

The Department of History: An Origin Story

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Presented at Centennial Celebration, 20 November 2025

As we planned this celebration, we received a few complaints from some faculty emeriti that it is *only* the department's sixtieth anniversary. Yes, our modern Department of History originated in 1965, a consequence of the university's decision to offer degrees in the Liberal Arts and needing disciplines in which majors could specialize. Additionally, history had been combined with political science for twenty-two years, and the political scientists drained resources away from history. History faculty were eager for their independence.

But 1965 was not the beginning of history as a discipline or department at NC State. In fact, there had been an independent Department of History between 1937 and 1943, and although history had been packaged with sociology between 1925 and 1937, both departments had their own heads and separate curricula. So, this evening in 2025, we mark two anniversaries: the centennial of the recognition of history as a discipline and distinct administrative unit at North Carolina State College, *and* the diamond jubilee of the modern Department of History.

History was an integral component of the college's curriculum from the beginning, so important that President Alexander Holladay taught the classes, considering the subject necessary for students to understand "how to read and to think." After Holladay's retirement, vice-president

Daniel H. Hill Jr. taught the history courses until he became president in 1908. History instruction ceased for the next thirteen years. In 1921, the college's new Rural Life major formally incorporated history into its curriculum, and three years later, the Department of Rural Sociology and History formed. But that should be understood as the Department of Rural Sociology and Rural History. The courses were taught by sociologists and most had one common theme: understanding the socio-economic contexts for American, southern, and particularly North Carolina's rural societies.

The sociologists did not want to dedicate their time to history, however, and

within two years, rural sociology dispensed with history. The college considered creating a new department with a degree program in history, but trustees such as newspaper editors Clarence Poe and Josephus Daniels, both social and economic reformers, protested elevating a humanities

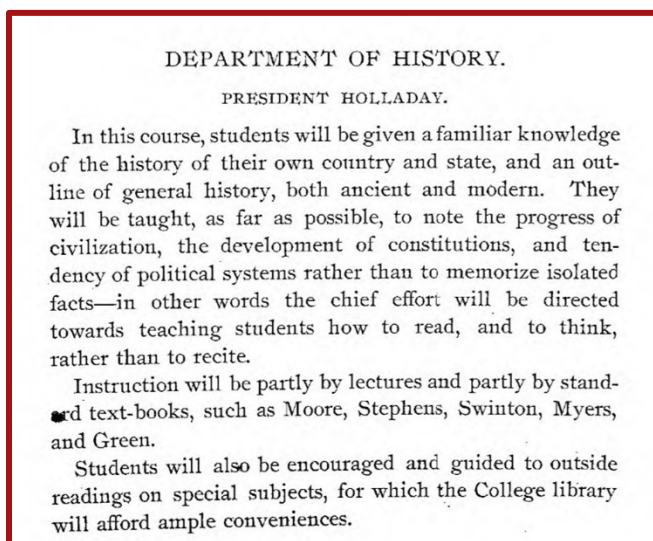


Figure 1. History Course Description, 1890, *North Carolina College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts Catalogue*, June 1890, 49, Special Collections Research Center, NC State University Libraries, Raleigh.

discipline and straying from the institution's agricultural and mechanical arts mission. It would be another forty years before the trustees approved a history major, giving rise to the modern Department of History. Although defeated in 1925, the proposal to create a degree nonetheless acknowledged history as a legitimate and distinct discipline, bundling it with the few non-rural sociologists into a new administrative unit housed in Peale Hall. It just needed faculty.

The college initiated a search for its first full-time historian, finding him in Hugh Talmage Lefler, who had a degree from Trinity College (now Duke University) and was working on his doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania. Lefler was twenty-four years old when he arrived at State College, but despite his youth, he is our founder: over the next decade, he designed a history curriculum and had a hand in the hire of all fellow faculty, shaping history as a discipline and department, and laying the foundation on which the degree-granting department arose in 1965.

During Lefler's third semester at State College, on a Friday in mid-November 1927, he spoke to the League of Women Voters on the causes of World War I, concluding that the United States had been swayed into war by allied propaganda about protecting civilization from Germany's ambitions and making the world safe for democracy. There had been no good national purpose for entering the war, Lefler concluded. It should come as no surprise that historians often say controversial things, but in the 1920s, academic freedom was still taking root in southern colleges, and a scholar who commented on racial politics or questioned the federal government exposed himself to public



Figure 2. Hugh Talmage Lefler, 1921, *The Chanticleer* (Trinity College, Durham), 1921, 63, University Archives, Duke University Libraries, Durham, NC.

