old friends when at all possible. Knowing how prized relationships were to Clemson makes information regarding Simpson’s father pertinent.

Richard F. Simpson made his home near Pendleton, where he had a farm, although he came originally from Laurens, South Carolina. An alumnus of South Carolina College, he had served as a lawyer, a soldier, and as both a state and congressional legislator. It is also important to note that R. F. Simpson signed the Ordinance of Secession of the State of South Carolina. This fact demonstrates that he was

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14 The Story of the Clemson Bequest, Folder 27, Box 2, James Corcoran Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
deeply involved in politics and must have possessed a clear understanding of the inner workings, needs, and wants of his home state. In 1866, at the time Clemson served as president of the Pendleton Farmers’ Society, Simpson was selected to serve on a special committee along with Clemson and W. A. Hayne. The committee’s charge was to “appeal to their fellow men for aid to found an institution for educating the people in the sciences, etc.”\textsuperscript{16} Sadly, the committee failed and a discouraged Clemson left the Society.\textsuperscript{17}

By way of background, the Pendleton Farmers’ Society emerged in antebellum South Carolina as a leader in the community on topics ranging from business to education to commerce. The Society’s primary objective was to brainstorm alternative methods of cultivating crops in order to promote soil conservation and maximize profits. In a state where farmers had to grow more to earn less each growing season, land erosion became an unavoidable problem as destitute agricultural workers attempted to eke out a living from an ever-exhausted land. It went further than that, however. The Society also concerned itself with the business of shaping model citizens in the process. As such, the Society was one of the bedrocks of the local community, and there were similar societies sprinkled through the state that operated in much the same fashion.

Immediately in the aftermath of the Civil War, it is apparent that the men of the Pendleton Farmers’ Society, with Clemson as its leader, felt strongly regarding the need for such an institution as Clemson College. In this respect, Clemson and Simpson earned

\textsuperscript{16} Holmes and Sherrill, \textit{Thomas Green Clemson}, 145.  
respect within the community by holding such positions within the Society. They were well-versed in contemporary farming methods as well as sympathetic to the farmers’ circumstances. Simpson must have been one of the movement’s strongest advocates to have been chosen by his peers as a representative and champion on their behalf. During this same time period, Simpson’s son, R. W. Simpson, became a farmer. After enduring the difficult physical labor associated with agricultural endeavors for himself, Simpson joined his father in sympathizing with the other farmers in the state. His difficulty farming the land following the war left a lasting impression on the younger Simpson.

R. W. Simpson was elected to the state legislature in 1874 and was later appointed to Governor Wade Hampton’s staff. This appointment serves as evidence that Tillman and Simpson would most likely have not been friendly toward each other as Tillman disavowed and abhorred much of the privilege Hampton and his powerful Bourbon friends stood for politically. Simpson’s position within the upper echelon of South Carolina government “convinced [him] that changed conditions made necessary a change in our educational system” and thereafter “became an earnest advocate of the establishment of an agricultural college.”

It is likely that Clemson and the elder Simpson spoke regarding the younger Simpson and his government service. It is also likely that Clemson’s friendship with R. F. Simpson led to his willingness to trust R. W. Simpson with such important legal matters several years later. The younger Simpson wrote in 1904 of Clemson’s decision to trust him over an unscrupulous neighbor:

Mr. Clemson said that he saw what this man was after that he wanted to get his hand into the fire, and told him that he knew my father Maj. R. F. Simpson and that he was the salt of the earth, and no son of his could be guilty of wrong doing, and that he would trust me absolutely…And Mr. Clemson told me afterwards that he had consulted with me and employed me solely upon the confidence and trust he had in my father.\textsuperscript{19}

If Simpson’s recollection is true, Clemson based his decision to hire Simpson from his father’s reputation. Thus Simpson’s pedigree mattered greatly to Clemson. Simpson’s experience within the administration of such an influential South Carolina figure as Wade Hampton would have also made him appealing to Clemson with his many connections, personally and professionally. It would appear that Clemson chose the perfect combination of friend, neighbor, farmer, respected member of the inner circle, and forward-thinker when he selected Simpson as his closest advisor.

The South Carolina legislature would pose perhaps the largest hurdle to the creation of the college. The state found itself poised on a precipice between its past and groups rallying for its future. The past consisted of the gentry of antebellum days, reminiscing on old glories and ways of life. Its ideology was embodied in the white politicians and planter class from the Midlands and the Lowcountry, although the upstate politicians and farmers also shared the hope to reestablish white supremacy. Into this situation came the farmer from Edgefield, South Carolina, the highly opinionated and vocal Ben Tillman. Tillman was a homegrown product, raised by a fairly wealthy family but with his own familial demons influencing his politics. His mother had borne the brunt

\textsuperscript{19} Richard Simpson 1904 Account, Box 1, Correspondence 1901-1904, Richard W. Simpson Papers, Mss. 96, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
of raising the family, which was quite a trying task considering most of his siblings met early deaths or significant legal troubles.

Undoubtedly influenced by his family’s misfortunes and poor decisions, Tillman set out for a career in farming that later became his political platform for societal change. His family had sacrificed too many young men before their time in the name of the cause of the powerful elite. He possessed an incredible vision for his home state and saw a multitude of problems caused by the antebellum regime. He feared that the situation in South Carolina during the 1870s and 1880s was nearing a re-creation of the same families who had long controlled the political interest in the legislature with little or no regard for what he considered to be the backbone of the state – the white, yeoman farmer. Tillman was equally concerned with protecting the supremacy of whites in South Carolina. During his time as governor between 1890 and 1894, Tillman set the stage for a new state constitution in 1895 with a key inclusion of “black disenfranchisement” as the “primary goal.”

Under his leadership, whites tended to favor complete segregation of African Americans, turning away from a paternalistic version of race relations in favor of something more extreme. Tillman’s feelings regarding African Americans are well-documented and are perhaps what he is most remembered for in spite of his positive initiatives for the state.

Tillman picked up on the undercurrent brewing among his peers, describing it as “great dissatisfaction among the people who believed that there was a ‘Ring’ in the state,

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21 See Walter Edgar’s *South Carolina* (Chapter Nineteen – Tillman) for a more thorough explanation of Tillman’s contributions to South Carolina.
in complete control of our politics and disposed to ignore the common or masses, and to
direct and control affairs from Headquarters in Charleston and Columbia.”

He hoped to change the future for the better for these men, so he fashioned himself into their
spokesman. He became quite popular throughout agriculturally-based communities,
speaking at meetings and appealing to small town interests. His sharp and uncensored
tongue, coupled with his quick wit and ability to manipulate any situation, quickly made
Tillman a lightning rod for the common man. Tillman relished his role as spokesman and
advocate, although he claimed that the “prominence into which I had sprung” was “by
accident rather than design.”

Tillman foresaw the need for better mechanical and more practical higher
education than what South Carolina College could offer. He viewed that institution as the
breeding ground for the upper class he so despised, and he did not believe it could be
changed enough to suit the agricultural interests of the state. In an article published on
December 3, 1885, in the Charleston News and Courier, Tillman argued that South
Carolina College could not be modified into a first-rate agricultural and mechanical
college, noting sarcastically “it would be a pity to shock the sensibilities of the remnant
of the old régime left among us by desecrating those classic halls in applying them to the
degrading uses of an agricultural and industrial school” and accused them of the “worship

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22 Benjamin R. Tillman Account of Origin of Clemson College, Folder 50, Box 3, James Corcoran
Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries,
Clemson, SC.

23 Benjamin R. Tillman Account of Origin of Clemson College, Folder 50, Box 3, James Corcoran
Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries,
Clemson, SC.
Clearly, there was little love lost between Tillman and what remained of the southern elite of the 19th century.

Tillman became a strong advocate for agricultural causes and possessed "pronounced views upon the needs of the farmers of South Carolina and the rights of which he alleged they had been defrauded." To suggest that lowly farmers had rights but also to demand those rights was a fairly novel idea for late 19th century South Carolina. Indeed, it strongly echoes national movements that would become the roots of

24 Quoted by Holmes and Sherrill, *Thomas Green Clemson*, 168.
25 Snowden’s History of SC, Folder 30, Box 2, James Corcoran Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
Populism. Tillman had little use for impractical education, and he did not mince words in his appraisal of higher education in his home state. When the legislature decided to set up a form of agricultural education at South Carolina College, Tillman wrote “they believed they had completely hoodwinked the people and successfully sidetracked those of us, who advocated the separate school.” But Tillman was not to be deterred so easily.

Whether independent of Clemson’s ideas or not, Tillman offered his own solution in letters to the News and Courier in 1885 and 1886. It is shockingly similar to that of the older statesman turned farmer. In Tillman’s own words:

I arrived at the conclusion that we needed in South Carolina a different system to that in vogue, and above all, the young men and women of this state should be trained industrially, keeping the fact in view, that the head alone, could not supply the body, but that the hands and eyes, as well as the intellect, must be trained together for the best results. I believed the false system of farming which our people had been following must be trained if there was to be any improvement in the financial condition of the Agricultural masses.

Tillman understood, perhaps as well as Clemson did, that times were changing and South Carolina needed to follow suit or be left behind to the detriment of its citizens. Thus, although the men came from different backgrounds and were of different times, each saw a similar need and worked to fulfill that need. While this is not known for certain, it is probable that Clemson saw Tillman’s letters in the newspaper and heard of his lobbying efforts through Clemson’s deep involvement with the Pendleton Farmers’ Society.

Tillman had served as a delegate to the South Carolina Agricultural and Mechanical

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26 Benjamin R. Tillman Account of Origin of Clemson College, Folder 50, Box 3, James Corcoran Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
27 Benjamin R. Tillman Account of Origin of Clemson College, Folder 50, Box 3, James Corcoran Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
Society, so it is quite plausible that while not acquainted, Clemson was familiar with Tillman, his beliefs, and his lobbying efforts on behalf of farmers. This explains why Clemson included him in the great summit at Fort Hill in 1886.

While each man played a pivotal role in the founding of the Clemson Agricultural College of South Carolina, Tillman became celebrated for his part while Simpson was relegated to the background as an individual of relatively minor importance in the tale of Clemson’s existence. With respect to Clemson University’s founding fathers, Tillman came to largely overshadow Simpson as the more important historical figure, despite Simpson acting as Clemson’s attorney, advisor, and executor of the will. Tillman is remembered over Simpson as the key individual in Clemson’s early years due to his influential political position as South Carolina’s governor and senator, his aggressive and much commented on personality and self-aggrandizing nature, and the legions of his followers throughout the state who worked tirelessly at his instruction to further his political platforms, one of which was Clemson College. And yet in spite of Tillman’s many contributions, it is Simpson who was the most important founding father of the school due to his influence on Clemson and the sheer tenacity and political agility he employed as Clemson’s lawyer to ensure the survival of Thomas Green Clemson’s bequest.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Following his wife’s death, Thomas Green Clemson became even more serious about formulating concrete plans for Fort Hill, his beloved and illustrious father-in-law’s
former home. The first draft of his will was adequate, but Clemson feared that it was too narrowly focused and would not meet the legislature’s approval. In March 1886, Clemson wrote to his son-in-law regarding his affairs that, “For sometime I have been much troubled about my affairs.”

It was at this crucial moment in the fall of 1886 that Clemson hosted a meeting of three men at Fort Hill. Those men were Benjamin Ryan Tillman, Richard Wright Simpson, and Daniel Keating Norris. It was in many ways a curious group: a politician in the making, a local lawyer and close, personal friend, and an industrial-minded farmer and businessman. Clemson’s inclusion of each played a critical role in the founding of his namesake institution. In this sense, it is essential to note, however, that what these three men Clemson invited to Fort Hill in 1886 had in common was that they had worked the land at some point in their lives so it is likely each understood the points Clemson must have made at that meeting.

There are no known records from that day in 1886. There are, however, several varying accounts from Simpson and Tillman. The two men would disagree about what happened that day for decades to follow. Each claimed to speak the truth and preserved his memories of what happened at different points through the first decade of the 20th century. This dispute would later reveal itself in other matters relating to the early years at Clemson College.

In 1901, Simpson wrote an autobiography at his wife’s request. He claimed the purpose was for his children to have it after his death. It appears to have never been

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28 Thomas Green Clemson Letter to Gideon Lee, March 29, 1886, Folder 28, Box 5, Thomas Green Clemson Papers, April 1864 – December 1886, Mss 2, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
published. Simpson explains his interest in founding an agricultural college, noting that he “never forgot the compact or resolution I had entered into with God to devote my future life to ameliorate the condition of the poor people (made in 1867).” Simpson equates his life’s labors with a promise made to God during difficult times. As such, his work and cause appear to be ordained by God Himself (at least to Simpson). Simpson claimed his work in this world was God’s work. The religious undertones throughout his autobiography point to his belief that he is merely a servant.

He writes of the opposition brewing in South Carolina at the time against an agricultural college:

And though I know that my determined and persistent purpose was the principle agency which eventually broke down and overcame this opposition, I freely admit I never could have accomplished my purpose without the help of others. When Tillman first came forth as the leader of the reform movement and called a convention, I wrote to him and urged him to drop every other proposed plank in their platform but one and that was a demand for an agricultural college. This he did and the first battle was won the majority voting for an agricultural college.

This passage illustrates that Simpson was willing to give Tillman credit when he felt it was due to him. With such a contentious relationship, respect in this manner is important. The two were civil if not cordial. While he may have disagreed with Tillman’s statements about their meeting with Clemson in 1886, Simpson acknowledged that he had needed Tillman’s influence to complete his mission of executing the will. While Simpson’s autobiography does not outright address what he believed to be Tillman’s lies, he does take a small stab at Tillman’s character:

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29 Richard Simpson Autobiography, Box 1, Richard W. Simpson Papers, Mss. 96, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
30 Richard Simpson Autobiography, Box 1, Richard W. Simpson Papers, Mss. 96, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
I think I could have secured any office if I had desired to do so. But I had not political policy. There was a time when I was offered any office in the gift of the state. But the price of it was to surrender my principles and advocate the interest of those whom I had so much opposed.31

He does not name Tillman directly, but the implication exists all the same. He rationalizes his national insignificance when compared to Tillman’s career by assuaging his mind and ego with his morals. It is a delicate balance that Simpson walks masterfully. It is also entirely possible that this was a reaction of jealousy directed toward Tillman’s national prominence over his own relative insignificance.

In just three short years, the delicate balance would forever tip the scales toward animosity. In 1904, Simpson penned what he called “A statement of the circumstances by which I was employed to write Mr. Clemsons will.” Simpson spells out his purpose in writing such an account on the cover page:

I have written this because some parties have already been trying to make it appear that they were the moving spirits in securing this bequest from Mr. Clemson. The testimony in the case…will show that Mr. & Mrs. Clemson had planned the college long before Tillman was even heard of.32

Unfortunately, no Tillman account of what transpired published during this time period has been discovered, so it is unclear what Simpson’s motivation was for penning this account. Perhaps rumors of Tillman’s boasting reached Simpson and he wished to preserve his story in his own hand, although Simpson’s account had already been preserved in his deposition fifteen years earlier. Simpson must have had some reason for this eight page handwritten account of what transpired in 1886. It appears this 1904

31 Richard Simpson Autobiography, Box 1, Richard W. Simpson Papers, Mss. 96, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
32 Richard Simpson 1904 Account of the Founding of Clemson College, Box 1, Richard W. Simpson Papers, Mss. 96, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
personal statement was never published as Tillman and Simpson remained cordial during Board of Trustees proceedings as evidenced by the minutes of that year. The 1903 minutes of the Board preceding the January 1904 account reflect no discord or apparent reason for the timing of Simpson’s writings. This is not surprising as it is unlikely that either gentleman would have wished for public discord to taint the fledgling college’s reputation with personal differences. It is likely, however, that Tillman already suspected Simpson’s disagreement with his version of events.

Indeed, Simpson’s account is full of details that have been widely cast aside in favor of Tillman’s story. Conventional thought teaches that Clemson purposely invited Tillman, Simpson, and Norris to his home for the express purpose of discussing his intentions and the contents of the will. Simpson relates a different story:

In the fall of 1886 in going from my office in Anderson to the depot, I unexpectedly met with Mr. B. R. Tillman who was also on his way to the depot. On the way home to Pendleton he told me that Mr. Clemson had written to him to come and visit him (Mr. Clemson afterwards told me that he had read of Capt. Tillman who was advocating an Agricultural College, and he wanted to see him and see what kind of a man he was, and had written and invited him to visit him at Fort Hill) and that fearful that Mr. Clemson would forget to meet him he (Tillman) had written and asked D. K. Norris to meet him at the depot in Pendleton. When we arrived there both Mr. Clemson and Mr. Norris were present to meet him. Mr. Norris insisted on Capt. Tillman to go home with him but Mr. Clemson would not hear of it, and as he and Capt. Tillman were about to enter his carriage Mr. Clemson invited Mr. Norris and myself to dine with him the next day, which we did.

This revelation, if true, completely changes widely accepted beliefs about what happened at Fort Hill in 1886. If this is accurate, Clemson had no intention of meeting with anyone

33 Conventional thought regarding the 1886 meeting at Fort Hill is described in Thomas Green Clemson (Alester Holmes and George Sherrill), Thomas Green Clemson (Various, ed. Alma Bennett), and Clemson: An Informal History of the University, 1889-1979 (Wright Bryan).
34 Richard Simpson 1904 Account of the Founding of Clemson College, Box 1, Richard W. Simpson Papers, Mss. 96, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
that day about his will. If Simpson is believed, Clemson wanted to meet with Tillman to learn more about his thoughts and role in the farmers’ movement for an agricultural school. Clemson clearly saw value in Tillman’s influence and skill set. It is also clear that Norris and Simpson were the accidents at the dinner table that day. Perhaps Clemson invited the two men to be polite or perhaps he knew they may be of value to him later. Clemson may have seen an opportunity in the serendipitous meeting at the depot and took advantage of it to discuss the larger picture of agriculture in South Carolina with three interested parties. It may never be known. However, Norris became the leader of the South Carolina Farmers’ Association, so Clemson would have been interested in his opinions regardless of running into him at the depot that day. Norris was also a member of the Pendleton Farmers’ Society, so Clemson was likely well-acquainted with him on that basis alone. It is curious that Tillman was unquestionably an intended dinner guest that evening (a man unknown by Clemson) and that Simpson and Norris were extra guests at the table (men known by Clemson). Tillman’s presence at Fort Hill meant, at a minimum, that Clemson wished to discuss agricultural politics specifically.

