

THE LEWIS PRESTON SUMMERS AFFAIR

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In 1903 Lewis Preston Summers of Abingdon, Virginia published his monumental History of Southwest Virginia and Washington County. It is a reference work that stands as the role model for all regional histories, and is still in print today. He was a well known criminal lawyer, and was described as the “dean of the Washington County Bar”.⁽¹⁾ He was descended from a famous line of local founding fathers, and was related to most of the upper crust of Washington County, Virginia. Abingdon sat on a crossroads, with access to the Yadkin Valley of North Carolina, Tennessee, the Midwest, and to the coal fields to its west. A Federal Court sat on a hill in the center of town. It was a prestigious address.

SUMMERS



In 1907 Col. C. Bascom Slemp died. He was a Federal Congressman from Big Stone Gap. He had been the founding Col. of the Confederate 64th Mounted Infantry, which was maned by men from along the state line with Kentucky. This circumstance led to his having become wealthy by serving as an intermediary between his former soldiers who owned the coal bearing mountain top farms of the area, and the industrialists from Pennsylvania who were setting up coal mining corporations in the region.⁽²⁾

Col. Slemp had been at the forefront of the most significant political development in Virginia since the Civil War. Before the war Virginia copied New York's success with the Erie Canal, and started building canals across the Commonwealth. The most notable of these was the James River and Kanawha Canal. It was financed by corporate bonds, but these debt instruments were cosigned by the Commonwealth. The War destroyed the canal system in Virginia, as well as the general economy. The canal companies went bankrupt, leaving the Commonwealth to pay off the bonds. After the War the General Assembly debated whether it would pay off the bonds at face value, or at a readjusted (lower) rate. The post war monolithic Confederate Democratic Party split into two factions named the Funders and the Readjusters. Col. Slemp was among the leaders of the Readjuster Movement. The Readjusters won, and soon joined the State Republican Party. Southwest Virginia, in a frenzy of railroad growth and of timbering and coal mining, was the center of this political faction.⁽²⁾

So it was that in 1907 C. Bascom Slemp inherited his father's farm, his seat in Congress, and his coal empire. He also inherited the nascent Republican political machine that opposed the Democratic one of Thomas S. Martin, later run by Harry Byrd.⁽⁸⁾

Politics in Virginia after the Civil War was a continuation of the War by 'other means'. Participants were dead serious. Structures were set up which were politely referred to as "organizations". They were more commonly called "machines". Control of government jobs, all the way from Senator to school teacher, were controlled by the machines, a process called 'patronage'.

About 1910 Dr. Joseph S. Fleenor MD (the author's grandfather) was set up to run the Washington Co. portion of the Slemp Machine. He lived on a farm at Lime Hill that had been settled by his ancestor about the time of the Revolution. Related to most everybody, and beloved for his practice of medicine, he had a large following. Thus it was that C. Bascom Slemp was spending the night in Fleenor's home in 1911 when the doctor's last child was born. It was named Bascom after the great house guest. Fleenor's best friend was Louis Preston Summers. Together they ran the county, with Summers taking the role as criminal attorney and Commonwealth's Attorney.⁽¹⁾ Fleenor ran the school board, named schools, hired teachers, and ran the County Road Commission.



DR. JOE FLEENOR &
PRIZE SHORT HORN
BULL, LADDIE, AND
BASCOM, LAWRENCE,
AND EUNICE

Summers had been appointed Post Master of Abingdon by Col. Slemp. It was pure political patronage. He was a prosperous attorney. The position carried a meaningful Federal salary, and the day to day running of the post office was left to what today would be referred to as an 'administrative assistant', but which was called a secretary or stenographer in those days.