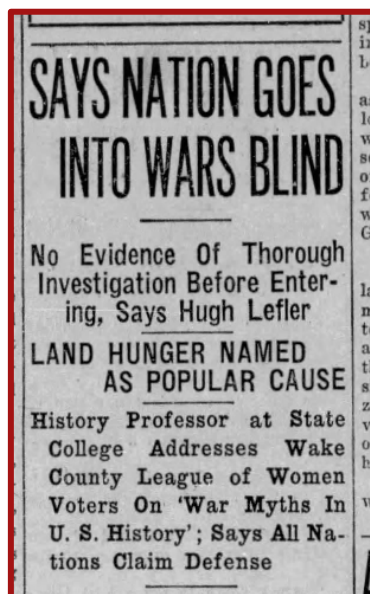


Figure 3. News & Observer (Raleigh NC), 19 November 1927.

scorn and potential investigation. After all, it had only been six years since United States attorney general A. Mitchell Palmer had authorities arrest and interrogate thousands of suspected communists, often without warrants to do so, and deporting hundreds of them for nothing more than having a foreign accent. Memories of the Red Scare continued to muffle political discourse well into the 1920s.

And throughout that decade, State College was in the public's crosshairs as a radical hotbed. In 1922, six State College scientists challenged the state legislature's efforts to cut funding to colleges that taught evolution, leading to a public debate in Pullen Hall. Dean of the Graduate School, Carl Taylor, championed textile workers' rights and social justice, angering many alumni and trustees whose visions of economic reform did not include labor, and contributing to his dismissal in 1931. State College President Eugene Brooks was widely distrusted for his denouncement of teaching "Americanism" and the Bible in public

schools. And the campus YMCA promoted racial harmony by regularly hosting Black speakers, drawing public condemnation.

Lefler's comments became the latest controversy between State College and a largely conservative public. Two days after his talk, newspapers began reporting the event, some hinting that readers should contact President Brooks about the young communist in the history department. They accused Lefler of being more devious than most agitators. His address "has none of the bolshevistic radicalism of some of the posing literati, it is a calm, considered statement from a scholar and intended not to fire the anger of the patriots, or raise a hue and cry which will bring the author into the limelight." Yet, light a fire under self-proclaimed patriots it did. By Monday, the *Raleigh News & Observer* editorialized that, while "it is well for college professors to wage war on war, for most wars are born out of hate or greed," Lefler's indictment had gone too far, doing "injustice to American leadership, American devotion to peace, and to honest soldiers and sailors."¹

Two days later, Brigadier General Albert J. Bowley, commandant at Fort Bragg and a veteran of World War I, disrupted a program at Raleigh's American Legion to denounce Lefler, declaring that "I'm intolerant when it comes to that breed of cats that is trying to tear our nation in two. . . . They ought to be sent to Atlanta prison." Warning of other "socialistic whelps" at State College, Bowley cautioned that "there are insidious movements afoot in North Carolina—pacifism and communism." Governor Angus McLean vowed that he would "overcome communism, and bolshevism by peaceful methods, if possible, but by force of arms if necessary," to which the *Charlotte Observer's* editor responded that "the Governor shows he knows that when . . . talking to swashbuckling folk he must talk swashbuckling language."²

As if to taunt Bowley and McLean, the following week, State College hosted a lecture by Harold R. Peat, an openly socialist Canadian World War I disabled veteran who denounced nationalism and uncritical patriotism as an "Inexcusable Lie." And then, in mid-January, YMCA missionary Sherwood Eddy arrived on campus with his message that Jesus had been a pacifist and socialist. The president of the University of Wisconsin, Glenn Frank, who, earlier in the 1920s, had founded the Citizens National Committee to advocate for accused anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, applauded State College for its embrace of free speech: "For the whole of human history presents unanswerable proof that only through the open and unhampered clash of contrary opinions can truth be found." Socialists and communists openly praised State College as criticisms of the school amplified, with Lefler lumped alongside Peat and Eddy as a capital-R Radical.³