Simpson becomes even blunter in his estimation of what Clemson’s intentions had been later in his account:

Mr. Clemson did not invite Capt. Tillman Norris and myself to come and consult with him about his will. Our being there was an accident as far as Norris and myself was concerned. Mr. Clemson did not consult with Norris and Tillman about his will at all. Neither Tillman or Norris had anything to do with the writing of the will, or in shaping the will, not one single thing. I suggested that part of the will providing for the seven life Trustees, and Mr. Clemson named myself Tillman & Norris. I begged him to leave me out, and he threw down the paper and said he would have no will if I refused to act. I then named Col. R. E. Bowen, M. L. Donaldson and J. E. Bradley, and being unable to think of another in the other
part of the state consulted with Norris and he suggested John E. Wannamaker, whom at that time I did not know.

Neither Tillman or Norris knew anything about the will I had written until the day of Mr. Clemson’s burial, when I took Norris to my safe and showed him the will. Norris without my knowledge immediately telegraphed what I had shown him…and the next day it all came out in the papers.  

Simpson clearly states that neither Tillman nor Norris had anything to do with the drafting of the will. He also states that neither man had any input as far as the structure of the Board of Trustees was concerned. As far as his assertion that neither even knew anything about the will until Clemson’s funeral, it is possible that Simpson overstated himself. Earlier in the account, he wrote that Norris suggested Wannamaker as the final named trustee in the will. As Clemson himself signed off on each participant, Norris would have had to suggest Wannamaker to Simpson prior to Clemson’s death. Therefore, Simpson’s assertion cannot be entirely true. Norris must have known something about the will in order to advise Simpson as to a final member of the Board.

At the end of his statement, Simpson reiterates a common theme throughout his writing, “I wish it distinctly understood that neither Tillman or Norris had anything to do in inducing Mr. Clemson to employ me to write his will, nor did either one of them know what was in the will until Mr. Clemson was buried.” Again, it is unclear why Simpson chose to write this in 1904 or who his intended audience was. It is clear, however, that he believed Tillman and Norris did not deserve any credit for the idea to leave Fort Hill to the state for the purpose of establishing an agricultural school or for the contents of the

35 Richard Simpson 1904 Account, Box 1, Richard W. Simpson Papers, Mss. 96, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
36 Richard Simpson 1904 Account, Box 1, Richard W. Simpson Papers, Mss. 96, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
will itself. In this 1904 account, Simpson does not claim any responsibility for Clemson’s bequest, beyond advising Clemson and drafting the will as his lawyer.

Tillman reflected in 1909 in his version of events on his one and only meeting with Clemson. He described the meeting at some length, sharing as much as he claimed he could remember. Posterity cannot be sure of what was said at that encounter, but Tillman must have made the correct impression on Clemson. As Clemson went on to entrust his beloved Fort Hill to Tillman in part, he must have either liked his carriage and ideas or supposed he could rely on him to do whatever was necessary to create the college. Perhaps Clemson realized the need for a legislative pit bull and knew he could leverage Tillman’s ideals to his advantage. For whatever reason, Clemson put his faith in a person whom many may have thought an unlikely ally.

Tillman’s first mention of Thomas Green Clemson in this account is interesting as it explains that Clemson had read of Tillman in the papers “and thus became familiar with the subject.” The word choice by Tillman suggests that Clemson was not nearly as well-spoken or educated concerning the current status of the agricultural college movement in South Carolina as Tillman was. This statement makes a few assumptions about Clemson and Tillman’s respective stations within the movement. Tillman fancied himself the more knowledgeable of the two regarding state politics which is an interesting assumption considering that Clemson had been one of Calhoun’s closest friends and confidantes. Clemson no doubt understood the political climate he was facing

37 Benjamin R. Tillman Account of Origin of Clemson College, Folder 50, Box 3, James Corcoran Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
in attempting to bequeath his property to South Carolina as evidenced by his 1880-1882 correspondence with Simpson regarding the feasibility of carrying out his plans.

Additionally, Clemson had been an active and quite vocal member of the Pendleton Farmers’ Society for years where he had already faced an uphill battle in building support for such a school. In fact, Clemson had been a key figure in the agitation for an agricultural school in South Carolina while Tillman was still a young man. Perhaps Tillman believed he had something to offer Clemson by way of his extensive travel throughout the state and public speeches as well as his conversations with men in multiple counties. As Clemson was largely a recluse at Fort Hill by this time, Tillman may have perceived himself as the more knowledgeable of the two in 1886 by virtue of that fact alone. It is possible that Tillman meant that he was more active politically in the state at the time than Clemson, who had been in retirement at Fort Hill for several years, and was thus the more knowledgeable by the mid-1880s.

Tillman writes about the similarities between his proposal for a school and Clemson’s initial ideas, noting however that Mr. Clemson’s ideas “were not clear or well defined as to which course he would pursue but the thought of a great Agricultural and Technical Institution grew on him,” claiming that Tillman’s own “conviction of the strength of the Agricultural College idea” led him to “guarantee the State of South Carolina would accept the property.”38 It was a lofty promise and one that he kept. Within this pledge, Tillman also implied that his influence on the final outcome of the

38 Benjamin R. Tillman Account of Origin of Clemson College, Folder 50, Box 3, James Corcoran Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
will was great. By suggesting that Clemson was unsure of the agricultural path until he met Tillman, he takes a great deal of credit for the founding idea of the college. Nonetheless, it is difficult to accept Tillman’s version without a measure of incredulousness. Clemson’s interest in agriculture and scientific methods of farming prior to 1886 is well-documented, so it is unlikely that Tillman influenced the idea of the bequest itself through one conversation on its own. It is much more likely that Clemson was already planning in that direction and Tillman’s word choice in this portion of his account is simply unclear. That is, of course, assuming that Tillman is correct at all as Simpson’s previous accounts refute his entirely.

Tillman took it one step further by taking credit for other innovative features of the will. His primary goal was the establishment of the school, but he claims his influence extended beyond the mere bones of the college. He explains the history of the trustee structure:

Having in view the possible danger of the negroes, who are so largely in the majority in our State, at some time getting control of the State Government, we suggested the scheme of seven trustees, who would be self perpetuating and thus make it impossible for an adverse Legislature to shipwreck the College, or make it a school to which negroes would be admitted.

Another reason which our recent experience with the Legislature made us urge the life trustee-idea strongly, was the fear that a Board wholly controlled by political influences might warp and twist the College from its purpose and finally cause it to drift back to the ordinary literary type.

We were anxious to keep down the danger of negro domination of the school and at the same time to prevent the prostitution of the Institution to ends not intended
by its founder. None of the life trustees were known to Mr. Clemson, except the
three men who were then advising with him.39

Tillman’s statement also points to a clear mistrust of politicians among the group. It is not
surprising considering the political climate of postwar South Carolina. Everything about
the state had been left in shambles and the very nature of Tillman’s beliefs and the
circumstances regarding the farmers meant that he was destined to live out of sync with
South Carolina’s traditional aristocracy. It is unlikely that the South Carolina government
in power at the time was amenable to doing any favors for Tillman, and without the
backing of his own party it would fall on his shoulders to make himself electable. There
was no love lost between Tillman and his state’s government of the 1880s.

Clemson himself had been burned by powerful politicians and what he saw as
political chicanery earlier when he sought foreign diplomatic posts without the favor of
his father-in-law’s influence.40 His experiences left Clemson disillusioned by American
politics and distrustful of politically-minded men for the remainder of his life. Simpson,
too, must have felt the sting of rejection at some point in his rather brief political career,
occupying a position in Governor Wade Hampton’s cabinet one moment and retiring
from politics to Pendleton almost as quickly. Simpson must not have liked the political
climate in South Carolina any more than Tillman and Clemson did. As all three men

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39 Benjamin R. Tillman Account of Origin of Clemson College, Folder 50, Box 3, James Corcoran
Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries,
Clemson, SC.
40 James P. Cross and Sabine Godts-Péters. "The European Years: Thomas Green Clemson as Student,
Activist, and Diplomat," Thomas Green Clemson. Ed. Alma Bennett (Clemson: Clemson University Digital
Press, 2009). Thomas Green Clemson’s father-in-law, John C. Calhoun, enjoyed a reputation as one of the
most powerful politicians in the United States, serving as Vice President of the United States as well as
Secretary of State. Calhoun was instrumental in getting Clemson appointed as the chargé d’affaires to
Belgium, the highest United States diplomatic post in that country. Following Calhoun’s departure from
national office, Clemson became virtually unappointable to any desired diplomatic posts.
were farmers at heart, they knew firsthand of the low crop prices, worn out land, and foreclosures that beleaguered farmers like themselves throughout the state. It must have angered them when the state’s government officials insisted “that the economy was robust” and labeled those who said otherwise as ignorant. The men might have shared their bitterness at the workings of politics and commiserated together as they talked on Fort Hill’s porch. It is ironic, however, that Tillman would go on to serve the remainder of his life in public service. Each man thought, however, he could change the unscrupulous course of South Carolina politics for the better.

Tillman’s recollections bring up a number of interesting points. He states that the three advisors collectively came up with the idea of two distinct categories of trustees.

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41 Edgar, South Carolina: A History, 430.
The successor trustees would forever be outside the reach of the legislature, while the elected trustees would give the state a vote in the administration of the college. The will’s instructions were quite clear, however, that the self-perpetuating trustees would always carry the majority over any legislative influence. It is a unique idea. The question becomes whose idea it was. Tillman’s account is clear. However, Simpson’s thoughts on the trustee structure’s origins are different.

In 1909, Simpson wrote to the editor of *The State* newspaper in Columbia. It was a direct response to Tillman’s account that had been published in the same paper. His purpose for writing, he says, was to “take issue with the impressions he sought to make upon the minds of your readers, that he [Tillman] originated the idea of an agricultural College, and that he participated in the preparations of Mr. Clemson’s will.” Unlike Simpson’s previous writings, it is clear that this letter is a direct response to something Tillman wrote and subsequently published. Rather than confront Tillman privately about what he perceived as untruths, Simpson chose a very public medium to air his concerns.

As some might argue this is a minor point for Simpson to harp on, especially considering that the school had already been in operation for a number of years, Simpson may have had a couple of motives for penning this public refutation. Perhaps this account is the culmination of years of personal animosity between the two men. It is possible Simpson quibbled with Tillman over the details of the Fort Hill meeting of 1886 out of jealousy and bitterness over his comparatively low station in life. However, it is also possible that Simpson was loyal to Thomas Green Clemson and what he perceived to be

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42 Richard Simpson 1909 Letter to the Editor of *The State* Newspaper, Box 1, Richard W. Simpson Papers, Mss. 96, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
the truth for the remainder of his life. Until his death, it was important to Simpson to protect the memory of Clemson, as evidenced by his own statement in his autobiography, “This opposition was so bitter they did not scruple to assail Mr. Clemson’s character which was absolutely unimpeachable.” Simpson was referring to claims made against Mr. Clemson’s sanity in attempts to overturn the validity of the will during the *Lee v. Simpson* proceedings. However, this statement is indicative of a protective nature Simpson felt toward Clemson. The responsibility he felt toward Clemson did not die with the gentleman, as evidenced by this exchange with Tillman in 1909.

While Simpson admits that he does not “believe that Sen. Tillman seriously intended to claim all that he set out in his article,” he is plain in his estimation of what led to Clemson’s will. Simpson refutes Tillman’s claims by providing a brief history of the Pendleton Farmers’ Society’s actions concerning the possible founding of an agricultural school. Simpson traces these actions to a letter received from Clemson in the early 1880s sharing Clemson’s hope to bequeath his property to the state for these purposes. The letter has not been found, but there is a response from Simpson to Clemson’s inquiry in 1882 that survives. It is clear that Simpson was attempting to establish the fact that Clemson had come to the conclusion that an agricultural school was needed in South Carolina apart from Tillman’s influence.

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43 Richard Simpson Autobiography, Box 1, Richard W. Simpson Papers, Mss. 96, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
44 Richard Simpson 1909 Letter to the Editor of *The State* Newspaper, Box 1, Richard W. Simpson Papers, Mss. 96, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, South Carolina.
Simpson continues with a history of the initial wills of Mr. and Mrs. Clemson and the mention that their children had predeceased them. Simpson then arrives at the heart of the controversy between himself and Tillman – the formulation of the will:

About Nov. 1st, 1886 Mr. Clemson invited Sen. Tillman, Col. D. K. Norris and myself to dine with him at Fort Hill. At that time it was generally reported that Mr. Clemson intended to donate his property or a part of it, to the State for the purpose of founding a College, but no one, as far as I knew, had any certain knowledge of the fact. After dinner when we returned to the sitting room, Mr. Clemson picked up a paper, and handed it to me and asked me to read it, and see if I found any defect in it. I was surprised to find that the paper was a copy of his will (the Rion Will) in which he had donated Fort Hill and all of his property, with a few legacies excepted, to the State of South Carolina for the purpose above stated. He asked the other gentlemen to excuse him while we were carrying on this private conversation…At that time there was no discussion of the will itself. On my way back to Pendleton that afternoon I informed Sen. Tillman and Mr. Norris that the paper Mr. Clemson asked me to read was his will, and I also informed them of the contents. My recollection is that neither Sen. Tillman or any of us discussed Mr. Clemson's will, but having heard that he had such a will, we did urge him to do at once what he intended to do after his death, which he declined to do.45

Again, Simpson’s account refutes Tillman’s entirely. By the Simpson/Clemson letter exchange between 1880 and 1882, it is known that Simpson was at least somewhat aware of Clemson’s intentions, although this passage conveys that it was not known for certain. It is clear that Clemson had no intention of discussing his will with either Tillman or Norris if Simpson is correct, and Clemson went so far as to excuse them from the room for a confidential conversation. Simpson is adamant that there were no group conversations about the will with Clemson at that time. It is not surprising that Clemson would have wanted confidentiality given the subject matter; however, it is arguable that

45 Richard Simpson 1909 Letter to the Editor of The State Newspaper, Box 1, Richard W. Simpson Papers, Mss. 96, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
no attorney-client privilege existed during this meeting as Simpson, by his own admission, was not Clemson’s attorney of record at this point in 1886.

This is an extraordinarily different recounting of events than what Tillman wrote regarding the same subject matter:

I wish I had the faculty of describing the appearance of things at the old home of John C. Calhoun as it then appeared and contrasting it with what appears at Clemson College today. Col. D. E. Norris, who had been one of my strongest supporters in the advocacy of a separate Agricultural College, and Col. R. W. Simpson, met me at Mr. Clemson’s, (being invited by him to dinner), and the four of us spent nearly the whole day in talking over the new project which Mr. Clemson had in mind, and which he unfolded to us. At that time Mr. Clemson had made a will which he showed me, in which the scheme was outlined to make of Fort Hill a sort of Mount Vernon, a place of Pilgrimage for those who admired and loved John C. Calhoun and his political ideas. Col. James Rion of Winnsboro, as a I remember, was the Trustee, with a board of ladies as Regents, to be chosen by Mrs. Rion, to direct and control the property, and take of it in perpetuity.

Mr. Clemson talked over this scheme with us, and mentioned his desire to establish a Technical and Industrial School, such as I had been advocating, and gave that as an explanation as to why he had invited me to visit him…and I recall begging him to have his last years brightened and made happy watching the consummation of his cherished plan; but he was the most suspicious man in regard to lawyers and the dangers of getting involved in law suits I have ever met, and nothing we could say made any impression on him to take immediate action. But, he did accept our suggestion in regard to what disposition he should make of his property at his death and we talked the whole matter over, Col. Simpson making memoranda, as he was requested to write the will and bring it to Mr. Clemson at his earliest convenience.46

It is shocking to compare and contrast the memories of Simpson and Tillman. The two men agree that they had dinner at Fort Hill with Clemson and Norris sometime in the fall of 1886. Beyond that, the similarities cease to exist. The most obvious discrepancy is the subject matter of conversation at this meeting. Simpson says the will was not discussed

46 Benjamin R. Tillman Account of Origin of Clemson College, Folder 50, Box 3, James Corcoran Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
with Norris and Tillman, while Tillman writes that all four men talked for hours about each detail. A large portion of the animosity between the two revolves around this not insignificant discrepancy.

Something in the passage above directly refutes an earlier writing of Simpson’s and explains Tillman’s knowledge of the Rion-drafted will. Simpson initially wrote in 1904 that Tillman and Norris knew nothing at all of the will. By 1909, though, he wrote that he told Tillman and Norris about it immediately upon leaving Fort Hill. Perhaps the distinction is that he told them it existed but did not discuss its contents with either of them, respecting Clemson’s wishes and attorney-client privilege. Or he may have told them everything he saw and the reason this account differs from earlier ones is that Tillman’s published one reminded him of the conversation’s details. If believed, it explains how Tillman would have known the details he wrote about. Unfortunately, the exact dialogue from that day is lost forever. This is indicative of a larger problem found in historical statements, namely that over time the memory begins to fail and details are not as clear as they once were. This fact may account for the slight variations in wording found throughout Simpson’s writings on the subject over the years. Furthermore, the same reasoning may be applied to Tillman’s account, and memory loss and confusion should be taken into account when examining either man’s version of events.

The question is not as simple as determining which man’s memory had failed or ego had won. The key element of the debate is how influential Tillman and Simpson were on Clemson’s decisions and the final outcome – the will. If Simpson is correct and Tillman played no part in Clemson’s will, then Tillman’s claims on the founding of the
college are dealt a blow. If Tillman is correct and his influence is not overstated, then his assertions used to attain public office are sustained. Pride in legacy must also have been at stake for each man with his respective claims. So which account is correct?

The question may never be answered definitively, but there are clues within each man’s writings that point to truth. It is logical that Clemson would have asked Simpson to review the first draft of the will. Simpson was an attorney, a neighbor, a former legislator, and son of one of Clemson’s Pendleton Farmers’ Society colleagues. As an attorney, it makes sense that Simpson would have been useful to Clemson in reviewing the Rion draft of his will. Tillman himself acknowledged that Clemson did not trust lawyers, but there are reasons why Clemson chose Rion and Simpson as his attorneys. Clemson was familiar with both the Rion and Simpson families, so there was a certain level of familiarity and trust that existed amongst the men. Rion was Calhoun’s housekeeper’s son, and Simpson’s father had known Clemson well. Family connections mattered to Clemson, so it is difficult to imagine he would have elected to confide in anyone outside of his circle of well-established connections when it came to something as personal as his will. As Tillman only met Clemson once, it is unlikely he would have been Clemson’s first choice for a prime confidante in such personal matters as his will, although it is possible Clemson would have felt comfortable enough to discuss the larger idea of an agricultural college with him.

However, Tillman’s version is not without its own merits. Tillman wrote of some of the details of the original Rion will. Simpson’s account attests that the original will did include these details. This lends credibility to Tillman’s version. How could Tillman have
known such details of an earlier will if he had not been privy to at least some conversations on the matter? If Simpson is to be believed, he spoke of the will he had seen at Fort Hill to no one except to possibly mention that a will did exist. Even if Simpson did tell Tillman and Norris that a will existed upon departing from Fort Hill that day, he writes that he did not share any specifics contained within. It is unlikely that Simpson or Clemson published anything about the original will, as Simpson later chastised Norris for writing the press about the will after Clemson’s burial.

