

CARPETBAGGER TRAILBLAZERS IN THE  
PACIFIC NORTHWEST; THE LIVES OF SIMON BARCLAY CONOVER  
AND WILLIAM FARRAND PROSSER

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the thesis of MICHAEL JOHN SCHWARTZ find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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**ABSTRACT**

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**Abstract**

This study is focused on two important examples, William Farrand Prosser and Simon Barclay Conover, of a distinct element of immigration into the Pacific Northwest. Both Prosser (1834-1911) and Conover (1840-1908) were Union Army veterans who served in the Civil War, and following that conflict were engaged in their respective political careers in the Reconstruction-era South. They, like a number of other carpetbaggers (white men of northern birth who became Republican politicians in southern Reconstruction governments) left the South as Republicans fell from power there, moved west and then played significant roles in the development of the areas of the American West in which they settled.

This work presents biographical and interpretive detail on two former carpetbaggers, both of whom played major roles in the state of Washington. Simon Conover, after serving as a carpetbagger U.S. senator from Florida, left the South to settle in Port Townsend, Washington, where he practiced medicine. He became active in the political arena of his new home as the first president of the board of regents of what today is Washington State University. Colonel William Prosser served as a carpetbagger congressman from Tennessee, moved to Washington Territory, served in the 1889 Washington state constitutional convention, wrote, "The History of the Puget Sound Country," and settled a town which today bears his name.

Conover and Prosser represented, in both the South and the West, forces of order, federal government influence, and development. The telling of their stories has been aided greatly by a generous travel grant from the Department of History at Washington State University. That funding made possible research in manuscript collections at the Benton County Historical Museum in Prosser, Washington; at the Tennessee State Archives in Nashville; at the Florida State Archives in Tallahassee; and at the University of Washington Archives in Seattle.

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## INTRODUCTION

At the end of Reconstruction in the American South, a good number of “carpetbaggers” moved to the Pacific Northwest. Two such individuals, specifically William F. Prosser and Simon B. Conover, did the same. What motivated them in their Civil War, Reconstruction, and post-Reconstruction experiences? Their actions and careers during the Civil War and Reconstruction shaped them, and in turn impacted the Pacific Northwest when the men migrated to that region.

The lives and works of Colonel William Farrand Prosser and Simon Barclay Conover M.D. were emblematic of the vision carpetbaggers (northern white Republicans elected to office during Southern Reconstruction) tried to impose on the Reconstruction South and later on the Pacific Northwest. During a time of great national flux following the Civil War, northerners flooded into the South to impose their conceptions of order and labor upon southerners. When their efforts at enterprise and governance were only marginally successful, and as Southern Reconstruction ended, many of these carpetbaggers fled the hostile South in pursuit of western “virgin” lands. Although the two carpetbaggers from this story did not directly address their reasons for leaving the South for the West, roughly fifty other known carpetbaggers also headed west, perhaps also for reasons related to assisting in developing the this “new” area.

The experiences and careers of Prosser and Conover readied them to be champions of a more unified national government. Prosser was unique in many ways, and his numerous political appointments demonstrate this. He was passionate about public education and a stalwart of Republican idealism. In 1869 he was elected to Congress out of the fifth congressional district near Nashville, Tennessee, where he had served as postmaster and in other positions. He was

middle class and his visions of what civilization ought to be hinged on the federal government and legal development. President Rutherford B. Hayes selected Prosser as special agent of the Interior Department for Washington Territory, Idaho Territory, and Oregon, and Prosser served what would become Washington state in different government positions, even homesteading in a community which adopted his name. Of the many records that remain concerning Prosser's efforts to establish and organize Washington, an extensive history of Washington that he penned features short biographical sketches of prominent Washingtonians from the time.

Conover, a Republican his entire life, served in several government capacities before being elected a U.S. Senator from Florida. There he broke with other leading Republicans of his state to lead a group of "liberal" Republicans largely supported by freedman. When carpetbaggers were no longer welcome in the South, Conover, who had graduated from the medical department of the University of Nashville, moved to the Pacific Northwest and brought with him plans for institutions of higher learning and medical skills that paralleled the newest advancements in medicine from the East. He was appointed United States surgeon in Port Townsend, Washington, before being chosen as the president of the Board of Regents of the newly established Agricultural College and School of Sciences of the State of Washington (today Washington State University, Pullman).

Prosser's experience prospecting for gold in California shaped his career as a politician and pioneer. Conover trained as a medical doctor and had strong beliefs about science and rationality. Each of these men put his talents to use in the Civil War as each helped the North regain control of the South. Following their experiences in the war, both men returned to the places where they had served to rebuild the South in the image of the North.

Prosser in Tennessee and Conover in Florida sought out and gained political positions. Prosser was influential in Tennessee and was elected to Congress from there for one term. He wrote extensively and also edited the *Nashville Republican*. His experience as a northerner in Tennessee sheds light on Reconstruction in that state. Conover went to Florida as a surgeon, and was a member of the state's 1868 and 1885 constitutional conventions. Both men served terms in Congress, and each held different offices after Reconstruction. The roles the two played in rebuilding the South paved the way for their fruitful careers as both men traveled west and applied their political acumen in what became Washington state.

Conover practiced medicine in Port Townsend for a number of years, and Prosser worked for the Bureau of Land Management. Prosser departed from Nashville in 1882, while Conover left Florida later for Port Townsend, Washington, in 1889. Both men then left their marks on Washington's "Inland Empire," where the town of Prosser bears the name of one of its primary homesteaders and where Conover helped found the emerging agricultural college that became Washington State University. Prosser laid out the city that bears his name with care, and his plans there mirror the organization drive seen in other projects that he oversaw in Washington. Conover was well suited for the position he accepted at the new agricultural college because of his belief in reason and science, though internal divisions would end his time as a regent quickly. Shortly after the turn of the century, both men passed away; Conover in Port Townsend in 1908, and Prosser three years later in Seattle.

Both of these men took part in two of the most significant migrations of the nineteenth century: that of Union Army veterans who settled in the South after the Civil War and that of migrants who sought opportunities in the West. In so doing, their lives reflected many of the changes in a nation undergoing rapid transitions. Examining their activities and beliefs will yield

significant insights into how their experiences helped to shape both the South and the Pacific Northwest during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It will also suggest the need for “historiographical caution,” in regard to both “Dunningite” accounts of Reconstruction in the South and to the Turnerian view of development in the West.

This thesis will obviously not tell the reader everything about either Reconstruction in the South or migration to the West. What it will do is familiarize the reader with the daily pressures and interactions Conover and Prosser faced day in and day out. In so doing, the reader will become more aware of the extraordinary pressures each of these men faced during the eventful time periods in which each lived. This thesis spans some eighty years to include such epic periods in the American story as the California gold rush, the Civil War, Reconstruction in the South, and development in the Pacific Northwest. These topics are broad indeed, but the very stories of Conover and Prosser serve as a thread that weaves readers throughout the historically-rich periods during which they lived.

## CHAPTER 1

### **The Legacy of the Carpetbagger in the South and the Pacific Northwest**

In 1893, as a relatively young historian, Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his “frontier thesis.” He did so to an audience of fellow historians at a convention not far from that year’s Chicago World’s Fair. The economic and social make-up of Chicago at that time and what the World’s Fair represented to Americans greatly inform our understanding of this historical moment.