As quickly as the fire had been lit, however, it extinguished. Much of the anti-Lefler energy disappeared when, in late February, the army reassigned General Bowley to Fort Houston in San Antonio. Then, in April, Nell Battle Lewis, a local society-page reporter who regularly skewered the KKK, ridiculed those who opposed the teaching of evolution, and championed worker's rights and public health, wrote a full page editorial in which she pronounced that "General Bowley may bellow, the Daughters [of the American Revolution] may grow hysterical, the [American] Legion may wildly wave the flag, but North Carolina goes calmly about its

business, heedless of the ‘Red Russian invasion of the South,’ and without uneasiness lest tomorrow, or at least the next day, it be overthrown by a Soviet conspiracy.” Lewis’s mockery quieted the accusers, including Governor McLean. Ironically, some thirty years later, she would lead a new red scare in North Carolina, cheerleading anti-communist investigations in Chapel Hill, denouncing the Civil Rights Movement as socialistic, and advocating for unrepentant nationalism as symbolized by “the Confederate flag . . . a beautiful flag, the most moving in the world.”⁴

State College’s version of a Red Scare lasted less than six months, and as with any

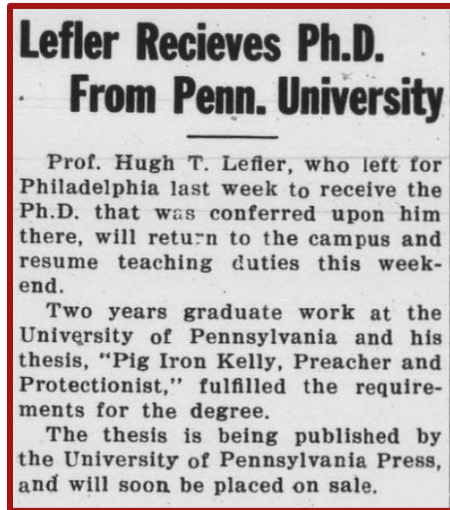


Figure 4. *The Technician*, 13 February 1931, Special Collections Research Center, NC State Libraries, Raleigh.

historical event, there are lessons to be drawn. Maybe it’s a life lesson about continuing to live fully, even amid controversy and hysteria. Once on the Trinity College tennis team, Lefler continued to play tennis, winning the state championship several years in a row. He became coach of State College’s tennis club and led the movement to have tennis courts installed on campus. Lefler continued to work on his dissertation, completing it in 1931 and becoming the first historian at State College with a PhD. Over a decade, he taught eleven of the department’s fourteen courses: seven a semester. He authored two books: a biography of abolitionist and white supremacist Hinton Rowan Helper, and a primary source reader titled *North Carolina History as Told by Contemporaries*. And for all of that, he made \$3000.00 a year, roughly \$58,000 in modern purchasing power.

Maybe it’s a pedagogical lesson about how students love an opinionated teacher who is not afraid to take on the establishment. The State College newspaper celebrated his new notoriety: “During this day and time, he who is called a radical, whether he is or not, gets more chances to express himself than is wanted.” In 1934, the student body selected Lefler as the most popular professor at State College, the first faculty so designated. And in 1936, he left for that other state college down the road where he received more pay and became one of the more significant historians of his generation, writing or co-writing another sixteen books, including the history of North Carolina that, if you grew up in the state, you likely used as a textbook.⁵

Maybe it is a historical lesson: beyond developing the curriculum and overseeing the growth of a history faculty, founder Lefler modeled the historian’s role in our State College as one who not only instructs students but steps beyond the classroom to engage and challenge public audiences. It is a model that gave rise to our

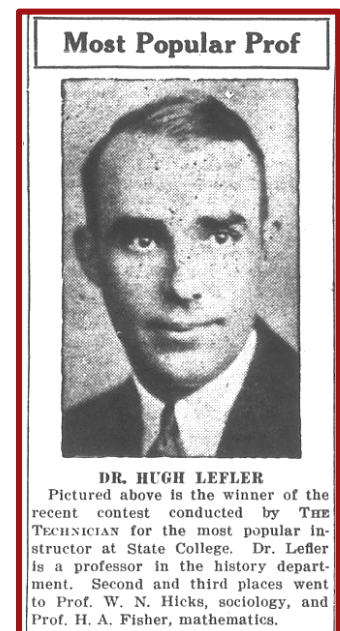


Figure 5. *The Technician*, 23 November 1934.

department's tradition of public intellectualism and applied history, and which many NC State historians—faculty and alumni alike—have since followed.

¹ *The Goldsboro (NC) News*, 20 November 1927; *News & Observer* (Raleigh NC), 19 November 1927.

² *News & Observer* (Raleigh NC), 19 November 1927, 12 December 1927.

³ *News & Observer*, 2 January 1928.

⁴ *News & Observer*, 22 April 1928.

⁵ *The Technician* (Raleigh NC), 3 December 1927