There are then, logically, only three ways Tillman could have known the contents of the original will: 1. Tillman’s account is accurate in that all four men were involved in discussions that day; 2. Tillman found out the terms of the will through Rion. The latter is highly unlikely as Rion was bound by attorney-client privilege, and he died in December 1886, and so little time would have existed for Rion to speak with Tillman; and 3. Tillman learned of the contents of the original will at some point through conversations and writings with Simpson or others after Clemson’s death. This is quite possibly the most likely scenario given his service as a trustee. As Simpson wrote repeatedly that the will was only discussed between himself and Clemson in 1886, it is difficult to dismiss his account as false.

Simpson’s letter to the editor is lengthy at five and a half typed pages, and it provides a different explanation of the Board’s structure to refute Tillman’s racially-driven explanation:

I explained if the school should be established he would have to make provision for some one to receive the property from the Executor, and hold it subject to the purpose provided, And I very naturally suggested that he name certain parties and their successors to whom his Executor could deliver the property and execute the
trust imposed upon him. It will be readily understood that such a provision would
be absolutely necessary, and it was agreed to. This life trustee feature after
discussion was extended to apply to the College if the State accepted the bequest,
as well as to the school for reason I need not now explain. The number of life
Trustees was fixed at seven, and we thereupon began to select them. Mr. Clemson
named myself Col. D. K. Norris and Sen. B. R. Tillman, and I at his request
named a number of gentlemen and from the number he selected Maj. J. E.
Bradley, Col. M. L. Donaldson and Col R. E. Bowen. We could not think of a
suitable person for the seventh place that Mr. Clemson would agree to. I then
went home to prepare the will, and told him I would suggest the other member
when the will was ready to be executed. I spent three days in preparing the will,
and I consulted no one about it, except as to the seventh trustee Mr. J. E.
Wonnamaker was suggested and accepted.\footnote{Richard Simpson 1909 Letter to the Editor of The State Newspaper, Box 1, Richard W. Simpson Papers, Mss. 96, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.}

Simpson suggests that the successor trustee structure was born out of necessity for legal
reasons. As Clemson’s will included a provision for the establishment of an institution
should the state refuse to accept his bequest, it was necessary for someone or some entity
to take possession of said property. For Simpson, the unique structure came about for
legal reasons and not racial exclusion. Whatever Simpson’s views were on African
Americans privately, this is the explanation he set forth publicly.

This is an explanation that entirely denies what Tillman wrote about the seven
named trustees. It is interesting that each man’s explanation centers around what his own
interests were known to be. Simpson, ever the lawyer, was mostly concerned about legal
loopholes and responsibilities. Tillman, ever the politician, was mostly concerned with
African Americans taking control in place of white men. It is ironic that while Simpson
did not openly admit that racism played a role in the trustee structure of the will, his legal
reasons cited for the unique division of power effectively achieved the same result.

Keeping in mind that Simpson was a gifted attorney with a sharp mind and remembering
his allegiance to the Confederacy during the Civil War, it is difficult to accept that he would have been unaware of the racial consequences of the Clemson will. The difference between Tillman and Simpson in this respect is that Tillman admitted his machinations openly.

At this juncture, it is crucial to note the timing of this exchange. In 1909, Simpson was nearing the end of life, writing from his farm in Pendleton. Meanwhile, Tillman was living in Washington, D.C. as a U.S. senator. Given the racial climate in his home state at the time, it is entirely possible that Tillman could have exaggerated the emphasis on race and political opponents in the conversation with Clemson (that is, if any such conversation ever even occurred, as Simpson denied repeatedly). It is also plausible that Tillman was concerned about preserving his legacy given his stroke of 1908.

It is clear when comparing the 1909 writings of each man that Simpson attempted to address each claim made by Tillman, point by point. Keeping Simpson’s description in mind of how the original trustees were chosen, Tillman’s version is telling:

M. L. Donaldson, John E. Wannamaker, and J. E. Bradley, all of whom had been prominent in the agitation for an Agricultural College were suggested and accepted by Mr. Clemson, and Col. Bowen a prominent farmer of Pickens County, whom I had never seen, was the seventh man. It is well to note the personnel of the original seven life members and to remember that at that time there were no factional differences in the State. It happened in the alignment in 1890 three of these men were my supporters and three were not, and it is worth remembering that in filling vacancies caused by death among life Trustees since, that one reformer, and two conservatives have been chosen. No political influences or feelings were considered or involved in the selection of trustees then or since, and while at times there have been some political differences among the seven life trustees, I do not feel that I am speaking too strongly to say that no one of the seven has ever allowed his political bias to influence him in the slightest in any action affecting the College or its organization and management. Those who
are trying to inject politics into its management now are no friends to it and never have been.\footnote{Benjamin R. Tillman Account of Origin of Clemson College, Folder 50, Box 3, James Corcoran Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.}

Tillman accomplishes several tasks with this paragraph. While Simpson framed the selection of the seven men in legal terms, Tillman chose another approach. He couches the names in political ones. Rather than acknowledging the reasons why Clemson might have chosen each one and their contributions to the college, Tillman sees each man as his supporter or his opponent. This is indicative of the politics in South Carolina during this time period. Men were either Tillmanites or anti-Tillmanites, and the political climate in the state was framed in these terms. It is almost as though Tillman expects praise for allowing detractors to sit on the original Board of Trustees as he also takes partial credit for helping to suggest these men to Clemson for his approval. It is a lofty claim for a career politician to assert that politics had never been inserted into decisions made on the College’s behalf. This is especially true considering that Tillman claimed in his own account that the so-called life trustees had to be a self-appointing group to thwart any political rivals who might subvert the intent of the will. It is interesting that he chooses to close this portion of his reminiscence with his musings about politics being removed from the operation of the college.

Once more, Tillman asserts that Clemson’s will was widely known prior to his death, writing, “Mr. Clemson’s will had become noised around among the leaders and his death, April 6\textsuperscript{th}, 1888, with the knowledge that there was a large plantation and $60,000, in cash for the purpose for which we had been striving, was the signal for reviving the
demand of the farmers for a separate College in full vigor.’”

How could word have spread throughout the leaders of the movement that such a will existed if Tillman did not at least have knowledge of its existence himself? Either Tillman is lying completely or someone must have at least shared a little regarding the will’s contents.

In his version, Tillman claims to have knowledge beyond that of the original will drafted by Rion, “Messrs Simpson and Norris joined with me in urging him to change his will so as to carry out his new purpose, the same I had been advocating as they were so nearly similar that there were only slight differences as to details.”

This suggests that Clemson discussed his intent with all of the men. The wording also seems to indicate that Tillman fancied himself the leader of the discussion with Simpson and Norris filling in as his supporting figures. He is also careful with his phrasing in order to link Clemson’s actions and generosity with his own well-established ideas.

Simpson closed his letter with one final parting shot at Tillman’s recollections. He wrote to the editor:

These are the simple facts, and it may be said that my memory is pitted against the memory of Senator Tillman and one may be as good as the other, but if any one feels enough interest to investigate the two statements, and will consider the circumstances, dates etc. he will inevitably reach the conclusion that the statements bearing thereon made by Senator Tillman are strangely and inextricably mixed.

49 Benjamin R. Tillman Account of Origin of Clemson College, Folder 50, Box 3, James Corcoran Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.

50 Benjamin R. Tillman Account of Origin of Clemson College, Folder 50, Box 3, James Corcoran Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.

51 Richard Simpson 1909 Letter to the Editor of The State Newspaper, Box 1, Richard W. Simpson Papers, Mss. 96, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
Simpson was correct in his assessment. It is the tale of two memories with little evidence to substantiate either man’s claims. It is literally one man’s word against another’s. Simpson is careful not to call Tillman a liar, but he feels his version of events is most supported by the evidence if anyone should care to investigate.

Unfortunately, Norris did not leave behind a written version of the events of that day, although his daughter did write years later that her mother often said that “Clemson College was born in my parlor.”52 With this in mind, even Norris and his family cannot be viewed as an impartial jury to settle the dispute. Everyone wanted to claim a piece of the credit for what eventually became a success and boon to the people of the state. While there may not be much hard evidence to settle the dispute, there are some facts which may help to shed light on the matter. With no evidence and years gone by to further cloud the issue, motivation becomes a determining factor for the closest proximity of the truth.

For Tillman, Clemson College was a primary platform for his political movement. He promised the farmers a way to a better life and that promise was fulfilled. An agricultural college had to be a huge indicator of Tillman’s effectiveness as a politician, and its existence no doubt helped him win elections. As evidenced by his newspaper account of 1909, Tillman used his association with Clemson College for political gains well beyond the founding years of the school. Tillman certainly believed in the efficacy of agricultural education, and he was fiercely proud of the role he played in the College’s founding, especially later in life when reflecting on his own mortality. The question becomes why Tillman wrote in 1909 and not before.

52 Virginia Norris, Colonel Daniel Keating Norris, One of the First Life Trustees of Clemson College (Clemson: Clemson College Library, 1963), 2.
What could Tillman’s reason for writing have been in 1909? It is plausible that a perfect storm of events in Tillman’s life led him to submit this for publication when he did. He suffered a stroke in 1908 that damaged his health and his spirits by leaving him forgetful. This forgetfulness must be taken into account when examining the veracity of his writing. Additionally, he was forced to publicly defend his son, B. R., in 1909 as he came under fire for his alcohol abuse, and his personal woes continued when Tillman and his wife, Sallie, needed to help their son fight for custody of his children. The aging Tillman was compelled to admit to the court that “his son has been a drunkard” who was “unable” to support his own children.\(^{53}\) It was a public scandal and possibly damaged Tillman’s image from a political perspective within South Carolina as well as his ego for having to endure such a public misfortune. As such, this may have been penned as a reminder to his home state of everything he had accomplished and done on their behalf.

Most importantly, Tillman may have written in the face of his own mortality. His stroke in 1908 would have made it apparent that he was not invincible. By writing down his contributions to Clemson College, he may have felt he was preserving his legacy in a world where everything is fleeting. A man like Tillman wanted to be remembered in death as he was when alive – as a larger than life figure. Stephen Kantrowitz writes, “As he grew older, though, Tillman became eager to define his own legacy. In the last decade of his life, it sometimes seemed the only thing Tillman wanted to talk about were the heroic deeds of his youth.”\(^{54}\) Although he would live for another nine years, his fragile


health at the moment may have made death seem much more imminent and prompted this account.

Meanwhile, Simpson may have had different motives for his various writings. He did not have a political agenda or any platform that needed bolstering. He claims his purpose in writing his autobiography detailing the events surrounding the Clemson will was to educate his children. This is plausible considering the fact that he leaves a post script at the end of the work addressed to his children detailing their lineage. However, people during this time period quite frequently wrote knowing that people might read what they wrote. So Simpson’s accounts must be examined through this lens. In his autobiography, he writes, “I say when I remember all these facts, I can not help but believe that I was simply an instrument in the hands of God for the accomplishing of this end.” His autobiography is littered with statements like this one. Now an older man and nearing the end of his life, it is possible that one of Simpson’s motivations in his writings was to justify his life’s work. He wanted to convince himself, his children, any readers, and God that his endeavors had been worthy.

With all this in mind, it is clear that Tillman had more to gain by propagating his version of 1886. To date, only one written version of Tillman’s story has been located, and it was published for public consumption. Meanwhile, Simpson had no less than three separate written accounts of the same events. Two of Simpson’s accounts appear to have been written for private use; there is no record of publication. The third was published but only in response after Tillman went public with his version. Simpson wrote these

55 Richard Simpson Autobiography, Box 1, Richard W. Simpson Papers, Mss. 96, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
accounts over a period of eight years. Each time, the story only varied slightly with respect to minute details. The heart of the narrative remained the same each time. In this respect, perhaps Simpson’s account is more credible than Tillman’s. It is also important to remember that Simpson was deposed as part of the Lee v. Simpson lawsuit in the immediate wake of Clemson’s death. His account never wavers with the exception of exact dates and other secondary considerations that any mind might distort decades later. With Tillman, there are simply not as many written pieces of evidence to support his version, and he only published this account over twenty years after the events occurred after suffering a stroke. Yet Tillman expended a lot of effort in detailing his version of events in 1909 and in the years that followed, so he must have felt strongly about his account.  

56 The same memory problems that may have crept up on Simpson surely afflicted Tillman as well.

While Tillman rode away from Fort Hill and Thomas Green Clemson that day and did not return until Clemson’s death, Simpson remained in Pendleton. He was a ready ear and close friend of Clemson’s in his final years. Simpson’s many visits to Fort Hill throughout 1887 and 1888 are documented in his journal in his own handwriting. Clemson often requested that Simpson join him and the elderly gentleman relied on and hoped for visits from his attorney. Simpson remained with Clemson while Tillman exerted his efforts further away from Fort Hill. Tillman participated in the South Carolina farmers’ movement as one of its key figures in the mid-1880s, so he is deserving of much

56 Tillman would show a documented interest in Simpson’s account following Simpson’s death in 1912, as evidenced by a letter exchange between himself and Clemson College President Walter Merritt Riggs. A detailed examination of these letters is included in Chapter 2 of this thesis.
credit with respect to garnering support for such an institution as Clemson College. But while Tillman was an agitator on a grander scale, Simpson spent much time closer to home in conversation with Clemson and actively engaged in his business affairs as well. For this reason, it is difficult to imagine anyone remembering the details of what happened at Fort Hill more clearly than Simpson. He lived in a world consisting of little but Thomas Green Clemson for a year and a half.
Clemson’s death in April 1888 set off a statewide debate that reached a boiling point in the local press, fueled by legislative motions, regional allegiances, and a lawsuit filed against the will on behalf of Clemson’s only living heir, a young granddaughter of New York by the name of Floride Isabella Lee. Clemson’s confidantes from the fall of 1886 proved to be wise choices. Tillman and Simpson each contributed much to the founding of the school, proving themselves invaluable to the path South Carolina would take towards restoration and prosperity in the decades to come. The two men were both well-suited for their respective tasks and uniquely qualified to act as Mr. Clemson’s champions in his absence.

The 1886 meeting also marked the beginning of a 26 year relationship between Tillman and Simpson. Their lives would be intertwined from the fall of 1886 until July 11, 1912, when Simpson passed from this world. Tillman would follow six years later. It was a curious relationship as the two were quite different in background and personality. In fact, Tillman was well-known for his distrust of lawyers and legislators, two occupations that described Simpson. Each man needed the other’s cooperation to ensure Clemson’s final wishes were carried out and to guarantee the success of the college, but the men were not necessarily compatible in style, tone, or their manner of conducting business. Without the commonality of Clemson College between them, it is unlikely they would have been friends or partners.
Less than two years passed between that historic meeting of the minds at Fort Hill and Clemson’s death. Due to the terms of the will, the South Carolina legislature would have to accept the will and all its stipulations. It had in fact been written in such a way that it was an all-or-nothing proposition. Approving a bastardized version would not be an option. Clemson had made sure of this even from the grave, and by 1888, individuals sympathetic to Tillman and his ideals, the Tillmanites, controlled the South Carolina House of Representatives. This was certainly serendipitous timing. The Senate, however, would prove to be a much more difficult task for Tillman and Simpson to overcome. It is important to remember that Tillman was not actually an elected official during this crucial time. The influence he wielded, however, cannot be overstated. While he may not have had a vote, he was still very much pulling the strings as a private citizen.

Tillman exercised much of his authority on the South Carolina legislature through his alliance with the Farmers’ Association. Not so coincidentally, that organization found itself under the leadership of D. K. Norris, the same Mr. Norris who had been invited to Fort Hill by Clemson several years earlier. The Farmers’ Association organized itself to elect a legislature that would be sympathetic to the cause of Clemson College. The relative speed with which this group mobilized to spread the word and encourage action is impressive and speaks to the bequest’s importance among the farmers. Tillman proved to be adept at whipping up support for his causes, and the Clemson will became the first of many he would take credit for personally:

The movement for the College had by this time broadened into many lines of reform in State affairs, and the agitation which had acted as a tonic, coupled with

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57 Reel, The High Seminary, 58.
the organization of the Alliance, had taught the farmers their strength, as well as right and the means of accomplishing their purposes.\textsuperscript{58}

Tillman thus explains that it was about more than a college to him. The movement that he became the unequivocal leader of was about respect, dignity, and recognizing self-worth in the pursuit of claiming one’s own rights. Although Tillman would later seek office as a Democrat, his tenets closely resembled those of Populism.

The legislature was divided between upcountry interests and those of the middle and lower parts of the state. It was also unwilling to take action until the court settled the legal questions surrounding the will. While Tillman was doing his best to wage war in the State House, Richard Wright Simpson came to bat as Clemson’s attorney and executor of his will. His role as legal defender of Clemson’s dreams was just as important as Tillman’s struggle against what he believed were narrow-minded politicians. Simpson, however, was fighting family, and it was an ugly contest.

When Simpson filed Clemson’s will with the probate court of Oconee County, South Carolina, its contents set off the protective instincts of Clemson’s son-in-law, Gideon Lee. Originally from and a resident of New York, Lee had begun a letter writing campaign on behalf of his daughter, Floride Isabella Lee, the only living descendant of the Clemsons. Lee apparently hoped to wage war against the will and Simpson in the press, pleading for a proper inheritance and justice for the great-granddaughter of John C. Calhoun. His efforts were, to a certain extent, successful. The state divided between those who recognized the validity of the will and the competency of the elderly recluse and

\textsuperscript{58} Benjamin R. Tillman Account of Origin of Clemson College, Folder 50, Box 3, James Corcoran Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
those who feared Calhoun would turn in his grave over the gross miscarriage of justice being done to his blood relative. On November 26, 1888, Lee filed a formal lawsuit to challenge the will in Charleston, and the stage was set for an historic showdown with unusually high stakes for the entire state.  

Simpson was the most actively involved individual in the lawsuit as executor of the estate and a material witness. Lee’s attorneys filed an injunction against Simpson on December 18, 1888, in a bid to stop the state from accepting the bequest and thus destroying any hopes of the Lee family to inherit the estate. The court granted the injunction, but it was also careful to differentiate Simpson from Fort Hill:

The complainant has brought her action against the defendant, not as executor, but in his personal character. He is devisee of the Fort Hill plantation as well as executor. As such devisee he takes the legal estate, charged with the equities, but not with the defaults, of his testator. If there be any account for the rents and profits received by Clemson in his life-time, for such default R. W. Simpson, executor, qua executor, is liable; not R. W. Simpson, devisee. He takes the property, if he takes it, with notice of the trust, responsible only for his own enjoyment of the rents and profits. For the same reason, the defendant not being a party as executor, these proceedings cannot affect him so far as personality in his hands to be administered as executor is concerned. The injunction, therefore, must be confined to Fort Hill plantation.