The city of Chicago at the time Turner gave his address reflected the way people portrayed what was happening in their country. Historians and citizens alike described Chicago as a great city and an icon of growth and prosperity.<sup>1</sup> People considered it a gateway to the West and many of the nation’s western railroads shipped to Chicago’s markets and factories. Although what Upton Sinclair later chronicled in *The Jungle* represented worsening conditions in Chicago in an ever more stratified community, his voice was the exception rather than the rule, and city officials and Chicagoans rallied diligently to show how their city was the penultimate example of American progress and prosperity so that judges would choose Chicago for the 1893 Exposition.<sup>2</sup>

Within this context, settlers continually streamed westward. Amongst the settlers were a small but important group of men who had been known as carpetbaggers, or northern whites who had moved to the South after the Civil War and later attained office as Republicans in the Reconstruction governments there. In some respects, carpetbaggers believed in the ideological

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<sup>1</sup> William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991), 369.

<sup>2</sup> Erik Larson, *Devil in White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 15.

framework underpinning Turner's thesis. At the same time, their experience in the South had pushed them to recognize the importance of place and space in their new lives in the West.

These frontiersman themselves believed they were carrying forward essential progress and development. From the earliest pioneers and well beyond the industrial boom of the Gilded Age, settlers in the West reproduced their own modes of living and production. Thus pioneers felled huge and old forests to make way for townships and houses. Developers modeled emergent cities on patterns found back east. A general desire for control and order pushed western whites to map out and carefully delineate new town streets, efforts that carpetbaggers, in some cases, would one day lead.<sup>3</sup> The push for this order, based in the almost compulsive belief in technology and growth, compelled settlers to remake areas in the West into their own understandings of what society ought to be.

The 1893 World's Fair, or Columbian Exposition, celebrated such growth and served as a landmark for the country fortunate enough to be chosen to host the event. Because France held the previous fair in 1889, and impressed people the world over, Americans believed they had to surpass what the French had accomplished. Implicit in that desire was a belief in American technological and general superiority. Fair promoters believed this, and Americans wanted to believe it as well. Congress voted for funding increases time and again to support a fair that had gone over budget because, in a way, it meant that people could continue believing in the greatness of their country and way of life.<sup>4</sup> Because it was the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus' arrival off the coast of Hispaniola, organizers decided to celebrate the fair under the

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<sup>3</sup> William F. Prosser, Eugene Semple, D.C. Guernsey, Frank Richards and William Sternberg, *Second and Final Report of the Harbor Line Commission of the State of Washington* (Olympia, WA.: Government Printing Office, 1893), 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Larson, Devil in White City*, 31.

name of the Columbian Exposition. Americans came from all over to revel in the country's achievements as they commemorated what they believed was Columbus' great discovery.

The World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 serves as a bellwether both of the attitudes of American elites and the public towards progress and the nation's technical dominance throughout the world. Architects Daniel Burnham and Frederick Law Olmsted designed and assembled the fair to showcase America's predominance in the technological realm. There were engines and innovations of all sorts throughout. Burnham, Olmsted, and others had little time to build the small city within a city, and so the impermanent plaster of Paris facades were perhaps as shallow and ephemeral as the myths of American equality and greatness the architects intended to symbolize; the Fair took place during a depression and amidst intense social strife.

Just outside of the official fairgrounds, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show offered a performance event in which actors recreated western historical events. Americans from around the country came for the World's Fair, but many of them took in the sideshow as well. In it, some who fought at Wounded Knee, as well as other actors, glorified and sensationalized western conquest. Indians came off as flat characters and troublesome villains; the cowboys and Bill were heroes.<sup>5</sup> In some respects Bill's show implanted or reinforced images in the minds of Americans regarding what the West was like. This entertainment mirrored the beliefs many already held about the region and the different groups that resided there. On the stage and in their mind's eye, they believed that the characters and caricatures of western figures presented were the reality. They believed in an image of the West that was reinforced by dramas, books, newspapers, and perhaps most convincingly of all, by historians.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 222.

Frederick Jackson Turner spoke near where Columbia Exposition took place. Turner embraced what he saw around him, and the content of his speech lent theoretical validity to the manifestations of the belief in progress that encircled him. Just three years earlier in 1890, the U.S. government pursued policies that led to the arrest and killing of Sitting Bull, a Sioux leader, and two weeks after that the massacre at Wounded Knee occurred. Turner rose to speak at this poignant historical moment when it truly appeared the West had been won. In his frontier thesis he propounded on how the process of American westward movement had developed and shaped the character of Americans in a fundamental way.<sup>6</sup> His ideas captured the essence of what Americans wanted to believe had happened in the West and furthered the belief that American westward expansion was unequivocally synonymous with progress.<sup>7</sup> He said:

The peculiarity of American institutions is, the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people – to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life.<sup>8</sup>

Until the early part of the twentieth century, historians traditionally told a narrative centered on U.S. progress, detailing the advancements American pioneers brought. Faith in superior technology, moral righteousness, and the civilizing of a virgin wilderness colored historical formulations of the American past, and in many instances with good reason.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894), 207.

<sup>7</sup> Patricia Nelson Limerick, “What on Earth is the New Western History?,” in Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin, ed., *Trails, Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 86.

<sup>8</sup> Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, 199.

<sup>9</sup> One need look no further than (for instance) the lives and works of Frederick Jackson Turner, Andrew Carnegie, or Andrew Jackson to get a sense of this pervasive American mentality.

Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* shortly after the 1890 census declared the close of the American frontier. Historians refer to the ideas so presented as the “frontier thesis.” Turner lamented the closing of the frontier because he believed the pioneering experience central to crucial American values.

Turner’s work encompassed a vast narrative of American progress, but to the exclusion of the stories of non-white or non-English speaking people. Subsequent historians reevaluated the narrative and slowly changed the writing of history, so as to include the voices of more of all the people involved. Henry Nash Smith was one of the first such revisionist historians and in his *Virgin Land* (1950) he identified the old way of telling history as collective national myths, a position which he later softened. Historians would emulate and build upon his history, and by the 1960s historians of the American West took a turn towards the writing of a more social history that included the voices of men and women with varying cultures and beliefs.

Today’s western historians focus especially on culture and the ways that environments of space and place have influenced the human experience. More than ever they attempt to convey a fuller, more complete depiction of Western history as they focus on the influence of the government, the physical and mental landscapes in which events transpired, and the multitude of peoples who have migrated to and through the West for at least the past twenty-five thousand years. Some of these historians refer to themselves as “New Western Historians.” According to Patricia Limerick Nelson, New Western Historians “Break free of the old model of ‘progress’ and improvement and face up to the possibility that some roads of western development led directly to failure and injury.”<sup>10</sup> In her *Legacy of Conquest*, Limerick essentially rewrites much of Turner’s frontier thesis by substituting conquest for most of Turner’s ideas about progress.

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<sup>10</sup> Limerick, “What on Earth is the New Western History?,” 84.

Other New Western Historians include Donald Worster, Richard White, Peggie Pascoe, Elliot West to name a few. Although each of these historians takes different avenues in writing this new type of history, most shared common goals of inclusion of all peoples' stories and their relationship to areas in the West. As Elliott West put it, “ “The new history proposes that we think of the West instead as a land washed by successive waves of immigrants who have been moving, settling, and adapting to the country . . . . The story does not stop with homesteaders.”<sup>11</sup>

New Western Historians expanded upon the groundbreaking work of historians before them. While they critique elements of Turner's work, or try to reorient his thesis to prove their own ideas, they still rely heavily on some of his ideas and conceptions. Unlike the historiography of the U.S. West, the historiography concerning Reconstruction and the effects of groups like the carpetbaggers has been much more polemical. William Dunning, a noted “traditional” southern historian framed the legacy of Reconstruction as such:

Few episodes of recorded history more urgently invite thorough analysis and extended reflection than the struggle through which the southern whites, subjugated by adversaries of their own race, thwarted the scheme which threatened permanent subjugation to another race.