All this time parallel to the Washington County developments described above, Joseph Crockett Shaffer was rising to prominence in Wytheville. He was a local man who was rising to prominence as an attorney and as a politician. He was a loyal Slemp man, and as such was given the job as Assistant District Attorney for the Federal Court of the Western Virginia District, which he held from 1920 to 1924, and served as United States Attorney for the Western District of Virginia from 1924 to 1929.⁽⁴⁾

Slemp was the only Republican Congressman from the South. Because of this, he controlled all Federal patronage for that region. A person could not get appointed as postmaster, judge, or any other federal position in the South without Slemp's approval. Kickbacks from all these appointees were required, theoretically to support the Republican political machine. Slemp sought to leverage this circumstance to gain greater influence in the national government. Warren Harding was President. A great national scandal occurred within the Harding Administration. Part of his administration swindled the government out of a great oil reserve, known as the 'Tea Pot Dome'. Harding and his administration were taking a lot of heat over this, and Harding called on all his troops to support him.⁽⁵⁾ Slemp threw his support behind Harding, a circumstance that caused great consternation among some of his supporters in Southwest Virginia. Dr. Fleenor and others within the management of the Slemp Machine remarked that Harding and his administration "were just a gang of crooks".^(6, 7) Shaffer, also seeking advancement within the Federal Government, threw his support behind Slemp and Harding.

In 1926 Summers' secretary at the Post Office (also described as a stenographer) took a protracted leave-of-absence without pay. However, the government was charged for her salary, and Summers kept it. Summers claimed that it was a bookkeeping mistake ("a technical error"), but the Federal Court under Shaffer convicted him of it. Appeals to both the State and Federal Supreme Courts were denied, as was a request for a Presidential pardon. Summers and his supporters, such as Dr. Fleenor, blamed Slemp. Harding and his supporters felt that his administration could not endure another swindle case. Slemp threw his support behind Shaffer, and left Summers out to dry in the wind. It complicated matters that Shaffer and Summers were competing for promotion within the Federal Government, a situation totally controlled by Slemp.^(8,9)

In July 1928 Summers and Fleenor turned the Washington County Republican Convention into a free-for-all. The "Bristol Herald Courier's" reporter took short hand notes. The transcript is worth including, as nothing better could possibly give the flavor of the times as well.



"L. P. Summers Opposes Shaffer Endorsement, and Dr. Joe Fleenor, lifelong Republicans, Says party in Ninth is bossed by Slemp and is Maintained to Continue his Prestige

"A split in the Washington Co. Republican Party "which will place the County in the Democratic column for ten years", according to Dr. Joe Fleenor of Benham, occurred yesterday when the county organization successfully waged a fight to have the delegation to the Bristol convention July 21st instructed to cast its vote first for C. Bascom Slemp as the party's nominee, and Joseph Shaffer of Wytheville as second choice. L. P. and Bob Summers led a faction which bitterly opposed instructing in favor of Shaffer, while Dr. Joe Fleenor opposed instructing for any candidate.

"Open dissatisfaction was by the Summers and "anti-instruction" factions after the after the meeting had adjourned.

How It Started

"The trouble started when the resolutions committee, returning from its conference, brought in a resolution endorsing Slemp as the county's first choice for the congressional nomination and Shaffer as second.

"A protest immediately arose from the Summer's faction. They opposed Mr. Shaffer. The Wythe Countian succeeded* L. P. Summers in Atlanta Penitentiary. Others sought to have the county delegation to have the delegation uninstructed to the Bristol Convention.

For Rouse, Say Fleenor

" 'Washington County will go for Rouse in November as a majority after his conviction count of about 1,000" declared Dr. Joe Fleenor of Benhams, a lifelong Republican in discussing the mass meeting's action after it had adjourned. We have voted the Republican ticket for 40 years. In all that time have never seen conditions in the Ninth District as bad for Republican Party as they are now.

" 'No Republican candidate has a chance of election because through hooks and moves, the convention has been delayed to such an extent that the party is totally unprepared for a congressional election. I supported Slemp when he was in office. I would support him again. The situation seems to show, however, that Slemp and those who hold office through him are controlling the situation in the Ninth District – dictating it just as they want in order that Slemp may be continued in power as national committeeman and they may hold their jobs.

" 'Slemp does not want the nomination. The committee that returned the nomination at Abingdon today knew that he would not accept the nomination.