The complainant filed the injunction against both Simpson and the estate. This is relevant information because it means the Lees and their attorneys viewed Simpson the man as an extension of the Clemson estate. Simpson was the most central living figure of Lee v. Simpson. Simpson was also still considered the attorney of record for Clemson, even after his employer’s death, so he was understandably named as a defendant in the suit.

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59 The Lee family, as well as supporters of the Clemson will, began letter writing campaigns to newspapers across the state. These efforts lasted over a year and were meant to sway public opinion for each of the respective camps. For more information on divisions within the state, refer to the chapter of Jerome Reel’s The High Seminary titled “The Founding: 1888-1889.”

On March 15, 1889, Simpson was deposed regarding his knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the will, the Fort Hill land, and his relationship with Thomas and Anna Clemson. At the heart of Lee’s challenge was the legality of Clemson’s ownership of the Fort Hill property following his wife’s death. His attorneys attempted to argue that in drafting his will, Clemson was giving something away that had never legally belonged to him, even though Anna had executed her own will expressing her wish that her belongings go to her husband upon her death. During his testimony, Simpson notes that he lived near Fort Hill his entire life and currently resided only three and one half miles from the Clemson house. He admits that he was too young to have known Mrs. Clemson well before her death, but he characterizes his relationship with Mr. Clemson as being of a “close and intimate nature.”

It is important to note that Simpson was not a mere acquaintance of Thomas Green Clemson. He was a trusted friend and lifelong neighbor.

Throughout the course of his testimony, Simpson recalls when Clemson first introduced the idea of his founding an agricultural school at Fort Hill. It was sometime between 1880 and 1882 when Clemson asked Simpson to inquire around the legislature as to the feasibility of donating his land to the state for educational purposes. Clemson’s initial inquiry would have one condition attached to it – that the remains of his mentor and father-in-law, John C. Calhoun, be removed from Charleston and reinterred at Fort Hill. Perhaps this was an unusual request, but Clemson respected, loved, and admired

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61 Testimony and Evidence, Folder 20, Box 1, Floride Isabella Lee, By Her Next Friend, Gideon Lee, Complainant, Against Richard W. Simpson, Defendant, 1889 in the Circuit Court of the United States, for the Fourth Circuit-District of South Carolina: Documents, 1856 – 1894, Floride Isabella Lee Documents, Mss 256, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
Anna’s father and wished to turn Fort Hill into an educational institution as well as a shrine to Calhoun’s memory. In a letter to Clemson dated January 11, 1882, Simpson explains his stance on the proposed donation and the requirement to exhume Calhoun’s body:

To defeat your purpose these grandsons uniting with the News and Courier have published to the world that you had some personal object in view – some object which would increase the value of your property. So firmly fixed now is this idea in the minds of the people that it appears to be impossible to induce them to think otherwise. In my talk with Col. Rion just before Christmas this difficulty was suggested and so great has it seemed to be that up to this time I could never make up my mind to make the effort… I learned from Dr. Miller that you had in contemplation the giving of Fort Hill property to the State upon the condition that the State would maintain an agricultural college upon it. I never felt more relieved in my life and were you to do this act of public generosity, that instant every slander and lie that have been uttered against you would be stamped as false and baseless fabrications. That moment you would pass in the minds of the people from a money seeking individual to a liberal patriotic and public spirited citizen. Every slander against you would be brushed away, and for all time to come your name would be revered as a public benefactor, and forever would your name be linked with the name of Mr. Calhoun and the memories which cluster around Fort Hill.

This passage of Simpson’s letter speaks volumes about his feelings on the matter. Simpson worried about the damage Calhoun’s grandsons could wreak for Clemson if he insisted on Calhoun’s exhumation. Simpson appears to be legitimately concerned about the reputation of Clemson after his suggestion that Calhoun’s body be exhumed and moved. Clearly, he does not wish for the people of South Carolina to view Clemson as a fortune-seeking outsider. As a native Philadelphian, enough South Carolinians must have distrusted the Yankee as it was following the Civil War. Clemson’s well-known eccentricities did not help his case either. As the News and Courier was an influential...
newspaper within the state, the risk to Clemson’s reputation was real, especially if the newspaper reported damning words from blood relatives of Calhoun. This strange request regarding Calhoun’s body would later cloud Clemson’s bequest as it was interpreted by the public as evidence of the old recluse’s lunacy.

It is also evident from this passage that Simpson was acquainted with James Henry Rion, Clemson’s attorney during this time period. The two had a relationship with each other and with Clemson at the same time. It is also significant that Simpson was brought into Clemson’s confidence over four years before Tillman ever met Clemson. Clemson must have trusted Simpson’s judgment as a neighbor, legislative representative and friend. While Clemson may have recognized the need for a man like Tillman in his plans, he willingly included Simpson at every turn, pointing to a real sense of respect and perhaps admiration. Simpson knew Clemson well enough to realize which buttons to push in his letter. He recognized that Clemson wished to be remembered along with Calhoun, so Simpson played upon Clemson’s sense of sentimentality and family loyalty by suggesting the two could be inexorably linked forever with his proposed act of generosity. Moreover, Simpson was himself a strong supporter of Clemson’s idea to found an agricultural school for the state.

Following Rion’s death, Clemson asked Simpson to serve as his legal advisor and counsel. Simpson acquiesced to his request. Upon examining photographs of the original will in 1959, Simpson’s daughters, Mrs. W.W. Klugh and Miss Louise Simpson, both positively identified their father’s handwriting as that contained within the handwritten will. Further, both women remembered that their “Father would lock the door to his study
and labor for hours at a time without interruption” and made “several trips to Fort Hill to confer with Mr. Clemson about the document.” It was rumored throughout the years that a number of copies of Clemson’s will were written out, but Simpson’s handwriting, as the daughters recalled seeing, appears on the original one filed with the court.

Simpson was deposed several times over the course of the legal battle and testified at length about Clemson’s property rights in Fort Hill and what Clemson asserted as the chain of custody of the land. As part of his deposition, Simpson noted that shortly after Clemson’s death Lee admitted having had knowledge of Clemson’s plan to donate the land to the state for many years. This testimony, sworn under oath, points to the fact that Clemson did not attempt to conceal his intentions from his heirs. Thus, according to Simpson, Lee knew about the plans for several years and either did not seek to change his father-in-law’s mind or was unsuccessful in his persuasions.

Nevertheless, Simpson was still left with the arduous task of defending his friend’s final wishes in court and in the legislative campaign as well. A veteran of the South Carolina legislature, Simpson was himself quite savvy in how his state’s postwar government worked. While Tillman was waging the bulk of the legislative war to ensure Clemson’s acceptance, Simpson also played a role, albeit a secondary one, in that arena. Simpson understood that a Charleston lawyer, Augustine T. Smythe, was a Lowcountry power player in the Senate. He knew that Smythe could quite easily control the rest of his region’s delegation when the Act of Acceptance came up for a vote. Without any

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63 Some Notes In Regard To The Will of Thomas Green Clemson, Folder 19, Box 1, James Corcoran Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
Lowcountry support, the dream of a separate agricultural college would be dead before it even began.

In this vein, Simpson engaged in a brilliant maneuver that quite possibly saved the school from certain death. He approached Smythe directly, smartly deferring to Smythe’s political influence and asking for a favor in return for another. Simpson’s proposition was simple but effective. If Smythe would simply vote no on the Clemson bequest and not request the rest of his Lowcountry counterparts to vote no as well, Simpson would employ Smythe’s law firm to represent him in the legal proceedings brought on by Gideon Lee. Simpson’s trade worked:

After all hope was abandoned I decided upon a desperate expedient. I sought Major Smythe and asked him to be one of my attorneys. I reasoned as a lawyer such a case would appeal to his ambition and if I was correct he could not afford to lose the opportunity to distinguish himself by defeating the acceptance of the bequest. When I mentioned the matter to him he looked at me sharply and tried to probe my purpose but I looked innocent and he asked for time to think. I referred him to Orr then also in Columbia. When I told Orr of my plan he excitedly exclaimed that I had won. Smythe accepted and while he voted against the bill, three Senators on the coast voted for it. This was a tremendous surprise to the opposition. No one ever understood why the three coast Senators voted for the college. I watched these three Senators and after passing the bill to accept the bequest they never voted for the college any more…Therefore I say by that management I saved the College.64

Simpson’s autobiography relays a different turn of events than what history has popularly accepted with respect to the Act of Acceptance. It has traditionally been widely believed that Tillman carried the bulk of the work in ensuring Clemson’s will would be accepted by the state of South Carolina. While the Tillmanites did play an integral role in its success in the legislature, Simpson was involved as well.

64 Richard Simpson Autobiography, Box 1, Richard W. Simpson Papers, Mss. 96, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
Smythe voted no against accepting the bequest but did not urge his fellow senators to do the same, and Smythe’s firm represented Simpson in court. In a letter written by Smythe dated August 19, 1906, he explains his strange personal history with the school to John E. Wannamaker, a critic of Clemson College in the early 1900s:

As you know, my connection with the college has been intimate, though rather peculiar. I was associated with the late Col. James L. Orr as counsel for Mr. Clemson’s executor in the litigation before the Supreme Court of the United States, as to the validity of Mr. Clemson’s will, under the terms of which the Fort Hill property passed to Mr. Clemson. The validity of the will was sustained by the Supreme Court.

As a member of the State Senate, I opposed the acceptance of Mr. Clemson’s bequest, on the ground that it was not wise policy for the State to accept a bequest which would require the use of State money when a majority of the Board of Trustees was appointed by Mr. Clemson, and was a self perpetuating body. To meet the objection so raised by others as well as myself, the legislature provided that the vote of nine trustees out of thirteen being two more than the life trustees, should be necessary to elect any professor or instructor or to appropriate any money.

When the legislature decided to accept the bequest I ceased any factious opposition and did what I could to make the new college successful.

Six years ago without my knowledge or any notice to me, the legislature elected me a trustee of the college, and I served as such for six years.  

Perhaps better than anyone Smythe came to understand both sides of the Clemson College debate in his unusual role as both a legislative opponent and legal ally. He would later defend it against detractors, seeming to take it personally when anyone spoke in a besmirching manner of the agricultural school.

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65 Augustine T. Smythe Letter to John E. Wannamaker, August 29, 1906, Folder 36, Box 2, James Corcoran Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
Knowing that the measure passed in the Senate by one tie-breaking vote, Simpson’s actions bear more weight than they are credited. The facts are clear. Smythe did vote no for the bill and his counterparts voted yes. The Senate vote ended in a tie with Lieutenant Governor W. L. Mauldin casting the tie-breaking affirmative vote. Had any one of those yes votes decided to vote along with Smythe, the Act of Acceptance would not have been passed, and Clemson College would not exist as a public entity. With the facts clearly delineated, it would appear as though Simpson told the truth about the deal he struck with Smythe. While it is true Simpson could not be sure how the remainder of the Charleston delegation would vote, it is likely that his bartering with Smythe had some bearing on the final votes. It is probable, therefore, that Simpson really did play a crucial part in the legislature’s passage of the Act of Acceptance.

In making this deal, Simpson demonstrated a remarkable grasp on politics while refraining from engaging in the public debate. He simply went straight to the source of the problem and bartered a solution. Simpson’s involvement in the South Carolina legislature was not restricted to running interference with Smythe. His autobiography includes a fair amount of detail about his actions in Columbia:

I was in Columbia lobbying for the measure which was reduced to a bill to accept the bequest and appropriating three thousand dollars to make a practical beginning to carry out the provisions of the will. There was great feeling on all sides and in order to intimidate the legislature a bill of injunction was read out against me to prevent me from disposing of the property until the suit was decided. Judge Simonton (U.S. Judge) of Charleston came up to Columbia to hear the case and grant the injunction. The contest began in the House and waxed heavy and bitter. I sat by our speakers and gave them the facts to answer the unfounded charges brought up by our opponents. This debate continued for several days. During the debate I wandered about everywhere trying to devise a plan to overcome the majority against us in the Senate. We had counted and found we had a clear majority in the House for the college but there was a majority in
the Senate against it. Every effort had been exerted to overcome this majority but without effect. And the hopes of the friends of the college were gone.66

Simpson describes his actions as those of a lobbyist, so he must have been more than a mere bystander if he was feeding speakers the correct answers. He was an active participant in the legislative battle. Curiously, Tillman’s name is not mentioned in the details of the legislative proceedings. Even more curiously, the autobiography only mentions Gideon Lee in passing and makes no mention of the lawsuit other than to note that a “suit was commended.”67 It seems strange that the executor of the will that had the arduous task of defending it in court would fail to provide details about the legal proceedings. Its lack of emphasis perhaps points to Simpson’s pride in his legislative accomplishments regarding the Act of Acceptance over his legal triumph in the case of Lee v. Simpson.

The South Carolina legislature approved the bequest in 1888, but Governor John P. Richardson refused to sign it until after the Circuit Court’s decision. In May 1889, the Circuit Court ruled in Simpson’s favor. On November 27, 1889, Richardson signed the Act of Acceptance which created an agricultural college at Fort Hill in accordance with Clemson’s wishes. Not surprisingly, Lee was dissatisfied with the decision and appealed to the United States Supreme Court. That court affirmed the Circuit Court’s ruling in April 1890. Simpson himself wrote the Chief Justice of South Carolina on December 5,

66 Richard Simpson Autobiography, Box 1, Richard W. Simpson Papers, Mss. 96, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
67 Richard Simpson Autobiography, Box 1, Richard W. Simpson Papers, Mss. 96, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
1889, to “respectfully request you to decide if the act of the General Assembly above refered to is an acceptance by the State.”

As executor, Simpson breathed a sigh of relief and celebration at the culmination of a year and a half’s worth of legal and political maneuverings. By the time the will made it through the South Carolina legislature and the United States Supreme Court, the Clemson estate had expended over $6,000 in defense of the bequest. He had been arguably the most heavily involved individual in the whole proceeding. The task had fallen to Simpson to oversee probate; it had been Simpson’s job to answer each of Gideon Lee’s claims; it had been Simpson who had submitted the Clemson will to the General Assembly of South Carolina; and it had been Simpson’s duty to call together the first meeting of the seven successor trustees as appointed by the will on May 2, 1888.

While there is no doubt others assisted him at every stage of the process, it is clear that Simpson carried the heaviest burden of his fellow founders as Clemson’s attorney and executor.

Leading up to the actual legal creation of Clemson College, all signs would seemingly indicate that Simpson was better positioned for leadership within the school than Tillman. Tillman had not been as closely involved with Thomas Green Clemson, and he had his own political agenda to pursue in the coming decades. He believed in the cause of the school, certainly, and he wished to see the school succeed. But Tillman also had his sights set on loftier goals than President of the Board of Trustees of a rurally-

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68 Letter from Richard Simpson to Chief Justice, December 5, 1889, Folder 21, Box 1, James Corcoran Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
located startup college. Meanwhile, Simpson had occupied a front row seat during the formulation years between 1866 and 1886. For a solid twenty years, Simpson had seemingly unparalleled access to the mind of the benefactor. He took a documented interest in all aspects of the will and its defense in 1888 and 1889. Simpson had the proper last name, the connections, and the background to make him the ideal choice to lead Clemson College.

Fate would have something else in mind for Simpson and Tillman. While it is true that Simpson became the first President of the Board of Trustees and played an integral role in the first two decades of the school, Tillman far surpassed him in the hearts and minds of faculty, staff, students, alumni, and community members. The historical evidence right up until the Act of Acceptance lends a belief that behind Clemson, Simpson was the most important person to the school’s founding and its future. But once established, a curious phenomenon developed. Simpson did not achieve any real acclaim while Tillman, having become governor of South Carolina and a United States Senator until his death, became the focal point.

Tillman’s participation in the maneuverings to make certain South Carolina accepted the Clemson bequest proved to be the springboard for the rest of his career. While opinionated and outspoken, Tillman had never actually held public office in 1889. However, his work relating to Clemson College focused directly on him the spotlight of the Farmers’ Association. The Executive Committee of the Farmers’ Association unanimously thrust Tillman forth as its gubernatorial candidate in November 1889, the same month that Governor Richardson signed the Act of Acceptance to create Clemson
College according to the terms set forth by the will. The timing of this support cannot be a coincidence.

Tillman, who had refused offers of public office before, chose to accept this challenge. An early biographer in 1894 described his decision:

He who had so many times before refused to run for office now saw it was his imperative duty to obey the call. The time was ripe for action. Heretofore he had seen that he could do more good in going among the farmers, in speaking to them upon the hustings and through the press, than in going to the Legislature, as they desired. But now they wanted him to fill an office, for which he believed it his duty to canvass the State. After many years spent in trying to educate the masses, amid an unfair and non-representative government, he believed that the time had at last arrived. But it meant bold, direct, unflinching action, and this was the kind of action that Benjamin Tillman gloried in.\(^{69}\)

The author received Tillman’s blessing on his words before publication, so it must reflect his own thoughts during this time period. Tillman made quite an impression on the Farmers’ Association through his speeches, newspaper articles, and legislative endeavors and so much so that they put their faith in an untested commodity. There was more than a measure of truth to the heroics espoused in Thornhill’s biographical sketch regarding Tillman and his actions in Columbia that resulted in the passage of the Act of Acceptance. Tillman would relish his past and forthcoming actions in defense of the dream called Clemson College.

**FIGHTING FOR SURVIVAL**

Upon passage of the Act of Acceptance, the Board of Trustees faced a new set of challenges starting a college from scratch. There were facilities to build, faculty to hire,\

curricula to set, and students to recruit. It was a daunting task, perhaps even overwhelming. With the school achieving official status in both the legal and legislative realms, the trustees could begin their work. They began by selecting Simpson as the Board’s first president, a position he would hold from 1890 to 1907. He would ultimately oversee the construction of the earliest buildings, welcome the community to partake in Clemson’s dream, preside over ninety-two meetings of the Board in his capacity as president, and congratulate the first class of graduating cadets.

One of the Board’s initial acts was to find and hire a suitable president. The Board selected Henry Aubrey Strode of Virginia for the task, voting on his appointment on July 16, 1890. As the school’s first president, Strode had the arduous job of building a school from nothing. The clean slate must have been both exhilarating and exhausting. Sadly, Strode’s tenure as president at Clemson was brief and did not allow him to see the first cadets matriculate. He resigned in November 1892, and the reason why remains a mystery.  

In 1893, Strode was followed by Edwin Boone Craighead, a native of Missouri. He presided over the first cadets on campus and was part of the opening ceremonies for the school. The football team would play the University of South Carolina for the first time in 1896 with Craighead at the administrative helm. His presidency, however, was far from triumphant, as a public relations nightmare unfolded under his watch.  

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Ben Tillman’s brother, George Tillman, was a state legislator and member of the Clemson College Board of Visitors, an appointment likely made possible by his own brother, Ben. The Board of Visitors is comprised of goodwill ambassadors who serve at the pleasure of the Board of Trustees. George Tillman served as the chair of the Board of Visitors, but he was anything but supportive of the college. His complaints were chiefly about a lack of extension stations and his concerns about what he believed were high salaries. Governor John Evans joined in by charging the Board of Trustees with poor management.\textsuperscript{72} It is in this climate that Ben Tillman’s aura skyrocketed.