No disposition anywhere appeared, however, to resist Federal military power, and a mere handful of troops was sufficient to sustain a far-reaching despotism . . . .The reasoning by which the policy of Congress was justified in the North was regarded in the South as founded on falsehood and malice . . . . Under all these circumstances the southerners felt that the policy of Congress had no real cause save the purpose of radical politicians to prolong and extend their party power by means of negro suffrage.<sup>12</sup>

The above quotation, from 1907, epitomizes the interpretation the “Dunning school” had of Reconstruction. Simply put, those of this school of thought interpreted events favorably for the

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<sup>11</sup> Elliott West, “A Longer, Grimmer, but More Interesting Story,” in Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin, ed., *Trails, Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 107.

<sup>12</sup> William A. Dunning, *Reconstruction, Political, and Economic 1865-1877*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers: 1907), 1, 110-111.

white South by defending southern plantation owners, blaming the North and abolitionists for causing the war, and pinning the “excesses” of the era of Reconstruction on Radical Republicans determined to punish the South. William Dunning, John Burgess, their disciples, and white southerners in general would have posterity believe that Dixie was the unwilling victim of postwar northern vindictiveness. In their view, all went well until the North interfered with President Andrew Johnson by forcing equality of blacks upon the South. White southerners took issue with allowing blacks to be treated as equals; they believed that the former slaves were inferior. Radical or Congressional Reconstruction, from 1867-1877, was led by the corrupt carpetbaggers, scalawags, and ignorant black voters who followed them blindly.<sup>13</sup>

Such a perceptual framework has changed. Eric Foner, in the preface to his definitive 1988 work on Reconstruction, noted that no period in American history, “Has, in the last twenty-five years, seen a broadly accepted point of view so completely overturned as Reconstruction – the violent, dramatic, and still controversial era that followed the Civil War.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed the historiographical shift regarding Reconstruction’s interpretation and the way people understand the acts and impacts of carpetbaggers, has been profound.

The interpretations of the Dunning School met early criticisms and challenges in W. E. B. Du Bois’ *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), which admonished historians for not seriously including the story of the emancipated slaves who figured so prominently into the Reconstruction narrative. From the 1940s through the 1960s less racially biased scholarship, influenced by DuBois, emerged that dramatically reformulated previous interpretations of historical events. Could it have been that Reconstruction was not altogether destructive, and is it

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<sup>13</sup> Scalawags were native southern whites who supported Republican Reconstruction policies.

<sup>14</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction, America’s Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), xvii. *Ibid*, xvii.

plausible that it even aided many people? Revisionist historians thought so. Still, even more recently, postrevisionists have produced work that claims Reconstruction had been too limited in its effects on freedmen; the exact opposite claim made by the Dunning School. The legacy of the carpetbaggers has shared a common fate with Reconstruction's legacy; new interpretations have given rise to more complete and more positive – or at least restrained - overviews of the work accomplished.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps an underlying and yet not often explicitly highlighted factor in all of this historiographical cacophony is the impact of the federal government.<sup>16</sup> Needless to say, it was the federal government that implemented and led Reconstruction, and early westerners decried the influence and power of Washington and eastern capitalists in the West. Historians have, like conservative southern whites of the postwar years, often recorded and represented this later sentiment, especially because the government has in fact been so influential in the West. The post-Reconstruction carpetbaggers who went west helped bring this federalism as part of their political expertise to that region. These men moved west because of their profound belief in progress, despite the “failures” of Reconstruction, arising from their contributions to Union victory in the Civil War.

A continual theme in the development of the United States has been that of the tension between stronger federalism and state rights. Since the country's inception, the proper balance here has been a hotly disputed matter. Thomas Jefferson and other Republicans of his day believed that a stronger federal government presence might limit the rights of both states and

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<sup>15</sup> For a brief overview of the postrevisionist position, see Richard L. Hume and Jerry B. Gough, *Blacks, Carpetbaggers, and Scalawags: the Constitutional Conventions of Radical Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 7-8.

<sup>16</sup> Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 158.

independent yeoman farmers. In contrast, federalists like George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and John Adams worked to create national banks, overarching laws, and other measures which increased the power and reach of the federal government. This legacy transcends the founding fathers. The Civil War and the story of western expansion demonstrate how the federal government grew in power and how this growth enabled expansion.

In some respects, the multitude of issues that defined the debates of the Missouri Compromise of 1820, the Compromise of 1850, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 led to the outbreak of internecine warfare in 1861. Abraham Lincoln and the Republicans held that the national authority must be preserved, that federal laws governed all the states, and that the national government had the authority to restrict the expansion of slavery. The southerners who had seceded, often Democrats, claimed that the oppressive federal government had impinged upon state and individual rights. Laws, limitations, and beliefs about slavery influenced southern sentiment, but concerns about autonomy and freedom mattered as well.

Enter the Union Army and its soldiers, some of whom later became carpetbaggers. Like most of their fellow soldiers and northern countrymen, these men went to war to keep the Union from disintegrating. They believed that southerners had committed a great and illegal folly in denying the power of the central government. Union soldiers under the command of President Abraham Lincoln were to defeat the Confederacy and to reassert the dominance of the federal government. In so doing, these soldiers essentially served as the footmen for federalism, whether fighting for the Union, or in the case of many, administering Reconstruction in the South, or developing western states. They believed in one, unified nation beholden to the laws of the central single government.

The part that these men played in the expansion of the federal government in the West, then, is particularly important. Some modern New Western Historians, such as Donald Worster, contend that one of the best ways to reevaluate and fully tell the history of the West is through inclusion of the involvement of the federal government.<sup>17</sup> Indeed that government owned more than half of the land in the West at one point or another, and the Homestead Act of 1862 encouraged people westward in great numbers.

To understate the influence and importance of federal development in the West would be a mistake. The National Reclamation Act of 1902 altered the face of the region even more than had the Homestead Act.<sup>18</sup> As Worster argues, “The West, more than any other American region, was built by state power, state expertise, state technology, and state bureaucracy.”<sup>19</sup> Turner, as well, in an essay entitled “The West and American Ideals” stressed the importance of the federal government in reclamation efforts in western deserts. The post-World War II development of the defense industry throughout the West encouraged growth, especially of many western cities.<sup>20</sup> The New Deal and Great Society programs, the GI bill, large-scale irrigation projects, and other such programs vaulted the West beyond the confines of its underdeveloped and arid locale. The carpetbaggers who headed west after southern Reconstruction, then, represent an important piece of this regional growth of the power of the federal government. The influence and control of the federal government in the West was thus pervasive. From land concessions

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>18</sup> The National Reclamation Act passed on June 17, 1902, secured arid land in seventeen western states to be transformed by the national government into arable land. Through immense dam and irrigation projects, the federal government sought to encourage families to settle in the West. The Bureau of Reclamation built over 75,000 public or private dams in the twentieth century including the Hoover Dam, Shasta Dam, and Grand Coulee Dam.

<sup>19</sup> Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 131.

<sup>20</sup> Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and Struggle for Postwar Oakland*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 175. (Although this reference occurs much later, it serves as a powerful later example of how the U.S. government created many of the conditions necessary for cities and civilizations to thrive.)

for railroad companies to control over which territories gained statehood, Washington made many of the key decisions that affected the West.

Carpetbaggers who headed west after Reconstruction's end carried with them convictions that the federal government could and should help develop the region. Because, in part, of the carpetbaggers' experience within southern postwar governments, they often were able to gain positions of leadership in developing western territories and states. Prosser served in the 1889 state constitutional convention in Washington, and Conover served twice in constitutional conventions (1868 and 1885) in Florida. Moreover, as a group, carpetbaggers who moved west often helped start institutions that brought the West in line with national developments. Just as they had once sought to impose order on the South, they now brought the West divided city gridlines, harbor expansions, educational systems, and the newest developments in medicine. Their legacy in the West, though less known and less controversial than in the South, might have been nearly as great and provides additional insight into their motivations and actions.