" 'The trouble started when the handpicked committee, which had not been gone long enough to draft the resolutions it brought in, submitted its 'work'. There may have been a

personal issue to the opposition voiced in the Shaffer resolution by L. P. and Bob Summers. There was no personal antagonism in my stand.

" 'Instead of progress in the Republican Party in the Ninth District, we have a party that is controlled by Slemp and fondled along by Slemp and his herdman to maintain him in prestige at Washington. We shall never get anywhere the way we are going. The horse is in mid-stream. The time is here to either drown or pull out of the water. The Republican Party is doomed to drown if its present direction continues in the Ninth. Washington County, for ten years to come, in my opinion, was placed in the Democratic column by the mass meeting's action yesterday which was very unsatisfactory to many leading men of the party.' "

"Fred C. Parks was temporarily chairman of the mass meeting and Mrs. R. S. Gill was temporary secretary. J. M. Arnold was made permanent chairman, and Roy C. Thompson of Abingdon, permanent secretary, and Mrs. R. S. Gill vice chairman.

"The Resolution follows:

"Be it resolved that the Republicans of Washington County, Virginia, do hereby adopt the following resolutions, in mass meeting, assembled July 16, 1928.

"First: that we heartily and enthusiastically endorse the declaration of policies as set forth in the platform adopted by the National Republican Convention at Kansas City, and the policies and administration of President Calvin Coolidge.

"Second: We express our pride and confidence in the nominees of the Kansas City Convention and commend to the voters without re- " (continued elsewhere in the paper) ⁽¹⁰⁾

*This is an error made by the line-o-type operator when they were transcribing the reporter's short hand notes. The correct word was "sentenced".

Summers presented himself to the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary, where he was given a spacious cell, and was allowed to bring in all his historic documents that he had used in writing History of Southwest Virginia and Washington County, and a type writer. He served 15 months. While there he wrote his two volume Annals of Southwest Virginia, which is a major contribution to American History, which was published in 1929.

Harding died of ptomaine poisoning, and Coolidge became President. He ran and was elected for a term of his own. Slemp was hoping for a cabinet position, but a scandal over his requiring kickbacks from his appointees ended this hope. Instead Coolidge appointed him his Secretary, a position equivalent to Chief of Staff today. The New Deal destroyed the Slemp machine. Slemp died in 1943.⁽²⁾

Shaffer was rewarded by being elected to Congress 1929-1931. His brilliant legal career continued until his death.

Fleenor lost his position as head of the Slemp machine in Washington Co. The Road Commissioner, whom he had appointed, punished him further by running US 58-421 from Three Springs to Valley Institute down the present route rather than down the present Three Springs to Lime Hill Rd. and on to Valley Institute, a route that would have run through two of Fleenor's farms.⁽⁶⁾ He died in 1933. The last years of his life he used the energy that he had poured into politics to get the Kings' Mountain Hospital built on West State Street in Bristol, Virginia. This hospital was the grandfather of the present Bristol Regional Medical Center. Kings' Mountain was often referred to informally as "Dr. Fleenor's Hospital" well into the 1980's.

Summers was released to continue his brilliant legal career. His being a convicted felon did not seem to bother his colleagues and neighbors at all. This esteem is best evidenced by the list of personages who participated in his funeral in 1943. It included two judges, the Chief Justice, and all the members of the Bar from Abingdon and Marion.⁽¹⁰⁾

Bibliography

The majority of the historic newspaper clippings on which this work is based were contributed by Wilma Smith.

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2 – Fleenor, Lawrence J. – The Bear Grass, A History – pgs 111-113

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4 – Wikipedia – "Joseph Crockett Shaffer" -

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6 – Fleenor, Lawrence J., Sr. - to the author

7 – Bradshaw, William – to the author

8 – clipping of Dec. 3, 1926 in the "South Bend Tribune"

9 – clipping of Dec. 3, 1926 "Bristol Herald Courier"

10 – clipping of Dec. 12, 1943 "Bristol Herold Courier"

11 – photos of Summers, Slemp, and Shaffer are from Google Images; that of Dr. Fleenor is a family photo