In his position as a U.S. senator, Ben Tillman did not disappear to Washington, D.C. with few thoughts of Clemson College. Instead he jumped into the fray and positioned himself squarely opposite his brother and the governor in defense of the school. He replied to the charges against the Board of Trustees and President Craighead with a rebuttal published in \textit{The State} newspaper in 1897. He stood by the actions of his peers publicly.\textsuperscript{73} It is interesting that Governor Evans chose to support George rather than Ben. On January 22, 1896, Ben Tillman, being unable to attend a Board of Trustees meeting himself, dispatched Governor Evans to attend on his behalf.\textsuperscript{74} This would suggest at least a modicum of good terms between the two, but perhaps Evans was tired of being ordered about by one Tillman and traded in for another.

Craighead would not remain at Clemson long beyond the public fray. He resigned later in 1897 to return to his alma mater, Central College in Missouri, as its president.

\textsuperscript{72} Idol, Jr., \textit{Tradition: A History of the Presidency of Clemson University}, 48.
\textsuperscript{73} Idol, Jr., \textit{Tradition: A History of the Presidency of Clemson University}, 49.
\textsuperscript{74} Board of Trustees, Clemson University, “January 22, 1896 Clemson Trustees Minutes” (1896). \textit{Minutes}. Paper 502. http://tigerprints.clemson.edu/trustees_minutes/502
The reasons for his departure are more clearly delineated than Strode’s resignation had been. Although it would appear the “previous turmoil centering on Clemson’s mission and Craighead’s role in it affected his decision,” it may have simply been an instance of a better opportunity presenting itself. His resignation coupled with Strode’s, however, could have been indicative of larger disputes over institutional control between the Board of Trustees and the administration.

Henry Simms Hartzog was selected to replace Craighead in 1897. His presidency lasted five years and was not plagued by the problems of the first two presidents. Little correspondence exists between Hartzog and Simpson or Tillman, suggesting perhaps the Board attempted a more laissez-faire approach in the day-to-day running of the college. However, as Simpson lived so close to campus it is impossible to know just how involved he was in overseeing the school’s affairs during the Hartzog years.

Hartzog carried out the massive task before him to the Board’s satisfaction until the student walkout in 1902. This controversy centered around disputes between the students and the faculty. With little control as cadets, the students reached a breaking point and departed campus en masse in a display of solidarity. The Board ultimately ruled in favor of the students over the faculty, but it refused Hartzog’s resignation. The damage, however, had already been done publicly due to several damning articles that appeared in *The State* newspaper, and Hartzog resigned again later that year.

His successor, Patrick Hues Mell, took command of the college in 1902. Again, little correspondence of note exists between Mell and Simpson or Tillman. Both regularly

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attended meetings of the Board of Trustees during this time period, and it is likely that Simpson remained involved on campus due to his proximity. Mell dealt with another round of public criticism regarding Clemson’s mission and its lack of performance according to newspapers throughout the state. He quit fighting all the controversies in July 1909 by resigning. He stated publicly his reasons: “interference of the trustees in the day-to-day affairs of the institution, the board’s circumvention of the president in faculty and curriculum affairs, and the prevalence of nepotism at the school.”

With his final parting shots, Mell exposed problems that had likely plagued his predecessors. He made it clear that most of his problems at Clemson were, in his estimation, caused by the Board of Trustees. According to Clemson’s will, the Board was, and is, ultimately responsible for carrying out the mission of the benefactor. The first years of the school obviously required trial and error with procedures being drafted and revised as needed. The Board and the administration struggled to find a harmonious balance of control, and it would appear Mell was a casualty of that trial and error period. While the entire Board was accused, it seems that Mell leveled his charges particularly at its leader, Richard Simpson. Simpson provided the leadership for the Board of Trustees and presided over each meeting carefully. Mell, however, viewed him as the ultimate problem, no doubt confirmed in that view by Simpson’s frequent visits to check on matters on campus. Additionally, Simpson had three sons-in-law serving on the faculty during Mell’s presidency. Clearly, the charge of nepotism was directed at Simpson and

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meant to inspire a lack of confidence in his leadership as well as his judgment. It is not surprising that Simpson was a leading voice on the Board and thus a target for critics since he had much of himself invested in the college and could not bear to see it fail.

During the Mell presidency, the Board witnessed a change in its leadership. Simpson, having tried to resign as President of the Board of Trustees in July 1907, again tendered his resignation from the post in August 1907. It was accepted this time, although the minutes note that “Each individual member of the Board expressed his regrets and paid a tribute to Col Simpson’s services.”\(^77\) The minutes indicate that his fellow trustees appreciated Simpson and valued his leadership as President of the Board and, according to the minutes, reluctantly allowed him to vacate his post.

Additionally, the Board of Trustees preserved Simpson’s legacy with a resolution in his honor after his death. The resolution, dated November 19, 1913, characterized Simpson as “one of its most faithful friends” and heralded his “faithful, untiring and devoted efforts to guide the affairs of the College” with “few parallels in the history of South Carolina.”\(^78\) It is high praise from a respected group of statewide leaders. Again, this indicates that Simpson’s peers recognized his importance to the welfare and existence of Clemson College. People who actually knew him well and worked beside him for the betterment of the college remembered him fondly and heaped praise upon him in the form of recognition for a job well done.

\(^77\) Board of Trustees, Clemson University, “August 20-21, 1907 Clemson Trustees Minutes” (1907). Minutes. Paper 522. http://tigerprints.clemson.edu/trustees_minutes/522

\(^78\) Board of Trustees, Clemson University, “November 19, 1913 Clemson Trustees Minutes” (1913). Minutes. Paper 345. http://tigerprints.clemson.edu/trustees_minutes/345
Mell was succeeded in the Clemson presidency by another figure that would be remembered fondly in the community’s historical consciousness, Walter Merritt Riggs. Riggs was initially named acting president, but by 1911 he was promoted to president. Riggs proved to have the proper credentials, personality, and charisma to flourish as Clemson’s fifth president. His successes are impressive considering the climate during the early years of his presidency. He faced a school without a sparkling reputation among the general public, a lack of funds to run the school as he would have liked, and the challenges of World War I.

Walter Merritt Riggs. Photo, Series 100, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, South Carolina.
Riggs’s success as president of Clemson College could be attributed to a combination of factors including his demeanor and leadership style as well as his relationship with the Board of Trustees. His predecessors had rocky relationships with their employers at best. Riggs found a way to thrive in the Board’s culture by cultivating a close relationship especially with one of its own – Ben Tillman. This close relationship may have been one of the keys of his long-running presidency, as Riggs served as president from 1909 until his death in 1924. In fact, Tillman appears to be the instigator behind a bizarre string of motions that resulted in Riggs being appointed acting president during the December 1909 Board meeting. Riggs’s close relationship with Tillman and frequent communication with him stands in contrast to the little correspondence that exists between Simpson and Riggs.

Tillman was not a tyrant who monopolized the power of the Board of Trustees entirely, but he was a significant figure. As one of the original trustees named in Clemson’s will, his was an important voice on the Board. This, coupled with his political office, made him one of the more noteworthy figures among his peers. Riggs was wise to bring Tillman into his confidence and foster a close relationship with him. Riggs corresponded with a great many individuals concerning a variety of topics during his presidency, and Tillman was one of his best and most frequent correspondents. The pair exchanged innumerable letters between 1909 and Tillman’s death in 1918. The topics of their letters ranged from university policies to what sort of bushes should be planted around campus. Tillman may have been too far away to hassle Riggs in person, but he made sure his opinions were heard via letter writing campaigns.
For his part, Riggs handled Tillman masterfully, perhaps better than anyone else was ever able to do with such an outspoken politician. He was careful to reply to each letter he received from Tillman, showing him the deference due his position by making timely responses a priority. However, Riggs did not blindly agree with everything Tillman suggests. He was careful to couch his criticisms in respectful terms and clearly felt comfortable enough with Tillman to differ with him on topics that truly mattered. When Riggs received a letter from Tillman requesting assistance in having someone appointed to a position at Clemson College, he replied politely:

I made up my mind when I accepted the Presidency never to help to put in a kinsman of mine or of a Trustee in any position at Clemson, and to deviate from such a policy even in a single instance would weaken my position, and I do not know when I may need a record along this line in which no flaw can be discovered.

I am sure that you must agree with me fully in all of the above, since that has been your platform.  

He concedes smaller issues to Tillman, thus sacrificing the less important matters in favor of retaining his own authority over Clemson College’s daily affairs. In this instance, Riggs glosses over his refusal to hire someone by referencing both his and Tillman’s great sense of integrity in all business dealings. He disagreed with Tillman but was sure to stroke his ego while doing so.

As skillful as Riggs proved to be, however, even he was not able to avoid the conflict between Tillman and Simpson over what exactly happened at Fort Hill in 1886

79 Walter Riggs to Ben Tillman Letter, April 10, 1912, Folder 55, Box 5, Walter Merritt Riggs Papers, Series 17, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
and who deserved the credit. Following Simpson’s death in 1912, Tillman wrote Riggs with a seemingly innocent request:

I was very sorry I could not attend the last meeting of the Board for I would have been especially glad to have borne testimony to the worth of both Col. Simpson and W. D. Evans. They were both good trustees, loyal to the college in every aspect and always worked for its best interest. Col. Simpson, though sometimes seemingly perverse, had no thought in his heart but love of Clemson.

By the way, I wish you would make inquiry and find out whether Colonel Simpson left any sort of memoirs, or autobiography. He told me once a few years ago that he had written a story about the college and left it with his wife. If I remember aright she is dead too. Therefore the paper, if such a paper was written, is probably in the hands of one of his children. Quietly find out and let me know, if you can. My reason is to try to learn whether he and I agreed about the story of how Clemson came to be founded. You have my version of it given to the press some years ago. The feature of it that I desire to learn about is his version of my visit to Colonel Clemson when he and I and D. K. Norris dined with Colonel Clemson and the terms of the will were agreed upon. All the others are dead and I too will soon go over the river.°

Even after Simpson’s death, Tillman was occupied with spreading his version of the truth over Simpson’s. Tillman’s letter is telling of his mindset and prickly relationship with Simpson. He writes a compliment to describe Simpson but includes a barb along with it.

Most importantly, Tillman’s letter makes it clear he was aware that Simpson’s account differed from his version of the events in question. He knew Simpson had a different story to tell and wanted to know the details of his version for comparison. His statement about being the last living participant in that meeting implies that Tillman may have wanted to squash what he believed to be Simpson’s erroneous account before his own death. The letter to Riggs contains no other subject matter beyond the usual pleasantries expected in such a letter.

° Ben Tillman to Walter Riggs Letter, December 15, 1913, Folder 90, Box 8, Walter Merritt Riggs Papers, Series 17, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
Riggs responded to Tillman’s request for information on what Simpson may have left behind a week later:

[If I can do so without causing suspicion will try to find out Col. Simpson’s version of the foundation of the College as recorded in his autobiography, if he left such a document. He has recently published a history of Pendleton and the achievements of some of its principal citizens. I have a copy of this, but have not yet had time to look it over.

I am sure Col. Simpson if he has published anything regarding the incident of your and Col. Norris’ dining with Mr. Clemson, that it will be the version which he published in the newspapers. I have heard him say several times that your version was an error and that his was the correct record, and you know how difficult it was for him to change his opinion.  

Riggs agrees to undertake Tillman’s request, but he does not hide the fact that Simpson was quite vocal about Tillman’s errors. Riggs confirms that Simpson’s account was published in at least one newspaper if not several. However, he also soothes Tillman on the subject by noting how obstinate Simpson was once his mind was made up about something.

Tillman responded to the Riggs letter three days later on December 23, 1913, home for the holidays at this point: “I have never seen anything that Colonel Simpson published about the founding of Clemson, although you told me he said my version was erroneous.” No more mention of Simpson is made in this letter. The remainder of it is comprised of holiday plans and appeals to visit. This means that Tillman penned this letter for nearly the sole purpose of denying any knowledge of Simpson’s published account refuting his own. If Tillman sincerely had no actual knowledge of Simpson’s

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81 Walter Riggs to Ben Tillman Letter, December 20, 1913, Folder 90, Box 8, Walter Merritt Riggs Papers, Series 17, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
82 Ben Tillman to Walter Riggs Letter, December 23, 1913, Folder 90, Box 8, Walter Merritt Riggs Papers, Series 17, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
beliefs on the matter, then it is difficult to believe he would have asked Riggs to investigate other writings on the subject in the first place. It is much more likely that Tillman had knowledge of Simpson’s version and hoped to save face by not discussing it in detail by feigning ignorance. In that case, he would have wanted to know of every version that contradicted his own.

The preserved exchange of letters concerning Simpson’s autobiography ends here. It is unknown if Riggs ever found Simpson’s written account and if Tillman ever had a chance to read it before his death. Nevertheless, the fact that Tillman made such a request of Riggs speaks volumes as to the relationship between Tillman and Simpson. A feud must have existed centering around the events of 1886 for Tillman to be so concerned with Simpson’s documents after his death. There would be no other reason for Tillman to ask Riggs for information about a deceased man’s papers unless he was concerned about their contents. The fact that Tillman’s version of the truth is the one that has ironically lasted into the 21st century is indicative of his victory over Simpson as to the credit for Clemson University’s existence.

During the early years of Clemson College, Tillman was not the only active participant in the quarrel over Clemson’s will. In addition to his openly contesting Tillman on matters pertaining to Thomas Green Clemson’s will, Simpson displayed levels of hostility toward Tillman in other writings as well. In a letter to Tillman dated April 12, 1906, Simpson wrote:

My son John travels all of the Southern States, and he wrote me the other day that on the trains and in all the hotels the universal talk is about you, and it all to your
credit, dwelling especially on your honesty. You are all right, but remember I have not forgiven you, no, no. It is unclear what incident Simpson is referring to in this letter. As Simpson specifically mentions Tillman’s honesty, it can be supposed that his grudge with Tillman has something to do with integrity. It is interesting that the hostility existed between the two prior to Tillman’s published account in 1909. Perhaps it was simply a case of incompatible personalities, but there is evidence to support a substantial feud fueled by more than prickly demeanors.

Additionally, Simpson seemed irritated with Tillman’s schedule upon occasion. The records indicate several instances where Simpson wished to call a meeting of the Board of Trustees in his role as President, but Tillman opposed it due to his calendar. Simpson comes across as polite but frustrated at his inability to conduct business on behalf of the college due to Tillman’s schedule. On at least one occasion, however, the request came from Tillman to call the Board together in response to the cadet walkout of 1902. Simpson’s response attempts to tactfully put Tillman in his proper place:

I received your telegram this evening urging the immediate calling of the Board…I am always willing to take the advice of the members of the Board as to such matters of discretion placed upon me, especially when they are on the ground and know all that I know. But in this case I alone am on the ground, and know of many things that are no doubt unknown to you…I heard of the action of the class just before dark of the day they left, I immediately went to the college…I am simply tired to death, and if you knew what I have gone through you would thank me for this long letter.

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83 Richard Simpson to Ben Tillman Letter, April 12, 1906, Folder 29, Box 14, Benjamin R. Tillman Papers, Mss. 0080.01, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
84 Richard Simpson to Ben Tillman Letter, May 4, 1902, Folder 3, Box 4, Benjamin R. Tillman Papers, Mss. 0080.01, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
In the lengthy letter, Simpson outlines exactly what transpired that led to the walkout and promises to investigate the complaints of the cadets. Simpson makes a point to note that he rushed to campus immediately upon hearing of the walkout. The passage illustrates the larger truth that Simpson was present when Tillman could not be due to his status as a U.S. Senator. It was a question of proximity; Simpson could be on campus when Tillman could not. It is important to note, however, that Tillman participated in the investigation that followed the 1902 walkout. An article in *The Washington Post*, published May 12, 1902, notes the cadets “were persuaded to remain through the efforts of President Simpson” while Tillman “took a prominent part in the investigation” that followed.\(^5\) This illustrates that Tillman participated in Clemson College business as often as his schedule allowed.

With these facts in mind concerning the complicated relationship that existed between Simpson and Tillman, two senior Board members, Riggs’s contributions and success as president are even more impressive. He managed to juggle relationships with both men while still acting in the best interests of the college. It must have been difficult at times to balance the personalities of such strong-willed men. Ironically, it may have been the distance separating the two that made the feat possible for Riggs, rarely having to interact with both men at the same time. Hints exist in Riggs’s writings on the founding of Clemson College that point to his thoughts on the squabble between the two. In 1923, the *Greenville News* published a brief historical sketch on the founding of Clemson College, written by President Walter Merritt Riggs. Riggs writes of Thomas

Green Clemson’s great vision for South Carolina as well as the agricultural education movement at the federal level as demonstrated by the Morrill Act and the Hatch Act. He draws attention to the meeting between Clemson, Tillman, Simpson, and Norris at Fort Hill in 1886, giving Simpson credit for uncovering and correcting legal flaws within Clemson’s will as originally drafted. While Riggs is correct in his treatment of Simpson with respect to that meeting, it is virtually the only mention of Simpson in his account of the defense of the Clemson bequest. Certainly, Riggs credits Simpson with turning the will into “an instrument that withstood every legal assault, winning its final triumph in the Supreme Court of the United States.” That would most likely be taken as high praise for any legal mind in the country, but it is not all that Simpson contributed to Clemson and his legacy. Riggs begins to give Simpson part of the credit he is certainly due, but his focus then turns to Ben Tillman.

Riggs points out that Tillman’s one meeting with Clemson and the others rejuvenated Tillman’s hope in the cause. According to Riggs, Tillman did not view Clemson’s bequest as the point of origin for the farmers’ movement in South Carolina; rather, he saw the Clemson bequest as a continuation of the work already begun by the Farmers’ Convention with his guidance. Instead of the Clemson will being the origin of a movement, Tillman used it as a catalyst for real change that could not be denied within the legislature. Riggs credits Tillman with much of the will’s success, noting that the

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86 Historical Sketch of Clemson College by W. M. Riggs in 1923, Folder 65, Box 4, James Corcoran Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
politician’s “writings and his eloquence…made converts to the cause, and with his harsh
invective drove much of the opposition to cover.”

Riggs takes it one step further in his history. He describes Tillman’s contributions
to Clemson College:

To Tillman as to no other man, Clemson College is due. But for his leadership
and power, Mr. Clemson’s vision of an agricultural college at the home of his
great father-in-law would never have been fulfilled, and Col. Simpson’s work in
drawing the will would have gone for naught.