Carpetbaggers significantly influenced both southern and western history. In the South, their influence aided the struggling freedmen and provided order in a time of tumult. Despite an overly inclusive reputation of corruption and greed that led to the pejorative "carpetbagger" label, these entrepreneurs and political leaders deftly served the prostrate and struggling southerners, white and black, who were their constituents. They were not in the South only to abscond with stolen or immorally obtained goods; they worked towards progress there. When most white southerners spurned their efforts and ideologies, some carpetbaggers redirected their efforts out to the West. Endorsing the broad national belief that opportunities lay westward, these men chose to settle new frontiers. Their efforts at reintegration of southern states may have failed, but they hoped to fair better in converting western territories into new states. These men

were self-reflective and offered their wealth of experience and their political skills to western development. In this regard theirs is an intriguing story that needs to be told.

## CHAPTER 2

### Early and Formative Years in the Lives of Two Northern Men

This chapter explores the lives and experiences of the two men of this study, both before and during the Civil War. Their place of birth, their family circumstances, and their early career experiences shaped the way the two viewed the federal government and subsequently the politicians they became. Both were born in the North and eventually served the Union during the Civil War. Prior to the outbreak of war, the two, William F. Prosser and Simon B. Conover, had engaged in different careers - Prosser as a teacher, miner and soldier and Conover as a druggist and physician. Their experience in the Civil War, however, shaped their conceptions of the federal government that influenced them. Prosser fought throughout the Civil War and attained the rank of colonel near its conclusion. Conover served as assistant surgeon general in Nashville toward the end of the war. Their military service pushed both toward politics in the postwar south as Republicans.

William Farrand Prosser was born in Williamsport, Lycoming County, Pennsylvania, on March 16, 1834. In 1832, both David and Rachel Prosser, William's parents, immigrated to the United States. His parents removed to Beula, Cambria County, in the following year.<sup>21</sup> Three years later the family moved to Johnstown in Cambria County, Pennsylvania, some one hundred and eight miles to the southeast of Buela. Prosser's mother, Rachel Williams Prosser, was a native of Breckenshire, Wales and died in Johnstown in 1842 when William was eight years old.

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<sup>21</sup> William F. Prosser, *A history of the Puget Sound country its resources, its commerce and its people: with some reference to discoveries and explorations in North America from the time of Christopher Columbus down to that of George Vancouver in 1792, when the beauty, richness and vast commercial advantages of this region were first made known to the world* (New York: Lewis Publishing Company, 1903), 278.

Prosser described his mother as, “a woman of great beauty, most exemplary piety and strong mental characteristics.”<sup>22</sup> He added, “This loss has ever since been deeply deplored.”<sup>23</sup> His mother left behind four sons, one of whom, Major A. Sidney Prosser, died at the battle of Knoxville. Sidney was a lawyer by trade. Another brother, John G. Prosser, was a railroad man in Nebraska.

David Prosser, William’s father and also a native of Breckenshire, Wales, continued to live in Johnstown (which is approximately two hundred and ten miles east of Pittsburgh) for the rest of his life. He died there in 1883, after a life in which William Prosser described him as having been a prominent citizen in Cambria County for nearly a half century. David Prosser was a coal miner who played a vital role in establishing the Cambria Iron Works at Johnstown. He remarried and with the second wife had six children. His second wife, a daughter, and four grandchildren were lost in the great Johnstown flood of 1889.<sup>24</sup> In the 1840 census for Johnston, David Prosser appears as the head of household with three male children under age five, one male between five and ten years-old (William F.), one male and one female between twenty and thirty, and three males and one female between thirty and forty. Of those, four are listed with occupations; three were miners and the last worked navigating canals, lakes, and rivers. No family members over twenty years of age were recorded as being able to read or write.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Lewis Publishing Company (listed as author), *A Volume of Memoirs and Genealogy of Representative Citizens of the City of Seattle and County of King, Washington, Including Biographies of Many of Those Who Have Passed Away; Illustrated* (New York: Lewis Publishing Company, 1903), 553.

<sup>25</sup> United States, Bureau of the Census. Sixth Census of the United States, 1840, Johnston, Cambria County, Pennsylvania 1, 24.

Prosser attended the “common” or public schools in Pennsylvania during several winters, studying for three terms of five months each at Johnstown Academy in 1850 and 1851.<sup>26</sup> He later taught school for two years and studied law for a number of years but never practiced. For a time he also worked as a surveyor until deciding in 1854, at the age of twenty, to leave Pennsylvania for California.<sup>27</sup> He left for California because he sought a climate change in relation to ill health.

Simon Barclay Conover, like Prosser, was native to the mid-Atlantic region, born in Middlesex County, New Jersey, September 23, 1840, six years after Prosser (Middlesex is roughly forty miles southwest of downtown New York City). Conover’s father, Samuel Conover, was a farmer, then a grocer, and finally a farm laborer. Samuel married Ann Maria Barclay on October 4, 1837 at the First Presbyterian Church in Cranbury, Middlesex County, New Jersey. Simon Conover had three siblings, an older brother named Augustus, an older sister Catherine, and a younger sister Ida.

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<sup>26</sup> Elwood Evans, *History of the Pacific Northwest: Oregon and Washington; embracing an account of the original discoveries on the Pacific coast of North America, and a description of the conquest, settlement and subjugation of the original territory of Oregon, also interesting biographies of the earliest settlers and more prominent men and women of the Pacific Northwest, including a description of the climate, soil, productions of Oregon and Washington*, 2 vols., (Portland, OR.: North Pacific History Co., 1889), 2: 527.

<sup>27</sup> Prosser, *A history of the Puget Sound country its resources, its commerce and its people*, 278.



**Figure 1.** A youthful Simon Conover, date unknown. From the Simon Conover collection, WSU MASC.

Based on census information, it appears that the Conover financial situation gradually deteriorated. From 1850-1870 Conover's parents consistently reported diminishing wealth and property, going from \$2,000 in assets in 1850 (or nearly \$50,000 today) to \$300 in 1860 and down to \$100 in 1870 (roughly \$1,600 today). In the 1850 census, Samuel Conover reported

that he was a farmer, in 1860 a grocer, and in 1870 a farm laborer.<sup>28</sup> Conover's father passed away July 31, 1879. His mother died on April 18, 1905 at the age of eighty-nine. Given the family's rather bleak financial situation, it is telling that Conover completed so much schooling as a doctor and later became a U.S. Senator.

Although he did not experience combat in the Civil War, Conover did serve in the military as a physician for part of that conflict. Conover also pursued a trade that not only entailed his skills as a doctor, but also allowed him to sell different medicines. In 1860 he listed "druggist" as his occupation, and by this time he was also well on his way to becoming a doctor. In the 1860 census Conover also indicated that he lived with his parents in Trenton, Mercer County, New Jersey, and that he had personal property amounting to \$1,000.00.

As noted, Conover attended the academy at Trenton, New Jersey, after which time he studied under the preceptorship of physician John Wolverton, also from Trenton. Dr. Wolverton was an eminent physician of that city. Medical practices in the mid-nineteenth century were primitive. Germ theory, or pathogenic theory, was yet to take hold, which meant that doctors were unfamiliar with bacteriology and thus unconcerned with aseptic surgical procedures. Surgical instruments were wiped down or cleansed with water. Many doctors consider this time a 'middle-ages' in medicine that would experience a period of 'enlightenment' near the turn of the century.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> United States, Bureau of the Census. Sixth Census of the United States, 1860, Trenton, Mercer County, Pennsylvania 3, 34.