With these two sentences, Riggs succinctly sums up what Tillman’s memory around
campus and the community has been for over a century. Riggs accomplishes several
things with his estimation of Tillman. First, he makes it apparent that he views Tillman as
the most important figure in the founding of Clemson College. This is not surprising
given their close friendship. It is only natural that Riggs would view Tillman as a
quintessential figure as he knew him better than Simpson. Riggs does credit Clemson and
Simpson with their respective contributions, but the clause regarding Tillman remains:
“To Tillman as to no other man…”

The statement elevates Tillman as the most important figure to note in any
discussion of the history of the founding of Clemson College. The Greenville News
evaluation of Tillman and Simpson by Riggs matters as it was read by many throughout
the state and would have helped shape public opinion concerning the roles of each man with respect to Clemson College. Newspapers are undoubtedly influential in the court of public opinion, and it is likely that each person who read the account passed those beliefs on to others as fact.

The separation between Simpson and Tillman becomes even more pronounced and unusual later in the same account. While he gives nearly all credit for the Act of Acceptance to Tillman, he also acknowledges Simpson’s heart as a consideration:

Col. R. W. Simpson was elected President of the Board and served in that position for seventeen years. No man in South Carolina ever loved Clemson College better, or served it more faithfully than did this old Roman, whom Mr. Clemson spoke of in his writings as “my trusted friend.”

Riggs admits that Simpson’s sentiments for the College were unmatched, but he still gave most of the credit for Clemson’s success to Tillman. This is especially incredible considering how long Simpson served in the foremost position of the Board of Trustees. Of all the Board’s chairmen, Simpson is the second longest serving. Only Alan Johnstone served longer in that capacity from 1907 until his death in 1929. While term limits since imposed by the Board itself have shortened years of service as chair considerably, it is nonetheless impressive and speaks to Simpson’s commitment and dedication as well as the respect of his peers for his leadership.

Riggs’s account is enlightening on its own. It becomes even more important to the question at hand when compared with another historical sketch written by Riggs in 1910, thirteen years earlier. The earlier history includes many of the same events as the later

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90 Historical Sketch of Clemson College by W. M. Riggs in 1923, Folder 65, Box 4, James Corcoran Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
one, but it reads quite differently. The focus of this version is on the family history and
greatness of Thomas Green Clemson. It is a more factual and less flowery account, and
the only mention of Simpson or Tillman in this version is where their names are
mentioned from a passage in the will itself. It describes the events leading up to
Clemson’s death, particularly with respect to the Fort Hill property in great detail but
fails to include any part played by Tillman or Simpson in fighting for its acceptance by
the state. In fact, this version includes more information about John C. Calhoun than it
does two of the most vital founding fathers of Clemson College, giving him no credit for
the school itself: “Neither by intention, nor by donation, nor by any form of hereditary
transmission does it any where appear that John C. Calhoun had anything to do with the
founding of the College which bears Clemson’s name.”91

At the time, Calhoun’s descendants were attempting to make such a claim when
Riggs penned this sketch. The statement serves to take the focus off Calhoun’s greatness
and redirect it back to Clemson. It also includes a history of the actions of the Pendleton
Farmers’ Society as it pertains to Clemson and an agricultural school. It is a more
mechanical description of the school with enrollment charts, a listing of holdings, and
income information.

The purpose of the 1910 sketch was most likely for College purposes, although it
is unclear from the record if this version was ever widely circulated for public
consumption. As the 1923 piece was published in a newspaper, it is clear that it was

91 Historical Sketch of Clemson College by W. M. Riggs in 1910, Folder 65, Box 4, James Corcoran
Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries,
Clemson, SC.
meant for the general public. Riggs authored two very different accounts. If the same author could write about the same events so distinctly, the question becomes why. Why did Riggs take a different tone with his 1923 account? Was it simply a question of audience or were there other circumstances to consider? What might have changed between 1910 and 1923 to convince Riggs that Simpson and Tillman especially should be included in his narrative? Why would Tillman be given a place of prominence over Simpson? What factors motivated Riggs in each case?

There are some circumstances that likely influenced the change in focus between 1910 and 1923. First, both Simpson and Tillman were still alive in 1910. Riggs may have been reluctant to write about two living subjects who both happened to be his bosses. If he did not convey the story correctly or offended either one in any way, it could have been disastrous for Riggs professionally. Knowing how unsuccessful some of his predecessors were, Riggs may have feared for his position at Clemson College if his writings were taken the wrong way. It may have simply been safer for him to only include deceased subjects in his original history. By the later version, both Tillman and Simpson had died so there was less risk to consider in writing of each man’s involvement with the Clemson bequest.

It is also possible that family connections weighed upon Riggs in 1923. One of Ben Tillman’s sons, Henry Cumming Tillman, was elected to the Board of Trustees on November 13, 1920, and served until 1924. While it is not possible to prove definitively, this turn of events may have influenced Riggs. Even though Ben Tillman was deceased, it could be construed as difficult for Riggs to write about him while his son was a member
of the Board of Trustees. It was a fine line for Riggs to walk as he attempted to convey an accurate history for the readers of the *Greenville News* and not upset one of his employers. It is a precarious position that most people would struggle with balancing properly. This is not to suggest that the younger Tillman would have done anything unethical or ill-advised with respect to his father’s memory at Clemson. It is merely to point out that Riggs may have felt pressure, real or imagined, when penning his history. Again, the close relationship between Riggs and Ben Tillman is well-documented in their letter exchange, so it is entirely possible that Riggs was simply honoring his deceased mentor and friend.

Riggs’ treatment of Tillman and Simpson in his 1923 account may also be explained by the simple facts. Tillman served as a governor, U.S. Senator, and nationally recognized political figure. Meanwhile, Simpson was a small town farmer and lawyer. While both men may have been respected by their Clemson College peers, there was no competition between the two in terms of power. Clearly, Tillman owned the stronger resume. While Tillman fought alongside Simpson for the Act of Acceptance, Tillman went on to achieve real political results on a variety of issues while Simpson remained a local figure. Riggs wrote so highly of Tillman’s influence on the success of Clemson College because Tillman had wielded significant power in the statewide debate over Clemson’s will and leveraged that success into a quasi-Populist platform that led to significant changes in South Carolina.92

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It is known that Simpson’s family respected his contributions to Clemson College and understood how integral he had been in its formation. Simpson’s wife must have thought her husband spent most of his time on Clemson College. She wrote about her husband’s involvement:

The family today is indebted to the College for his life with us now. For had it not been for the pledge he made years ago when we were so poor and he was in such miserable health, he would have succumbed long ago. But that College was his life’s work, his theme, his hope and often lifted him from his bed of sickness. Now he realizes his work has been completed by the help of the good Lord. There is still more work for him to do for the College, and he will never lose sight of that work.\(^{93}\)

This statement differs with the beliefs of Tillman and his family. Tillman himself wrote about how much he had contributed to Clemson’s will and to the existence of the school. In a letter to Riggs in 1912, Tillman wrote that “the college must get along some day without my assistance and help.”\(^{94}\) Tillman clearly thought highly of his management capabilities to make such a statement concerning the college’s ability to survive without his leadership and guidance.

Contrast Tillman’s statement with what is known about Simpson. Simpson’s wife turns that line of reasoning on its head by crediting the school with her husband’s life. Rather than asking for something to honor her husband, Maria thanks the College for what it had done for her husband and family. She credits Clemson College for his very life, alluding to it perhaps becoming his reason for living. It was a project that gave him

\(^{93}\) Richard Simpson Autobiography, Box 1, Richard W. Simpson Papers, Mss. 96, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.

\(^{94}\) Ben Tillman to Walter Riggs Letter, July 5, 1912, Folder 62, Box 8, Walter Merritt Riggs Papers, Series 17, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
purpose. She also makes it clear that he had no intention of giving up on the advancement of the College.

It is interesting that rather than hoping for something from Clemson College, Simpson’s family acknowledged that they had received much from the school. It was a different mentality than what is prevalent today. It underlines an appreciation for the College, and as a result, an appreciation for Thomas Green Clemson. Grateful might be the best word to describe the Simpson family in the early 20th century.

Simpson would serve Clemson College until his death in 1909. After vacating his post as President of the Board of Trustees in 1907, he continued to attend meetings and remained an active participant in campus business. Tillman participated as a trustee as frequently as his schedule and health would allow until his death in 1918. He remained a United States Senator until the end, so his time was divided between Washington, D.C. and South Carolina, although he frequently wrote letters to Riggs and others on campus, providing opinions and directions. He was quite active in Clemson College business albeit from a distance. In fact, physicians publicly attributed Tillman’s poor health of 1908 to “hard work” in service to both his country and Clemson College, as he suffered an attack immediately following a meeting of the Board of Trustees.95 Both men died with the satisfaction that they had poured much of themselves into something larger than either of them, something that would endure beyond their physical beings. Each man had shared similar concerns and dreams for South Carolina, but their beloved state would remember them differently.

CHAPTER THREE
MEMORY CHOICES: WHAT’S IN A NAME?

With Ben Tillman’s death in 1918, an era in Clemson College’s short but productive history drew to a close. The three power players of the agricultural movement in South Carolina were silent after decades of vigorous activity. The Board of Trustees was left with the task of moving forward without the voices of the influential men it had relied on for years. Inevitably, life went on and the college moved forward, evolving eventually over the course of the 20th century to a fully integrated, co-educational, civilian university. In the meantime, however, much was written of the founding fathers and the roles each had played in the early days of Clemson College.

What may have been surprising to people affiliated with Clemson College between 1890 and 1912 was the amount of print dedicated to Tillman’s heroics in the years leading up to the Act of Acceptance. Given Simpson’s position of President of the Board of Trustees for so many years and his role as Thomas Green Clemson’s most trusted advisor and closest friend, a trustee, faculty member, or cadet may have expected to read more about Dick Simpson and his decades of service to the dream of his employer. However, something different unfolded during the 20th century. Simpson’s name appears sprinkled throughout the biographies of Clemson and Tillman, although no biographer has published his story as a standalone work. Guy R. Everson and Edward W. Simpson, Jr. (no relation) did edit and compile Richard and Tally Simpson’s wartime letters into a book, *Far, far from home.* The book paints a picture of the Civil War

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experiences of the brothers, although there is little biographical information included, save a short introduction and epilogue. Simpson’s involvement with Clemson College is mentioned briefly in the conclusion. Furthermore, Simpson is rarely mentioned in local newspapers of the time. Tillman, however, became a regular subject of journalists and biographers alike.

The catalog of Tillman’s great deeds began with Francis Butler Simkins’s *The Tillman Movement in South Carolina*, published in 1926. It is the biography that is most contemporary to Tillman himself, with a publication date only eight years after his death. It is a traditional biography, tracing Tillman’s life from childhood to his years as a senator. Simkins limits commentary on Clemson College to its role within the larger agricultural movement in postwar South Carolina. He ties the college’s existence to a larger theme of political unrest in the state during this time period, of which Tillman was one of the chief protagonists. Tillman’s role related to Clemson College is treated as part of the whole rather than worthy of its own chapter.

However, Simkins gives Tillman much credit for the fact that Thomas Green Clemson left his estate to the state of South Carolina at all. According to Simkins, “Clemson…had been induced by Tillman and two others interested in this subject to leave his property for the establishment of the college.”\(^97\) In 1926, Simkins accepted Tillman’s 1909 account of what had happened at Fort Hill in 1886. It is unclear if Simkins even considered Simpson’s alternate theory of that day, although it is unlikely considering Simkins was completely focused on Tillman in his writings. He even fails to

note the names of Simpson and Norris, referring to them instead as “two others.” This suggests that Simpson’s writings were not a consideration of Simkins and that perhaps Simpson’s account was not as widely read as Tillman’s.

The argument can be made that it is impossible to remove every aspect of bias from a writer’s work. It is nearly inevitable that personal feelings will impact a writer’s treatment of his subject. This appears to be the case with Simkins. He was from South Carolina and spent most of his professional career in the South, serving as president of the Southern Historical Association in 1954. *The Tillman Movement in South Carolina* was written as his doctoral thesis at Duke University and was his first published work. It is important to note that Simkins was raised within a stone’s throw of Tillman’s hometown. This likely explains his choice of topic and perhaps the tones of admiration present throughout his work.

Simkins would publish another biography of Tillman in 1944, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman, South Carolinian*. With many more years of scholarly research and publications on his vita, he writes in a different tone and with an eye to other judgments in his second Tillman work. Consider his treatment of the 1886 meeting at Fort Hill:

The four men spent the day discussing the agricultural college. According to Tillman’s version, Clemson was uncertain whether to turn Fort Hill into a Calhoun memorial or to use it for a college, until committed by his three visitors to the college idea with the scheme for seven life trustees…Ben Tillman undoubtedly overemphasized his influence in the making of the Clemson will. That document had been given definite form three years before the Edgefield farmer had his one interview with the Fort Hill recluse.98

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Compare this account with the one written by the same author on the same subject in 1926. In the first book, Simkins accepts Tillman’s telling of events, giving him credit for much of Clemson’s will. By 1944, however, Simkins questions what Tillman wrote in 1909, wondering how he could have influenced the end product of the will so much when it had already been drafted years earlier. While Simkins does not write of Simpson or Norris in this book either, he does entertain the notion that Tillman made up or embellished some of his claims. With the phrase, “According to Tillman’s version” Simkins also admits that other versions of this date do exist and acknowledges having reviewed them. After finding other accounts, Simkins was less than convinced that Tillman’s story was not exaggerated. Again, Simkins was attempting to convey the totality of Tillman’s life, so it is not surprising that he did not take up the research of determining with whom the truth did exist. There must have been enough in the rest of his research to convince him that Tillman’s version was not completely accurate.

The two accounts offered by Simkins underscore a larger theme of Ben Tillman in historical memory. While he was a public figure, extremely well-known throughout South Carolina, Tillman was and is elusive in the search for historical truth. Simkins researched and studied Tillman in depth, evidenced by the two biographies he wrote 18 years apart. While the facts do not change, Simkins comes to different conclusions about the man and his contributions each time. While it is possible that new evidence surfaced in the interim that swayed his writings, it is also possible that Tillman was a Janus-faced figure in southern history. He is difficult to understand because there were multiple facets to his personality, making a firm grasp on his character and contributions arguable and
difficult to achieve. The duality of man and the problem of changing societal values have illuminated Tillman as a lightning rod figure who tends to polarize and spark debate. Perhaps the problem is that Tillman has never been fully and accurately understood for his contributions to Clemson University or his triumphs and shortcomings in other areas as well.

Simkins’s work in 1926 was followed by a biography of the benefactor himself, *Thomas Green Clemson*, which appeared in 1937 and penned by two Clemson Agricultural College professors, Alester G. Holmes and George R. Sherrill. Holmes was a professor of history, and, in full disclosure, a son-in-law of Richard Simpson. Sherrill was a professor of economics and government. Both took a keen interest in Clemson College and the circumstances surrounding its founding. While the focus of the book is Clemson, Simpson and Tillman both emerge as important characters within the larger story.

Simpson first appears as a friendly advisor to Clemson sometime between 1880 and 1882 when he wrote Clemson concerning his proposed bequest and the condition that John C. Calhoun’s body be exhumed and returned to Fort Hill. The authors give credit to Simpson for talking Clemson out of this peculiar request, as the Rion will appeared to include no mention of this. The authors support Simpson’s claim, however, that he had no real knowledge of an actual will until he met with Clemson at Fort Hill in 1886.

Later, Holmes and Sherrill tackle the question of what exactly happened when Tillman, Norris, and Simpson descended upon Fort Hill in 1886. The authors consulted primary sources and recount the confusion:
[Clemson] invited B. R. Tillman, D. K. Norris, and R. W. Simpson, a lawyer and intimate friend to come to Fort Hill for a conference about the matter. The reports of what took place at this conference are conflicting and not altogether clear. Writing about “The Origin of Clemson College” twenty-three years later, Tillman said in substance that he was invited to Fort Hill in the fall of 1886. After spending the night there, he and Clemson were joined next morning by Simpson and Norris; the four of them spent the entire day discussing the idea of the farmers’ college. According to his story, the four of them planned the entire scheme in detail, and Clemson was thus induced to make important and fundamental changes in the will, Simpson making memoranda of such suggested changes. However, Tillman’s version of what took place at this conference does not agree with Simpson’s testimony in the case of Lee v. Simpson in 1889, with an interview he gave in 1891, nor with his oral description of what occurred at the Fort Hill conference.

Simpson stated that Clemson called him aside, and asked him to read the will of 1883, pointing out any defects which he saw. The other two men did not know of the existence of the will until he told them after they had driven away from Fort Hill. According to Simpson, it was only a short time afterward that Clemson came to him and asked him to draft a new will. When Simpson declined on the ground that it would be discourteous to Rion, Clemson urged Rion to come to Fort Hill and draft a new will. Only after Clemson had assured him that Rion could not come for several months and that, at his age, it would be dangerous to delay, did Simpson agree to write the new will, and then on the condition that Rion remain as executor and devisee. After Rion’s death, a few months later, codicils were added substituting Simpson for Rion as executor of the will.

What probably took place at the conference was a general discussion of the matter of an agricultural college, and a decision by Clemson to change his will so as to serve better the great purpose which he had in mind. The chances are that they all discussed together some of the main features which came to be embodied in the new will. It is also probable that the personnel of the proposed board of trustees for the new institution was considered in some detail. Most of the men named in the will as trustees had been active in supporting the idea Tillman had been so vigorously advocating.99

Holmes and Sherrill accomplish several tasks with this passage. First, they acknowledge that the events of that day are contested. They do not make judgments about which is correct and withhold the other version from the reader. They summarize each version and

99 Holmes and Sherrill, Thomas Green Clemson, 157-159.
then allow the reader to determine which is more correct. Either Holmes and Sherrill liked the freedom of this approach or were unable to determine definitively which account was accurate.

To their credit, the authors note that Simpson provided the same account on multiple occasions, and there are other occurrences not listed in this work as well. No fewer than six times Simpson told his side of the story, and it does not change substantively over a period of over 20 years. It is also to Holmes’s credit that he does not appear to allow family circumstances to cloud his assessment. Simpson’s and Tillman’s versions are expressed in much the same method and style, therefore not lending credence to one writing over another. Holmes could have easily declared Simpson as correct, but he took care not to overemphasize Simpson at the expense of Tillman.

However, Holmes and Sherrill do propose what they believe to be an accurate amalgamation of what probably transpired that day. They cede to Tillman that the college was discussed amongst the men as well as the trustee structure. They do soften Tillman’s description by acknowledging that Clemson was already determined to bequeath Fort Hill for the purposes of an agricultural school, so they describe each man’s influence more as changes than significant sweeping reform. This is logical as Tillman would have been called to Fort Hill due to his influence in the agricultural movement brewing in the state at the time. In doing so, they largely deny Simpson’s account despite the fact that his was recorded multiple times and much closer to the date of the actual events. Why would Tillman’s version gain such traction among these authors?
Perhaps the answer can be found in the last sentence of the assessment. It would appear Holmes and Sherrill based their conclusion on the notion that most of the original, named trustees were Tillman supporters. If this is true, it is a logical conclusion for the authors. However, there is no evidence that this was necessarily the case. Tillman’s own account points to a fallacy in their logic:

M. L. Donaldson, John E. Wannamaker, and J. E. Bradley, all of whom had been prominent in the agitation for an Agricultural College were suggested and accepted by Mr. Clemson, and Col. Bowen a prominent farmer of Pickens County, whom I had never seen, was the seventh man. It is well to note the personnel of the original seven life members and to remember that at that time there were no factional differences in the State. It happened in the alignment in 1890 three of these men were my supporters and three were not, and it is worth remembering that in filling vacancies caused by death among life Trustees since, that one reformer, and two conservatives have been chosen. No political influences or feelings were considered or involved in the selection of trustees then or since…

Tillman admits to at least an awareness of five of the original trustees – Donaldson, Wannamaker, Bradley, Simpson, and Norris. However, he does not admit knowing them personally, and he does not call them his friends. He did not know Bowen at all perhaps by reputation. Holmes and Sherrill agree with Tillman’s point that each of these men supported the founding of an agricultural college. The implication, however, that Tillman personally selected these men is not a foregone conclusion. Tillman notes that only half of these men were his supporters. With his political ambition, it is hard to imagine Tillman not including more of his own supporters on the Board if he had such influence over Clemson in naming the seven. Therefore, perhaps the account concocted

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100 Benjamin R. Tillman Account of Origin of Clemson College, Folder 50, Box 3, James Corcoran Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
by Holmes and Sherrill from the two versions is not that accurate either if it is (at least in part) based upon a flawed assumption.

The authors continue in a later chapter with a history of the agricultural college movement, noting that Tillman played a part in the agitation of the mid-1880s, the second attempt to found such a school. Holmes and Sherrill are somewhat fair in their assessment of why Tillman became so synonymous with Clemson:

Upon the death of Clemson there began the third movement for the college. The basis of this movement was Clemson’s bequest, and a campaign for its acceptance, led by Tillman. Thus Clemson College really began in the great social and political revolution popularly known as the Tillman Movement. However, it would be far from the truth to assume that the acceptance of the Clemson bequest was due only to the efforts of Tillman and his followers. They aided materially in promoting the movement for acceptance of the bequest, and perhaps they themselves were aided by it, but the forces that finally expressed themselves in the establishment of Clemson College had been slowly gathering for many years. Some of the men who led in the fight for the acceptance had little or nothing in common with the larger Tillman Movement. Some of them later even became hostile to Tillman and to certain features of his program, and fought him bitterly. A few men who refused to support the acceptance of the bequest later joined Tillman’s movement.\(^\text{101}\)

They propagate the belief that Tillman led the agitation, perhaps rightfully so as the Clemson College movement became known as the Tillman Movement. However, Holmes and Sherrill are careful not to award Tillman \textit{all} the credit for the movement’s success. Although they do not mention names, they acknowledge that countless others played important roles in the Act of Acceptance.

Holmes and Sherrill accomplish something else with this passage. They link Clemson College with more than just Tillman; it became a symbol for the Tillman Movement. The Tillman Movement was larger than just the one man. It stood for

\(^{101}\) Holmes and Sherrill, \textit{Thomas Green Clemson}, 166.
something broader, something white citizens in South Carolina had yearned for since Reconstruction – change. Tillman became representative of everything the common white man hoped for in the wake of such devastation. As Tillman the man grew into Tillman the movement, Clemson College became a physical embodiment of that change and was bonded to Tillman the man as well as Tillman the movement. The work does not identify Simpson in any way in either the legislative proceedings or the legal quagmire the will found itself tangled in during 1888 and 1889.

Wright Bryan, a 1923 Clemson College graduate, editor of *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* and *The Atlanta Constitution*, and later a Clemson University vice president for development, perpetuated some of the earlier writings of Holmes and Sherrill with his 1979 book, *Clemson: An Informal History of the University, 1889-1979*. He discusses the revolutionary bond that supposedly existed between Clemson and Tillman, describing it simply, “Clemson in death and Tillman in the vigor of young life led the way for Clemson College and later Clemson University to become what Thomas Green Clemson had dreamed.”102 In the early pages of his book Bryan sets up Tillman as a figure nearly as important as Clemson in the history of the school. With the wording of his thoughts, he makes it clear that he believed Clemson was a benefactor while Tillman was the active, driving force behind the school’s very existence. This would have no doubt pleased Tillman. It is true that after Clemson’s death, someone had to take responsibility for the practical matters associated with carrying out his vision. Tillman is most often credited, as he is here, although evidence suggests Simpson and others played a part as well.

To his credit, Bryan acknowledges that there may have been more to the story of the founding of Clemson College than what Tillman wrote in 1909. He writes briefly of the disagreement between Tillman and Simpson over how that fateful day unfolded in 1886, but he does not take sides in the matter. He simply notes that both men believed their version to be accurate. Despite this concession to Simpson that something else may have transpired that day than what Tillman conveyed, it is obvious that Tillman is the main protagonist in this work. Simpson is not relegated completely to the background, as Bryan does write of President Mell’s accusations of nepotism directed at Simpson during his tenure as the chief executive officer at Clemson College, which suggests the active role he continued to play in the College’s formative years. It could also be indicative of the disruption wrought by Simpson during his frequent visits to campus as cited in Mell’s resignation. It is possible that Simpson was too involved in the daily activities of the college, at least in the administration’s estimation.

In 1987, another author attempted to write about the founding of Clemson College. *Getting to Know Clemson University is Quite an Education: Determination Makes Dreams Come True* was written by Joseph Ellers and is filled with so-called “facts” and musings from the author’s time spent on campus. Ellers came from a political consulting background and served in various governmental administrative roles in the City of Clemson and the Town of Central. His is not a scholarly work, but it was published and read within the Clemson community. Despite the fact that his sources are spotty at best, Ellers attempts to educate the reader about Tillman’s role in the school’s founding. He writes that the school was “the culmination of a dream” that “was nurtured
early by Mr. Benjamin R. Tillman.”¹⁰³ As this is located on the first page of the book, Ellers sets the reader up with an understanding of Tillman’s important role from the outset. Simpson is not mentioned alongside Tillman.

Ellers goes on to write that the meeting in 1886 “brought Clemson and Tillman together,” acknowledging that it was their only contact but it “was valuable as it placed knowledge in the hands of Ben Tillman.”¹⁰⁴ Ellers viewed the 1886 meeting as important for what it gave Tillman, not for the influence it may have been on Clemson. This implies two things: 1. Ellers accepts that Clemson had already formulated most of his estate plan prior to meeting Tillman, and 2. The content of that day’s discussion was most useful and powerful for Tillman to use above all others who may have been involved. In this sense, Ellers accepted Tillman’s version of that day’s events, carrying on the beliefs perpetuated earlier by Simkins, Holmes, and Sherrill.

As Bryan and Ellers were contemporaries who wrote within ten years of each other, a comparison may be helpful. Bryan wrote as an older man nearing the end of his career, but Ellers was much younger at the time of his book’s publication. While each man tends to favor Tillman’s account, Bryan is fairer in his treatment of Simpson than Ellers. For Ellers, there is no truth other than Tillman’s truth. Bryan accepts that the historical question at hand is more complicated than that. Bryan’s book, moreover, is filled with primary sources while Ellers’s book is more a collection of reminiscences and events he heard about from others. As such, the Bryan work is more acceptable from an

¹⁰⁴ Ellers, *Getting to Know Clemson University*, 10.
historian’s perspective, but that fact does not erase Ellers’s book from existence as it was widely read in the Clemson community at that time.

The truly puzzling fact about the books when viewed as a pair is how two authors writing in the same time period could come to such different conclusions about the same events and the same people. On the surface, this appears irreconcilable. However, it points to a larger issue within the Simpson and Tillman feud. The disagreement about who the men were and what each contributed to the situation highlights the difficulty involved with grasping the truth behind what happened. Generally speaking, the historiography associated with the founding of Clemson College reveals one universal truth. Authors who relied heavily on the primary sources associated with the events came to a different conclusion about what may have happened than authors who simply repeated community lore. The sources, therefore, support a balanced version of events while communal or public memory choices support a lopsided version.

This conundrum of perception can be explained quite easily from a broad view of South Carolina history. Simpson provided no fewer than four accounts of his role in the founding of Clemson College. Each time, his story varies little and the details remain largely the same over a time span of twenty years. However, Simpson was merely a local attorney who rarely traveled away from Pendleton in the later decades of his life. Meanwhile, Tillman was a rising political star. He amassed thousands of disciples across the state and eventually found himself in Washington, D.C. with an even larger audience. He became a larger than life figure for a state that felt it had been shamed into submission by the federal government. Tillman’s rising stock was a point of pride for his followers,
and they spoke fondly, even reverently, of him for years after his death. Even for his multitude of critics, he remained an object of attention – and attention-getting. Thus, Simpson’s story is supported by multiple written accounts in his own hand while Tillman’s version is supported by fewer sources and the memory choices of his followers.

The enigma of Tillman is captured well in some respects by Stephen Kantrowitz in his 2000 work, *Ben Tillman & the Reconstruction of White Supremacy*. While the author focused mostly on the race issue, Kantrowitz recognized the problem facing Tillman throughout his rise to power, “…if he came to be perceived as a mere office-seeker, his message would lose its power.”\(^{105}\) The Ben Tillman of the 1880s had a problem. He needed to carefully balance his hope for political authority with the suspicions of many South Carolinians following the Civil War of his motivations. In order to get their votes and loyalty, he needed to transcend the typical actions of a politician desperate for power in the minds of the people. He needed, in short, a platform that was bigger than any one person, and in Thomas Green Clemson he found it. It also happened to support Tillman’s documented interest in agricultural reform and became the perfect action item on which to base his movement for change.

While Kantrowitz does not explore the 1886 Fort Hill meeting in depth, he does note that Tillman met with Clemson in order “to ask him to consider endowing an agricultural college.”\(^{106}\) While Tillman would not have approved of much that Kantrowitz wrote, he probably would have liked this statement. It signals a certain level of agreement with Tillman’s account that he was largely responsible for swaying Clemson to donate

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\(^{105}\) Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman & the Reconstruction of White Supremacy*, 126.
\(^{106}\) Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman*, 127.
his property to South Carolina for the purposes of an agricultural college. At the very least Kantrowitz accepts that Tillman and Clemson discussed the will that day, running counter to Simpson’s story.

However, Kantrowitz points to some potential problems in Tillman’s account. He includes a statement from a Tillman letter, noting that he thought the school was “a fitting monument to myself.”\textsuperscript{107} This is an interesting statement as it proves Tillman was keenly aware of the fact that his legacy was intertwined with Clemson College. While Tillman’s hope for Clemson College to become synonymous with his name does not detract from the contributions of other individuals, it does suggest a certain level of ownership over the founding and early years of the school.

Kantrowitz outlines another reason why Tillman might not be the most reliable witness after the fact – fear of death. Kantrowitz writes, “As he grew older, though, Tillman became eager to define his own legacy. In the last decade of his life, it sometimes seemed the only thing Tillman wanted to talk about were the heroic deeds of his youth.”\textsuperscript{108} It is not uncommon for people to wax poetic about their younger days when they are facing a much more imminent death than what seemed possible in youth. Tillman was no exception. It is likely the stroke in 1908 made Tillman aware of his own mortality, and he wished to turn back the clock by reminding himself and others of his earlier accomplishments. Fear of death can be a powerful motivator and this may explain the timing of Tillman’s 1909 account.

\textsuperscript{107} Kantrowitz, \textit{Ben Tillman}, 214.
\textsuperscript{108} Kantrowitz, \textit{Ben Tillman}, 295.
Additionally, Tillman suffered a stroke that could have impaired him physically and mentally, even if only temporarily. Strokes typically cause damage to the brain although the severity and extent can vary widely between patients. As the stroke occurred in 1908 and Tillman’s version of events was not penned and published until 1909, the sequence of events lends credence to the theory that he was mindful of his legacy and fearful of death following his physical ailment. Although Tillman after his stroke went on to continue his political career and remain actively involved in the affairs of Clemson College, it does raise a question as to the soundness of his account.

In 2009, the second biography of the school’s benefactor was published, *Thomas Green Clemson*, edited by Alma Bennett. While the focus of the biography has little to do with Ben Tillman or Richard Simpson, one chapter on the famous will does explicate the Fort Hill meeting. It was written by then-Clemson University General Counsel Clay Steadman. The chapter authored by Steadman is meant to be a legal analysis of Clemson’s last will and testament and the manner in which Thomas Green Clemson inherited the land at Fort Hill. A portion of the chapter, however, focuses on the circumstances surrounding Tillman and Simpson’s involvement in the final version of the will. Steadman’s version of events contrasts greatly with Simpson’s:

Clemson appears to have been very thoughtful in drafting his will. In addition to Rion’s input, he sought the advice of numerous other friends regarding his plans. In the fall of 1886, Clemson invited South Carolina political leader B. R. Tillman, along with D. K. Norris and Clemson’s attorney friend R. W. Simpson, to his home at Fort Hill to seek their counsel on his project. By this time, Simpson had eclipsed Rion as Clemson’s primary legal counselor, due apparently to Rion’s advanced age and declining health (he was to pass away on December 12, 1886)…
At this convocation at Fort Hill in 1886, Clemson sought the advice and best thinking of this group of trusted advisors regarding the structure and tactics for fulfilling his dream of an agricultural college for South Carolina’s youth. The exact details of that discussion are unknown since there are no contemporaneous notes of the meeting. Clemson makes no direct reference to it in any extant papers. The only accounts to have survived are an interview Ben Tillman gave in 1909, the testimony R. W. Simpson gave during the Lee v. Simpson trial in 1889, and a newspaper interview Simpson gave in 1891. Not only are these accounts recorded a number of years after the fact, but they are also inconsistent. All that is known for certain is that these four gentlemen – Rion, Simpson, Norris, and Tillman – met for the express purpose of discussing Clemson’s plans for a bequest to create an agricultural college at Fort Hill. As a result of this meeting, Clemson gave Simpson a copy of the original will drafted by Rion (which Simpson was unaware of until that moment) and asked him to make certain changes based upon the comments he had received from his advisors.\textsuperscript{109}

Steadman accepts Tillman’s assertion that the will was most definitely discussed at this meeting and that Clemson wanted the input of all three men. In this respect he sides with Tillman. However, Steadman also acknowledges that the men disagreed and that accounts were given years after the fact, suggesting he believes them to be possibly unreliable.

Steadman succinctly summarizes what the traditional view of the Clemson-Tillman-Simpson-Norris collaboration has been in the Clemson community in this passage. It is generally accepted as truth that the four gentlemen met to hammer out the details of Clemson’s will. However, there are two fallacies in Steadman’s recounting of events if Simpson is to be believed. First, Simpson by his own admission was not Clemson’s attorney at this time. He would not agree to represent Clemson until sometime after this meeting when it became evident that Rion could no longer act expeditiously on Clemson’s behalf. Second, Simpson vehemently insisted that the will was not brought up

at all around Tillman and Norris. Yet Steadman accepts Tillman’s narrative over Simpson’s, while admitting that the stories were inconsistent and recorded years after the events in question occurred. The question becomes why Steadman believed Tillman’s version of events when there were at least an equal number of reasons to distrust Tillman as to question Simpson.

The answer to that inquiry may lie in the memory choices made regarding Tillman during his lifetime and after in the state of South Carolina. Tillman’s popularity in his home state made him a much easier figure to remember than Simpson. Any mention of Tillman published in the local newspapers would have garnered more attention than interviews and/or letters from Simpson. Tillman had followers with similar political, moral, and ideological beliefs to carry forth his brand of gospel even after his death. Simpson did not. People tend to view the past through rose-colored lenses, so it is quite likely that the legend of Tillman and all he had done for the poor people only grew over time. This is not meant to downplay the real contributions of Ben Tillman and what became the Tillman Movement in South Carolina. He is certainly a seminal figure in the history of South Carolina. It stands to reason, then, that Tillman’s enigma would only increase over time. In this sense, voters continued to talk about Tillman while Simpson became a footnote in Clemson history. Perhaps the chain of events from 1909 (when Tillman published his truth) and 2009 (when Steadman wrote of Tillman’s truth) are tied together by the memory choices made by each stakeholder who lived in between, explaining Steadman’s slant toward Tillman. Over one hundred years later, Ben Tillman is still inserting himself into the minds of South Carolinians.
Clemson University historian Jerome V. Reel writes briefly of the 1886 meeting at Fort Hill in his 2011 book, *The High Seminary*. The work is a massive undertaking as Reel attempts to catalog all the significant actions and figures in Clemson University’s history. Reel’s version includes a description of the meeting in 1886, but he does not reference any conflict that would arise over Simpson’s and Tillman’s accounts of that day. Reel concedes that Tillman and Norris “having been at the very important Fort Hill meeting in the autumn of 1886, knew what to expect” when Simpson convened the first meeting of the trustees in 1888.110 The implication present in Reel’s statement is that the details of the will were discussed in 1886 for Tillman and Norris to know the contents upon their arrival at the first meeting of the Board of Trustees in 1888. In this respect, Reel agrees with much of Tillman’s statement regarding the matter. He is not alone in his assessment.

At this point, it may be helpful to pinpoint what the evidence suggests likely happened that autumn day in 1886. It is logical that Tillman was invited to Fort Hill to discuss the agricultural movement in South Carolina. It is also believable that Simpson was correct in stating that both himself and Norris were not intended guests at the meeting and were afterthoughts on Clemson’s part. The true point of contention lies in whether or not the will itself was discussed in any detail that day. Tillman knew too many details for it not to have been mentioned at least in passing during the meeting. However, it is unlikely, given Simpson’s testimony, that Tillman actually read the will. What most likely transpired was a general discussion of the agricultural reform movement sweeping

110 Reel, *The High Seminary*, 52.
the state with Clemson mentioning his plan to bequeath Fort Hill to the state for educational purposes. It is probable that Tillman and Simpson were both correct and were both wrong as well.

A number of newspaper articles over several decades highlight the problem of public perception surrounding the founding of Clemson College. Even journalists writing closer to the events in question cannot agree. While most give credit for the idea of Clemson College to Thomas Green Clemson, at least one article credits John C. Calhoun with part of the school’s foundation.111 Tillman’s name is unequivocally the name most featured in the articles throughout the 20th century regarding the founding of Clemson College. One article goes so far as to give him credit for the legal victory as well:

Thomas Clemson died…but a foundation had been laid in the minds of strong men and as death came to Clemson another battler stepped into his place. The newcomer to the cause of education was Benjamin Ryan Tillman, state governor and leader of Carolina’s farm folk.