<sup>29</sup> George W. Adams, *Doctors in Blue: The Medical History of the Union Army in the Civil War* (New York: H. Shuman Inc., 1952), 228

In 1862, Conover entered the Medical Department of the University of Pennsylvania. He won praise as a student, and in 1863 passed “a most rigid examination.”<sup>30</sup> With the successful passage of this examination, Conover was assigned acting Assistant Surgeon in the United States Army, and assigned to duty in Nashville, Tennessee. During this assignment, Conover studied medicine at two universities and served as Union doctor. Conover’s medical trade would serve him well throughout life, and during those times when he was not working as a politician, he practiced medicine.

In 1854 William Prosser embarked on a completely different track than Conover, choosing to leave his native east coast in search of gold and a better climate in California. He, along with twelve other Pennsylvanians, pioneered westward on ox-pulled wagons or horseback. They departed from Independence, Missouri, for California on May 1, 1854.<sup>31</sup> The journey lasted four months, during which Prosser said his group was, “Constantly traveling, much of the way through hostile Indian territory.”<sup>32</sup> Each night Prosser served as guard from half-past-ten until half-past-one. In California, the group, “stopped first at Dutch Flat in Placer [County], where the Colonel ate his first good meal after leaving Missouri.”<sup>33</sup>

Prosser began mining on the Middle Fork of the American River, but after having little success went to Sacramento then San Francisco. By the spring of 1855 he settled in Trinity County, which is a heavily forested area in the northwest part of California, just inland from the

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<sup>30</sup> H. K. Hines, *An Illustrated History of the State of Washington from the Earliest Period of its Discovery to the Present Time, together with Glimpses of its Auspicious Future, Illustrations and Full-page Portraits of some of its Eminent Men and Biographical Mention of many of its Pioneers and Prominent Citizens of to-day* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1893), 702

<sup>31</sup> Lewis Publishing Company, *A Volume of Memoirs and Genealogy of Representative Citizens of the City of Seattle and County of King*, 552.

<sup>32</sup> Prosser, *A history of the Puget Sound country its resources, its commerce and its people*, 278.

<sup>33</sup> Lewis Publishing Company, *A Volume of Memoirs and Genealogy of Representative Citizens of the City of Seattle and County of King*, 552.

Pacific Ocean.<sup>34</sup> Trinity was one of the first counties created when California attained statehood in 1850, and Prosser must have experienced its rugged terrain. Even today it is a sparsely populated area and has no incorporated cities and a total population of 13,022 as of the 2000 census.<sup>35</sup> He tried his hand at mining there and lived near Weaverville. “He there secured in one day gold to the amount of one hundred and twenty dollars, but on the whole his mining experiences were not as profitable as he had expected and he removed to Shasta County, California.”<sup>36</sup> In 1857 he returned to Trinity County and lived at Indian Creek, where he carried express around Weaverville and did some mining.

In 1858, after several years engaged as a miner and mail carrier, Prosser shifted his career path dramatically. The circumstances surrounding this change probably formed some of Prosser’s beliefs regarding American Indians and also shaped his feelings toward government and civic duty. Prior to his enlisting in the volunteer Trinity County Rangers (a military group assembled to combat hostile natives), Prosser had referenced the repeated Indian attacks his overland crossing party faced as they made their 1854 journey. Warding off those attacks perhaps influenced his later beliefs and subsequent actions towards Indians. The first possible manifestation of those beliefs appeared when Prosser volunteered to fight against various Indian tribes that threatened residents in the California towns of Humboldt Bay and Weaverville. Native Americans from the Mad River and Redwood Creek tribes attacked and killed white

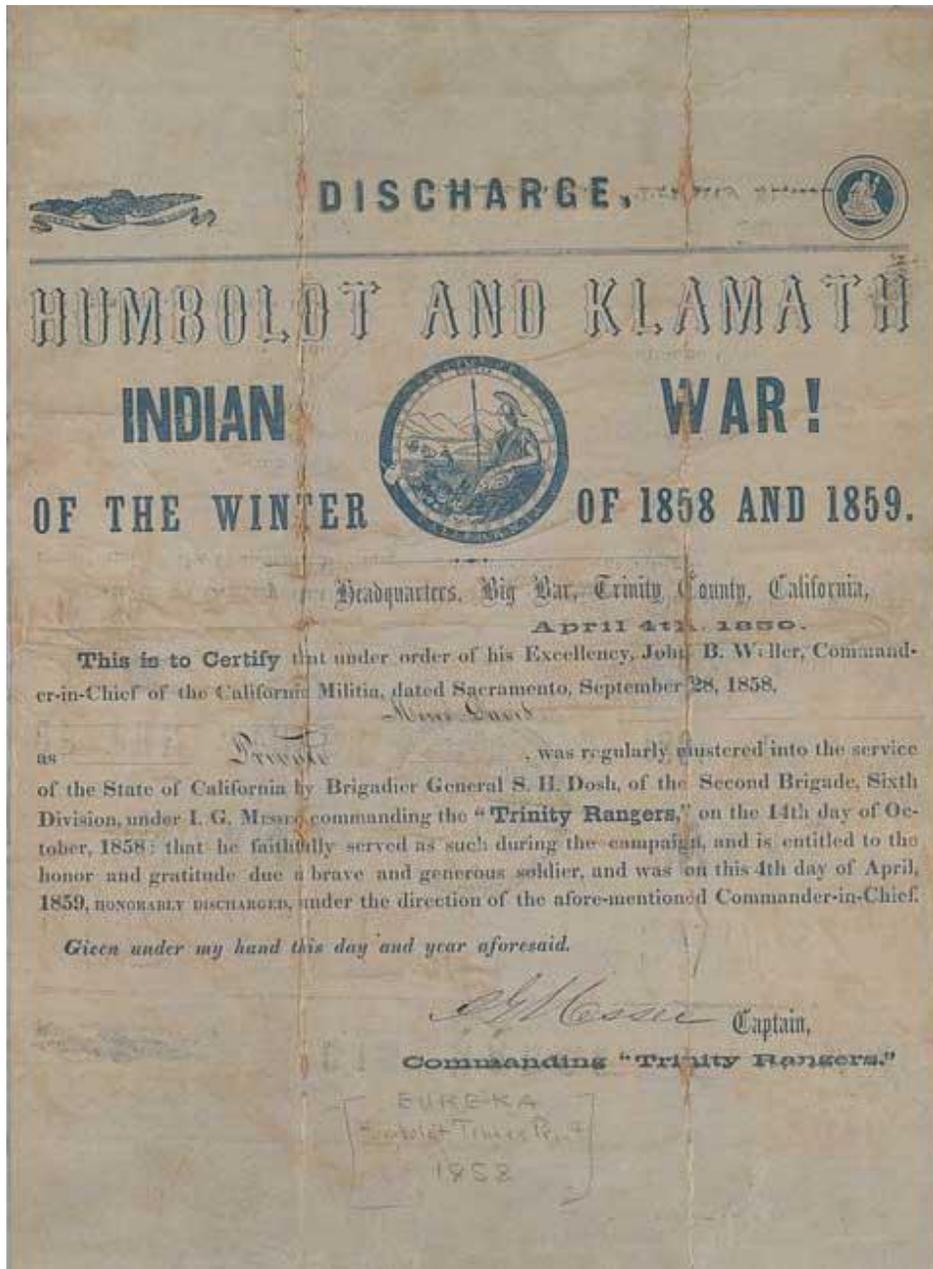
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<sup>34</sup> Evans, *History of the Pacific Northwest*, 527.