Tillman, known as “Pitchfork Ben”, called on his legislature to accept the Clemson gift and make the college a reality. At once friends and foes of the plan began argument. The courts tested the validity of Clemson’s will, with Tillman winning his point.112

The author implies that Tillman won over not only the legislature but also the court in the case of Lee v. Simpson. In reality, there is no evidence that Tillman had anything to do with the will’s legal acceptance. Statements like these served to further Tillman’s stock with the general public, even decades following his death.

111 John C. Calhoun Laid Foundation For The College, Anderson Independent, November 30, 1943, Folder 50, Box 3, James Corcoran Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
112 Clemson College Was Founded By A Far Sighted Pennsylvanian In 1866 Great Was The Foundation Laid By Tom Clemson, Anderson Daily Mail, January 21, 1960, Folder 50, Box 3, James Corcoran Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
Apart from the historiography associated with the subject of Clemson’s founding, much can be learned by studying building names across the Clemson University campus. Of the original seven trustees honored with a building name, Simpson and Tillman were the first ones to be conferred in 1946. The minutes of the Buildings and Grounds Committee meeting of May 14, 1946, provide a wealth of information regarding the rationale of the decision to name the main administrative building after Tillman. The proposal made by the committee to President Robert F. Poole includes suggestions to name a number of buildings after former trustees, including a recommendation to name the administration building Tillman Hall and Barracks #4 Simpson Hall. While the committee’s reasoning is not fully explained within the minutes or in the accompanying letter, a brief biographical sketch of each subject is included, perhaps as means of explanation or rationale. The sketches are not listed in alphabetical or chronological order, yet even randomly Tillman ends up as the first name listed, followed by Simpson.

Tillman’s description includes what anyone familiar with his biography might expect and covers the high-water marks of his career:

[Tillman] was the leader of the Farmers’ (or Reform) Movement, which made possible the acceptance of the Clemson bequest by the legislature. He was one of the original “life” trustees. Later he became Governor and a United States Senator.113

In this description, emphasis is given to his association with the farmers’ movement in South Carolina following the Civil War by listing it first among his accomplishments. It may also have been mentioned first because its success led to Tillman’s participation in

113 Bldgs and Grounds Committee and Sub-Committee on Names, 14-15 May 1946, Folder 7, Box 1, Professor Alester Garden Holmes Collection, 1789-1977, Mss 1, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
the other roles mentioned later in the biographical paragraph. The way the paragraph is ordered and its content provides clues as to the rationale of the committee in choosing to name the main administration building for Tillman. Clearly, these men viewed Tillman as the reason why the Clemson bequest was accepted by the South Carolina legislature. Thus, the entire reasoning for the naming as it currently stands is based on the belief that Tillman is the reason why Clemson University exists. Accepting that as the basis for the honor justifies the committee’s recommendation. The fact also remains that Tillman was a political giant and the naming of Tillman Hall honors his positive contributions to the state and Clemson College.

However, the committee frames Simpson’s involvement in the founding of Clemson College differently. The paragraph on Simpson reads:

[Simpson] was a member of the legislature and suggested to Clemson that he give his property to South Carolina for the founding of an agricultural and mechanical college. Later he wrote Clemson’s will. He was executor of the estate. He was one of the original “life” trustees and long served as first chairman of the Board of Trustees. It is interesting that the committee acknowledges that much of the setup of the will was Simpson’s idea, as well as recognizing him as the executor and a long-running President of the Board. Yet even after listing all these facts as true, the committee chose to relegate Simpson’s name to barracks that were, unfortunately, razed only a few years later, a byproduct of campus expansion in the 1950s and 1960s. It is telling that Tillman’s biography contains subjective information, including the assertion that the school would

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114 Bldgs and Grounds Committee and Sub-Committee on Names, 14-15 May 1946, Folder 7, Box 1, Professor Alester Garden Holmes Collection, 1789-1977, Mss 1, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
not exist without his involvement. Meanwhile, Simpson’s biography contains only facts that can easily be substantiated. While nothing in Simpson’s paragraph is factually wrong, it includes no such subjective statements about his importance. In fact, no other individual listed by this committee is heralded as quite the contributor that Tillman was made out to be.

Why was Tillman’s name given such accolades by the Buildings and Grounds Committee over other arguably suitable choices including Thomas Green Clemson himself? The answer may lie in relationships within the administration of the college. According to a letter to President Poole from the Chairman of the committee, David Watson, dated March 12, 1946 (a mere two months prior to the formal naming recommendations), the list of names proposed were “in line with your suggestions of several days ago.” This letter would imply that the names suggested by the committee in May of 1946 were Poole’s suggestion, if not his idea. The letter makes no mention of any specific proposed building names. In the final version approved by the committee weeks later, the administration building was to be named for Tillman while Simpson’s name would now grace Barracks #1 rather than the originally proposed Barracks #4.

Naming opportunities must be approved by the Board of Trustees before the proposed names officially take effect. The proposal was brought to the Board that

115 Minutes of the Buildings and Grounds Committee, 11 March 1946, Folder 6, President Robert F. Poole Committee Files, Clemson University Archives Series 7, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, South Carolina.
116 Bldgs and Grounds Committee Report, 16 May 1946, Folder 6, President Robert F. Poole Committee Files, Clemson University Archives Series 7, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
summer and was approved on June 28, 1946.\textsuperscript{117} The minutes do not indicate which trustee made the motion, simply that it was approved. Beyond the sparse information provided in the minutes, it is impossible to know what the discussion entailed or if any trustees raised concerns about the treatment of Simpson as compared to the honor being given Tillman.

Many items were considered by the Board at this meeting. The minutes themselves are forty-four typed pages, and the naming items were considered as a composite motion near the end of the meeting. The minutes do not include any information on the discussion that may or may not have taken place surrounding the requested action. This is not unusual and in keeping with parliamentary procedure with respect to what is typically included within minutes of a governing body. A note at the end of the minutes indicates that letter votes were received from trustees not present, W. C. Graham, J. P. Mozingo, T. B. Young, and R. M. Cooper, to complete the necessary quorum for action. There is no indication as to whether or not the naming of Tillman and Simpson Halls had champions or critics on the Board of Trustees.

The timing and parties involved are curious indeed considering that one of Tillman’s sons addressed alumni on the 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of Clemson College’s first graduation only two days after the committee formally voted on the proposed names. Furthermore, the same Tillman son wrote to President Poole on May 20, 1946, thanking him for the naming of Tillman Hall, saying, “I am grateful beyond words for your efforts

\textsuperscript{117} Board of Trustees, Clemson University, “June 28, 1946 Clemson Trustees Minutes” (1946). Minutes. Paper 427. http://tigerprints.clemson.edu/trustees_minutes/427
to have the main building known and named Tillman building.”¹¹¹ This could simply be an innocent thank you for a meaningful gesture in memory of one’s parent. However, this letter in conjunction with the words of David Watson implying that the building names were President Poole’s idea may merit more investigation. Perhaps President Poole and B. R. Tillman had a connection that accounts for the suggestions by Poole. It is also possible that the names chosen were simply because Poole honestly believed that Tillman deserved to be honored in that way due to his outstanding record of service to the school. However, it should be noted that B. R. Tillman corresponded frequently with Poole in the last few years of his life, even requesting that Poole serve as the executor of his estate.

It is entirely plausible also that the naming of Tillman Hall was in response to larger events unfolding. In South Carolina in 1946, another southern political giant was just beginning his ascent to Washington, D.C. – a World War II veteran named Strom Thurmond. Thurmond was declared victorious in the Democratic primary and ran unopposed in the general election in 1946, becoming governor of South Carolina. Much like Tillman, Thurmond ran on the platform of destroying the “Barnwell Ring,” a group of extremely powerful politicians and was considered a progressive candidate despite his views on race. Tillman made similar promises in the late 1880s and early 1890s to destroy a powerful “ring” of influence within the state. In many ways, Thurmond could be viewed as Tillman reincarnate, so perhaps political events influenced the honoring of Tillman at the same time that an eerily similar Thurmond was seeking the gubernatorial

¹¹¹ B.R. Tillman, Jr. to President R. F. Poole Letter, 20 May 1946, Folder 25, Box 59, Office of the Vice-President for Business and Finance Records, Clemson University Archives Series 87, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
vote. In fact, Thurmond was from Edgefield, South Carolina, and “learned the art of handshaking as a farm boy from the late Senator Benjamin Ryan (Pitchfork Ben) Tillman.”

Maybe the men responsible for the naming of Tillman Hall hoped to stir up support for Thurmond by bringing Tillman’s name back to the forefront of the collective subconscious of voters.

None of these theories are meant to discount other concrete reasons why Tillman’s name remained larger among college members and supporters than Simpson’s. It is merely conjecture meant to emphasize the point that the naming of buildings on Clemson University’s campus, or any campus, is often a complex matter and worth more than the cursory examination and simple explanations it often gets. It is logical to assume that Tillman Hall’s placement in the center of campus, its signature architecture, and the fact that for much of the College’s existence it was the administrative center of the campus made it the most memorable building. Thus Tillman’s name has been remembered and spoken of far more frequently than Simpson’s over the years as an inevitable byproduct of the building’s placement and use.

A myriad of factors contributed to Tillman’s larger than life status among South Carolinians, and it translated to Clemson College’s remembrance of him. He was a public figure with thousands of followers and admirers, he wielded for many years a position nationally and within the state of great power and influence (and notoriety), he played an active part in the College’s early, sometimes tumultuous years, and he was always careful to protect his image while furthering his own reputation. While Tillman not surprisingly

took precedence following the Act of Acceptance of 1889, Simpson, nonetheless, it
should be recalled, was arguably the more important and crucial figure in the years
leading up to it. He worked closely with Clemson and had his hand on every aspect of the
unusual bequest from conception to follow through. Major S. M. Martin, Simpson’s son-
in-law, penned a short biography of his father-in-law, indirectly addressing the
disagreements with Tillman:

Col R. W. Simpson’s principal service to the State was in directing the
development and operation of Clemson College in its formative stage. Ben
Tillman did a great work in getting the farmers to see the need for the college
while Simpson did the legal work, shall we say. Major Martin says, and many
people agree, “There never would have been a Clemson College if it had not been
for Col. R. W. Simpson.”

Martin’s assessment must be weighed against his personal connections, but he is perhaps
the most accurate and succinct in explaining the roles played by each man in the
formational and foundational years of Clemson University. Simpson worried himself
with the details of the will and its execution on a local level while Tillman whipped
support among farmers and politicians in the state for the idea of such an institution,
although he was not “solely accountable for the state’s acceptance of the bequest.”

Simpson is the more important figure with respect to the development of the idea of
Clemson College, while Tillman became the most essential individual in fostering the
school’s foundation after it was created. In the end, each man’s role was necessary for the
will’s success. As a 1905 letter to the editor of the Southern Cultivator noted, “Ben

Tillman nor any other one man could not have won the fight for Clemson College in

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120 Major S. M. Martin Notes on Richard Wright Simpson, Folder 9, Box 2, Board of Trustees 1888 – 1991, Series 30, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
South Carolina if he had not been backed up by the great force of the rank and file.”

It took an army to make Thomas Green Clemson’s dream a reality. Still, in the annals of Clemson history, Simpson should by all rights exist as more than a footnote attached to a lawsuit. More so than any other individuals involved in the lengthy process of defining and defending Thomas Green Clemson’s will, Simpson and Tillman deserve credit as the most important of all of the school’s founding fathers, being, at the critical moment, the right men for the right jobs at the right time.

In 1893, Clemson College opened its doors for the first students. Simpson and Tillman both addressed the gathered crowd, and it is not hard to imagine their pride in the moment. President Craighead spoke of his hopes for the new institution:

May ours be a State famous for her schools and scholars, her poets, her historians, her novelists, her painters, her sculptors and above all her happy, contented, intelligent, harmonious people. May Clemson College fulfil the expectations of her friends and founders. May we who teach here never betray the trust committed to our care. May you, young men, seize the golden opportunities offered to you, but denied to your less fortunate brothers.

Despite the differences of opinion, legislative hurdles, and legal challenges that characterized the early years of Clemson College, Clemson University has grown into a well-respected and nationally recognized institution of higher learning. In that respect, notwithstanding the differing views over the years as to who deserves the most credit, surely Thomas Green Clemson, Richard Wright Simpson, and Benjamin Ryan Tillman all rest in peace.

123 The Opening of Clemson, The Greenville Mountaineer, July 12, 1893, Folder 58, Box 3, James Corcoran Littlejohn Collection, 1900 – 1961, Mss 68, Special Collections Library, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.
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Books

Bennett, Alma, ed. Thomas Green Clemson. Clemson: Clemson University Digital Press, 2009. This multi-author book thoroughly examines each independent aspect of Clemson’s life. The authors use many of the same primary sources contained in the 1937 Holmes and Sherrill biography. There are chapters for everything from agriculture to diplomatic service to the Clemson family’s art collection and what sheet music they likely owned. While it does not extend much beyond Clemson’s death, it does provide good background information as well as extensive footnotes. One chapter authored by Clayton Steadman explicates Thomas Green Clemson’s will and analyzes the circumstances surrounding its creation. Steadman supports Tillman’s version of the events of 1886. His argument, while well-reasoned, lacks in-depth research on the topic.

Bryan, Wright, Clemson: An Informal History of the University, 1889-1979. Columbia, SC: R. L. Bryan Co., 1979. This book serves as a general history of the University, written during a different time period. Bryan was a former vice president at Clemson University, so his perspective is from that of an insider. He touches briefly on the argument between Simpson and Tillman as to who had the greater influence on Clemson’s final will. Bryan acknowledges there was a disagreement, but he fails to examine the primary sources surrounding the controversy in-depth. A full analysis, however, is not expected in this work as it is a general history of Clemson University.

Edgar, Walter, South Carolina: A History. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1998. This book serves as a point of reference for events unfolding in South Carolina politics following the conclusion of the Civil War. Edgar recounts the entire history of South Carolina in great detail. For the purposes of this thesis, however, the sections concerning Tillman and Clemson University were most often referenced. Edgar does not include the disagreement between Simpson and Tillman in his work.
Ellers, Joseph C., *Getting to Know Clemson University is Quite an Education: Determination Makes Dreams Come True*. Clemson: Blueridge Publications, 1987. This book is a Clemson University history although it is not considered a scholarly work. Ellers uses few primary sources, filling his chapters with local stories from mostly secondhand sources. While it has little value as an academic source, Ellers does praise Tillman heavily for his work relating to the founding of Clemson College. For comparison’s sake, he does not mention Simpson at all. This book is cited here as a source of popular opinion regarding Tillman in the Clemson community.

Haynes, Thornwell, *Biographical Sketch of Gov. B. R. Tillman of South Carolina*. Columbia, SC: B.C. Dupre, c1894. Haynes produces an incomplete yet timely biography of Tillman in his 1894 work. It is especially interesting as it was written during Tillman’s lifetime and actually received his approval prior to publication. While it does not include most of his political career due to its early publication date, it was written closer to the events of 1886 – 1889 than other biographies of Tillman. The work is helpful as it explains Tillman’s entry into politics in detail. Haynes is clearly a supporter of Tillman and admired him greatly.

Holmes, Alester G. and George H. Sherrill, *Thomas Green Clemson*. Richmond: Garrett & Massie, Incorporated, 1937. Holmes and Sherrill wrote the original biography of Thomas Green Clemson beautifully with attention to most facets of his life. There is a heavy emphasis on his belief in improved agricultural processes as a means to improve lives and stimulate the economy. The better part of an entire chapter recounts the 1886 Fort Hill meeting with a definite slant in favor of Tillman over Simpson. Newspapers of the time are cited extensively, pointing toward useful primary sources. It is helpful to remember that Holmes was Simpson’s son-in-law, and both authors were professors at Clemson College.

Kantrowitz, Stephen, *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. This is a fairly recent biography of Ben Tillman. It is written mostly with his racial beliefs as the primary focus, so it is not really about Tillman and his involvement with Clemson College specifically. However, it is a valuable reference from this century. In order to understand Tillman’s dominance over Simpson, his national record of service is an essential consideration.

McKale, Donald M., ed. *Tradition: A History of the Presidency of Clemson University*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988. This book follows the history of the presidency of Clemson University from its first president through Walter Cox, its twelfth president. The background information provided in this book on the first few presidents is valuable as a filter for understanding Riggs’s presidential papers and his relationship with the Board of Trustees.
Morrison, William S., *History of Old Pendleton District*. Anderson, SC: Oulla Printing & Binding Company, 1913. There is no information on Tillman in this book, but it does mention Simpson briefly. As little has been written about Richard Simpson, this work helps place him in context with his community. There are few secondary sources that even include Simpson briefly, so this source is quite rare for these purposes.

Norris, Virginia, *Colonel Daniel Keating Norris, One of the First Life Trustees of Clemson College*. Clemson: Clemson College Library, 1963. Norris, a daughter of original Clemson College trustee, Daniel Norris, composed this brief account of her remembrances of her father. Obviously, the work must be examined critically as she was most likely biased and perhaps forgetful later in life. However, as Norris was present at the summit at Fort Hill in 1886, he is an important figure in the story of the Clemson College bequest. Unfortunately, this work does not address the disagreement between Simpson and Tillman. In fact, it only serves to confuse the issue further with Norris claiming some credit for the idea of Clemson College for her family.

Reel, Jerome V., *The High Seminary, Volume 1: A History of the Clemson Agricultural College of South Carolina, 1889-1964*. Clemson: Clemson University Digital Press, 2011. The work provides an in-depth history and analysis of Clemson College from prior to its founding through the mid-1960s. Clemson’s biography is included in the early pages to provide background for the reader on the University’s benefactor. This work is not as heavily about Tillman; rather, it seeks to provide as much information as possible about each of the original trustees and their contributions to the institution. Both Simpson’s and Tillman’s names appear frequently until their respective deaths. This work is useful for general history and as a guide for useful primary sources. While Reel does not specifically tackle the argument between Tillman and Simpson, certain sentences hint at agreement with Tillman. It is a comprehensive history of Clemson University and an excellent resource for the time period.

Simkins, Francis Butler, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman, South Carolinian*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1944. Simkins revisited Tillman as a topic of interest later in his career. In this book, Simkins examines Tillman critically on several matters, including the question of credit for the founding of Clemson College. He does not dedicate many words to the dispute, but Simkins does hint that another version of the events of 1886 existed and ponders whether or not Tillman told the truth about the extent of his involvement. This is perhaps one of the most balanced portrayals of Tillman in existence.
Simkins, Francis Butler, *The Tillman Movement in South Carolina*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1926. This is a much older biography of Tillman than the Kantrowitz work. It is published less than ten years after Tillman’s death in 1918, so it is valuable in that the memory of his actions was much fresher than later published works. However, it could also be less trustworthy because of how recently the statesman had passed. Nevertheless, the book has more of an admiring tone than that of Kantrowitz. Simkins grew up near Tillman’s birthplace and clearly had great respect for the man and his work as a statesman. Nothing is written of Simpson in this account.