<sup>35</sup> Census Data, Trinity County, Ca 2008 [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/SAFFFacets?geo\\_id=05000US06105&state=04000US06&pctxt=cr&show\\_2003\\_tab=&redirect=Y](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/SAFFFacets?geo_id=05000US06105&state=04000US06&pctxt=cr&show_2003_tab=&redirect=Y)

<sup>36</sup> Lewis Publishing Company, *A Volume of Memoirs and Genealogy of Representative Citizens of the City of Seattle and County of King*, 553.

settlers. Residents complained that the Indians were armed and would kill a man to get his rifle, while also paying high prices for guns and ammunition.<sup>37</sup>



**Figure 2.** Official papers for volunteers mustered out of service in Trinity County in 1858. Certificate of honorable discharge of Private Moses Davis from the Trinity Rangers. From the Bancroft Library, Berkeley CA.

<sup>37</sup> *San Francisco Daily Herald* November 1, 1858.

As the situation worsened, many residents petitioned the governor of California, then John B. Weller, who sent William C. Kibbe to ascertain the facts of the situation. Kibbe learned about roughly three hundred hostile natives before deciding that military action was necessary.<sup>38</sup> A call went out, and over eighty woodsmen and miners, allegedly all well familiar with the ways of Indian warfare, agreed to enlist. Prosser was among this group of volunteers, and was made second lieutenant of the rangers. John P. Jones, who would go on to be a United States Senator from Nevada, was also a member of the company.<sup>39</sup> The fighting occurred principally along the Eel and Mad rivers near Humboldt Bay. From October of 1859 (when the men enlisted) to April of 1860 (when they were mustered out), roughly twenty Indians were killed and only three of the Trinity Rangers.<sup>40</sup> It was a very severe campaign in that the men as they crossed mountains were in one-to-ten feet of snow. After killing twenty Indians and capturing many more, the Indian attacks halted and the trouble seemed to be resolved. The governor then issued payment to the rangers, and Prosser received \$65 per month for his services as second lieutenant.<sup>41</sup>

Prosser's time mining in California and serving as second lieutenant in the Trinity Rangers brought him some notoriety, not to mention combat experience. After being mustered out of the service, Prosser ran, in 1860, as the first Republican candidate for the state legislature from Trinity County. Trinity County was mostly Democratic, but despite this Prosser lost by

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<sup>38</sup> Governor John B. Weller to General W. C. Kibbe, September 5, 1858, (Military Dept. Indian War Papers, MF 3:6 (22), California State Archives, Sacramento, CA).

<sup>39</sup> Lewis Publishing Company, *A Volume of Memoirs and Genealogy of Representative Citizens of the City of Seattle and County of King*, 553

<sup>40</sup> *San Francisco Daily Herald*, May 16, 1859.

<sup>41</sup> "Act for Payment of Expenses incurred in the Suppression of Indian Hostilities, April 16, 1859," (Tenth Session of the Legislature: John O'Meara, State Printer, 1859, California State Archives, Sacramento, CA).

only a small vote.<sup>42</sup> Even so, his actions here signal that his political beliefs had already taken shape. He sought office as a Republican, he had served the government in combat, and he might have enjoyed a successful career as a California politician had not the Civil War begun. When it did, Prosser left California for his home state of Pennsylvania, where he enlisted.

Prosser's early government service in California likely inculcated his sense of the importance of the federal government. The experiences of Prosser and Conover during the Civil War encouraged their belief in the preeminence of the federalist government. Some 360,000 Union soldiers died fighting to assert federal authority. Fighting for four years, in the case of Prosser, or serving Union wounded and sick in the case of Conover, must have made an indelible mark on both men's political beliefs about federalism and their nation. While there is little record of Conover's involvement with the Union Army as a combatant during the Civil War, it is clear that he helped the cause as a surgeon. Even though Prosser's historical record during this time is much more complete, it is apparent that both men served the Union.

Following the crisis at Fort Sumter, William Prosser hastily returned from California to Johnstown, Pennsylvania. He desired to fight on behalf of his country, and he was tendered a commission in the regular army, probably because of his experience fighting with the Trinity Rangers. For unknown reasons, Prosser declined this offer, for a time recruited troops for colonel Edward D. Baker, and then enlisted with a unit known as the Anderson Cavalry as

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<sup>42</sup> Lewis Publishing Company, *A Volume of Memoirs and Genealogy of Representative Citizens of the City of Seattle and County of King*, 553.

private, along with James Quinn and James N. Rea also of Johnstown.<sup>43</sup> Baker, a close friend of Abraham Lincoln for over two decades, died at the Battle of Balls Bluff in October of 1861.<sup>44</sup>

Prosser felt a deep-seated sense of duty to fight for his nation and the North. He did not hesitate about returning from California, and he turned down the commission so that he could fight with men from his hometown. These actions reveal the type of man Prosser was. His convictions and courage guided him during vicious Civil War battles, during the Reconstruction of Tennessee, and in his later contributions to western development.

William Prosser fought for four years in the Civil War. He enlisted as a private with relatively little combat experience but emerged from the war a battle-hardened colonel with a fondness for the Tennessee country where he had fought. In his short biographical sketch, Prosser was characteristically circumspect and humble when reporting his military service. He listed his various ranks and some of the notable battles in which he fought. Absent are any accounts of his heroism, his leadership, or his time as a prisoner of war. By piecing together his service record, testimonials from others, battle accounts, and his own writings, Prosser's service in the Civil War becomes clearer. His experience sheds light on the experience of other Union soldiers and carpetbaggers alike.

The Anderson Cavalry, so named because of its leader, Everett W. Anderson, was recruited in the city of Philadelphia, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, in the fall of 1861. Men from prestigious backgrounds competed to be in the Anderson Troop because it was advertised as an elite group tasked with being the bodyguard for General Anderson. Its men were sent to

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<sup>43</sup> Evans, *History of the Pacific Northwest*, 527-528.

<sup>44</sup> Evans, who has a biographical sketch of Prosser's life, indicates that many of the troops disliked Colonel Baker. The reasons for this dislike are unclear. This is especially interesting considering Lincoln's friendship with Baker. Their relationship was so close that Lincoln named his second son, Edward Baker Lincoln, after Baker.

Louisville, Kentucky, and there became the bodyguard for General John Carlos Buell, attached to his headquarters for special duty.<sup>45</sup> The first major battle that Prosser lists in his biography is that of Shiloh. Because of the importance of that battle and the western theater, an overview of the situation at that time is useful.

The North was in dire straits in early 1862. President Lincoln issued “General War Order #1,” wherein all Union armies were to advance by February 22, George Washington’s birthday. Besides losing the first battle of Bull Run, the North seemed to be stagnating on all fronts. General George B. McClellan and the Army of the Potomac would fail to defeat Robert E. Lee in Virginia. Representatives from the South traveled to England hoping to persuade Britain to recognize Confederate independence, and they met with some success. Additionally, northern banks and the U.S. Treasury had just suspended specie payments. News of war contract scandals dominated newspaper front pages. The Army of the Potomac had done nothing significant for months.<sup>46</sup> The Union was in need of good news.

That good news came from the western theatre and Tennessee. Ulysses S. Grant had won decisive victories at Forts Henry and Donelson. On February 23, just one day after Lincoln’s “General War Order #1” was supposed to take effect, Union troops occupied Nashville, the first Confederate capital to fall to Union control. Confederate envoy James Mason wrote from London that the change of fortune in Tennessee “had an unfortunate effect on the minds of our

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<sup>45</sup> Lewis Publishing Company, *A Volume of Memoirs and Genealogy of Representative Citizens of the City of Seattle and County of King*, 554.

<sup>46</sup>James M. McPherson and James K. Hogue, *Ordeal by Fire: the Civil War and Reconstruction* 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 243.

friends here.”<sup>47</sup> Other western victories were to come, albeit with a higher cost in bloodshed. The first such engagement was the battle of Shiloh, in which William Prosser fought.

On the heels of the Union successes at Forts Henry and Donelson, Confederate General Albert S. Johnston regrouped his army at Corinth, Mississippi, where Pierre G. Beauregard joined him. On the Union side, William T. Sherman and Grant expected to continue their advance down the Tennessee River. They did not expect Johnston to mount an offensive operation against the Union troops near a small church named Shiloh, but that is exactly what happened. The Battle of Shiloh, April 6-7, 1862, was the bloodiest battle of the Civil War to that point, though by the war’s end it would rank seventh.<sup>48</sup> Prosser fought with the Army of the Cumberland, which soon had its name changed from the Army of the Ohio when an exasperated Lincoln replaced Buell with William S. Rosecrans. Prosser no doubt fought alongside his fellow soldiers and was witness to the huge carnage.

In all, some 1,700 men were killed and 8,000 wounded on each side. The prolonged fighting was intense, and the numbers of casualties shook many of the men.<sup>49</sup> Eventually, the Union turned back the Confederate offensive, and in the process General Johnston was killed (the highest ranking officer killed on either side during the Civil War and a tremendous loss to the Confederacy). The battle is considered a triumph for the Union, despite the fact that each side incurred heavy losses, and no pursuit of the Confederates retreating to Corinth seemed possible for the war-weary blue coats. The Anderson Troop distinguished itself in that battle.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Wiley Sword, *Shiloh, Bloody April* (New York: William Morrow & Company Inc., 1974), 259.

<sup>50</sup> Evans, *History of the Pacific Northwest*, 528.

General Don Carlos Buell detached Prosser for stores and supplies needed by the army. A detachment of John H. Morgan's Confederate Cavalry captured Prosser in June of 1862 while he was in transit. Prosser had traveled from Alabama and made it within forty miles of Columbia, Tennessee, before he was captured. Morgan's detachment stripped Prosser of his horse and arms, paroled him, and turned him loose in the woods to make his way.<sup>51</sup> Prosser walked the forty miles to Columbia. Once he reached Union lines, he made his way to Nashville and reported what had occurred to General Buell. He was then sent to Annapolis, Maryland, where he waited for his exchange. At Annapolis, Prosser was assigned to duty with other paroled soldiers from Pennsylvania. He remained in Maryland from June until September, 1862, at which point he was exchanged. In Pennsylvania Prosser was assigned to the Fifteenth Pennsylvania Cavalry as the first quartermaster to the regiment.<sup>52</sup>

According to Civil War veterans, the roles and responsibilities of the department of the quartermaster were legion. "The services of [quartermaster] are no less essential to success and involve no less labor and responsibility than those of the officers who accompany the troops on their marches . . . . The quartermaster's department is charged with the duty of providing the means of transportation by land and water for all the troops and all the material of war."<sup>53</sup> This department supplied all those things necessary for an army to fight, including horses, tents, forage, lumber, etc. Prosser's role in the army was clearly an important one.

While quartermaster of his unit, which participated in operations of General Buell subsequent to the battle of Shiloh, Prosser and the Anderson Cavalry, then numbering about one

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<sup>51</sup> Lewis Publishing Company, *A Volume of Memoirs and Genealogy of Representative Citizens of the City of Seattle and County of King*, 554.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> John Fitch, *Annals of the Army of the Cumberland* (Philadelphia: Lippincott and Co., 1863), 375-377. [www.qmfound.com/quartermaster\\_1861-63.htm](http://www.qmfound.com/quartermaster_1861-63.htm) (accessed 12/1/09).

thousand men, arrived at Louisville, Kentucky. The force arrived around November 9, 1862, where it became disgruntled due to lack of leadership and other concerns and subsequently refused to go to battle.<sup>54</sup> According to Major-General William Rosecrans, “The Anderson, otherwise the Fifteenth Pennsylvania, Cavalry, had the misfortune to become disorganized and demoralized. We have successfully reorganized it. The new officers are commissioned.”<sup>55</sup> Prosser was one such officer who received a temporary commission.

By December of 1862 Prosser was promoted to the rank of captain. By this time the Army of the Cumberland was stationed in Nashville and was 42,000 strong. The day after Christmas, Rosecrans marched out to face Braxton Bragg’s Army of Tennessee and its 36,000 men stationed near Murfreesboro. The two armies camped the night of December 31<sup>st</sup> on opposite sides of Stones River. That evening the military bands on each side “battled” musically for a while before both played the same tune and soldiers from each side joined in song. Prosser then led his company into the battle of Stones River, or Murfreesboro, the next morning, when Confederates launched an early attack while Union soldiers were still eating breakfast. At the end of the day, it appeared that the Union had lost. Yet Rosecrans refused to withdraw, and after another day of brutal fighting it was Bragg who ordered his army to retreat. After the three days of fighting, “The ‘dismal groans and cries of the wounded and dying’ replaced the crash of

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<sup>54</sup> Report of Adjutant-General Nelson. H. Davis, February 4, 1863, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 127 volumes and index. (Washington D.C.: 1880-1901), 20: 345-350.

<sup>55</sup> Letter of Major-General William S. Rosecrans to Brigadier-General George H. Thomas, May 23, 1863, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 127 volumes and index. (Washington D.C.: 1880-1901), 20: 380.

musketry and the roar of artillery.”<sup>56</sup> Prosser fought alongside of three hundred men in his regiment, eighty of whom died.<sup>57</sup>

Thirty-one percent of the Union combatants were killed, wounded or missing; the Confederacy lost thirty-three percent, and the combined casualty rate was the highest of any single battle of the war.<sup>58</sup> Despite this, the Union had fought and won and pulled a victory from apparent defeat. Lincoln later wrote Rosecrans, “I can never forget, whilst I remember anything, that you gave us a hard victory which, had there been defeat instead, the nation could scarcely have lived over.”<sup>59</sup> The two armies then went into winter quarters.

Soon after Stones River, at the request of the adjutant-general of Tennessee, Prosser was transferred to the Second Tennessee Cavalry where he served as adjutant. He was commissioned major in that regiment March of 1863, a position he held until March, 1864.<sup>60</sup> He was undoubtedly active in numerous smaller engagements as he came across various Confederate forces, the cavalry units of Nathan Bedford Forrest and Joseph Wheeler. Although the Army of the Cumberland was much larger than the Army of Tennessee, the Confederates had superior cavalry.

The next major engagement for Prosser and the Second Tennessee Cavalry was to be the Battle of Chickamauga on September 19-20, 1863. This battle came about as Bragg decided to counterattack after Rosecrans outmaneuvered him on a number of occasions as the Confederates

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<sup>56</sup> Peter Cozzens, *No Better Place to Die; the Battle of Stones River* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 167.

<sup>57</sup> Evans, *History of the Pacific Northwest*, 527.

<sup>58</sup> McPherson and Hogue, *Ordeal By Fire*, 334.

<sup>59</sup> Roy P. Basler (ed.), *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9vols. (New Brunswick, N.J., 1953-1955), 5: 39, 424, quoted in McPherson and Hogue, *Ordeal by Fire*, 334.

<sup>60</sup> Prosser, *A history of the Puget Sound country its resources, its commerce and its people*, 278.

retreated from Tennessee and abandoned Chattanooga. Bragg received reinforcements of some 12,000 men and their artillery when Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee sent him James Longstreet and two divisions from the Army of Northern Virginia. The intense fighting commenced on September 19, 1863, in the thick underbrush of Chickamauga Creek. On the 20<sup>th</sup>, the federals mistakenly perceived a hole on their right and pulled a division to fill it, just as Longstreet attacked right at the place where the moved division had been. Rosecrans fled to Chattanooga, but General George H. Thomas kept two thirds of the army on the battlefield and repulsed Confederate attacks until nightfall, when they could retreat. For this Thomas earned the nickname, “the Rock of Chickamauga.” This time, the Confederates were the victors, and as James McPherson points out, it was, “the last significant offensive victory by any Confederate army.”<sup>61</sup> Grant, now in command in the West, shortly thereafter replaced Rosecrans with Thomas as commander of the Army of the Cumberland. At Chickamauga, the South endured 18,454 casualties, the North 16,170.

Prosser and the Second Tennessee Cavalry then fought at the Siege of Knoxville, November 17, 1863 – December 4, 1863. The siege came about after Braxton Bragg ordered James Longstreet to Knoxville to operate against Ambrose Burnside. As Longstreet and the Confederates begin their siege of Knoxville, Grant ordered Sherman to advance on Knoxville; by December 3, Longstreet began a two-day withdrawal from Knoxville to Greeneville. On the 6<sup>th</sup>, Sherman entered Knoxville, thus formally ending the siege, after which Longstreet went into winter quarters.

An account from one of the last major engagements in which Prosser fought, the siege of Decatur, portrays Prosser’s skill on the battlefield. In October of 1864, General John B. Hood

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<sup>61</sup> McPherson and Hogue, *Ordeal By Fire*, 365.

and the Confederate Army threatened unexpectedly at Decatur, Alabama. Prosser by this time had risen through the ranks to Lieutenant Colonel and was in command of a cavalry brigade in the District of North Alabama. To hold off Hood, he arranged for quick defenses. Prosser's quick reaction on October 27, 1864 and excellent command held Hood off from ten in the morning until night fell, and it saved Decatur from falling into Confederate hands. The fighting also allowed General Thomas the time to prepare for the decisive Battle of Nashville in December later that year.<sup>62</sup>

Days later, Palmer and his men came across a large Confederate cavalry force that they sought to elude. During that evasion, they happened upon a Confederate force unprepared to fight. Lieutenant-Colonel Prosser led the advance that included the detachment of the Twelfth Indiana Cavalry. They routed the Confederates speedily and captured five wagons, including some containing official brigade papers. They freed a large number of prisoners, including eight Indiana soldiers who had been captured at Decatur. There are then, numerous references to Prosser's heroism and skill as a leader. Many of these refer to the siege of Decatur, battles in northern Alabama and Georgia, and engagements with Confederate Cavalry led by Nathan Forrest and Philip Roddy.<sup>63</sup>

As Elwood Evans points out in his biographical sketch of Prosser, although Prosser at this time was only a major, "From the time [Prosser] transferred, however, he virtually commanded [his] regiment."<sup>64</sup> Prosser is said to have been a valiant and able cavalryman and natural leader. Various authors have editorialized that had Prosser accepted the commission he

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Evans, *History of the Pacific Northwest*, 528.

had been offered initially, he might have risen as high as William T. Sherman or Ambrose Burnside. That will never be known.

The Battle of Nashville was Confederate General John B. Hood's last major operation in Tennessee. Hood led the Army of Tennessee toward Nashville in November of 1864. George H. Thomas's arrived there on December 1, and Hood arrived the next day. Nashville was well fortified, and for thirteen days Thomas prepared for an attack on Hood's flanks. On the 15<sup>th</sup> attacks began, against both the Confederate left and right, and throughout the course of the day were successful. Brigadier-General Robert Granger wrote the following report that displays Prosser's role in that outcome:

I have not mentioned in the body of this report the admirable conduct of Lieutenant-Colonel Prosser, commanding Second Tennessee and Tenth Indiana Cavalry on the first day of Battle of Nashville [December 15, 1864], who stubbornly resisted the advance of the enemy and handled his small command skillfully. Officers of the enemy who were captured say that they never saw cavalry stand up so bravely before infantry. They would not be stampeded.<sup>65</sup>

Although badly weakened, Hood remained, but by midday the next day the Union successfully broke through Confederate defenses. Hood's army retreated.

By war's end, Prosser had fought in all the major campaigns of the Army of the Cumberland. He served under Rosecrans, Thomas, Sherman, and at the siege of Knoxville under Burnside. For his valor he was promoted in June 1865 to the rank of Colonel. After fighting in what were some of the most significant battles of the Civil War, Colonel Prosser and his

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<sup>65</sup> Report of Brigadier-General Robert S. Granger, November 6, 1864, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 127 volumes and index. (Washington D.C.: 1880-1901), 39: 699.

regiment were mustered out of the service at Nashville, Tennessee, on July 6, 1865. Although he had never been wounded, Prosser suffered from after effects of malaria contracted during the war.<sup>66</sup>

Simon Conover studied and practiced medicine during early and later periods of his life. Prior to the Civil War, Conover was a druggist without an actual medical degree. In 1863, as has been previously noted, Conover passed a rigorous medical examination and was appointed as an acting Assistant Surgeon in the United States Army to serve in Nashville. Conover thus became one of the Medical Corps commissioned doctors. By the war's end, some 11,000 doctors were on the Union Army's payroll, half of these were Medical Corps doctors and half of were contract surgeons.<sup>67</sup>

Commensurate with this appointment, Conover enrolled at the University of Nashville, from whence he graduated in 1864.<sup>68</sup> He also attended the School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, for a brief time between 1864-1865 but did not earn a degree there.<sup>69</sup> Instruction for doctors at this time did not include how germs, or microorganisms, caused diseases and infections. John Keegan, in his *The American Civil War*, examined medical practice during the war by looking at Walt Whitman, who served in northern hospitals. Keegan said, "Doctors could administer anesthetics, but they did not yet understand the germ theory of infection and so did

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<sup>66</sup> Lewis Publishing Company, *A Volume of Memoirs and Genealogy of Representative Citizens of the City of Seattle and County of King*, 554.

<sup>67</sup> Adams, *Doctors in Blue*, 174.

<sup>68</sup> The University no longer exists.

<sup>69</sup> Scott W. Hawley, "University of Pennsylvania and the U.S. Congress Roster of Alumni, Faculty and Trustees 1774 to the present," University Archives and Records Center, University of Pennsylvania, <http://www.archives.upenn.edu/people/notables/political/pennincongressac.html> (accessed 11/1/09).

not practices antiseptis.”<sup>70</sup> Surgeons commonly operated in blood or pus-stiffened clothes, as Northern doctors routinely cleaned out and incised wounds infected with maggots.

Confederates, having noticed that maggot-ridden wounds often healed more quickly and without the death of the wounded soldier, left the bacteria-eating larva alone. Despite all of this, Conover’s surgical experience provided him with opportunities that shaped the direction of his life.

Conover served as acting assistant surgeon at times between September 1863 and July 1866, treating wounded soldiers in Nashville. As noted, medical treatments at this time were woefully lacking. Even though shortly after the Civil War medicine improved, soldiers risked their lives on the battlefield; they faced new weaponry capable of more destruction, and if injured, received primitive medical treatment. Roughly twice as many soldiers died from disease as from battle wounds.<sup>71</sup> Walt Whitman assisted doctors and nurses and became a great poet of the Civil War. He wrote heart-rending letters home to the families who lost sons, fathers, or brothers. In one of his notebooks he wrote, “The expression of the American personality through this war is not to be looked for in the great campaign and the battle-fights. It is to be looked for . . . in the hospitals, among the wounded.”<sup>72</sup> Indeed, one of the most profound elements of the Civil War played out in the emotions of families who waited at home for news of their soldier.

The Union began the war with far too few doctors and insufficient support for the medical corps to properly care for the sick and wounded. This was especially true in 1861, when the chief of the Army Medical Department, a veteran of the War of 1812, was over eighty and

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<sup>70</sup> John Keegan, *The American Civil War: A Military History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 314.

<sup>71</sup> Ken Burns, “The Civil War Facts Sheet,” Public Broadcasting System (PBS), <http://www.pbs.org/civilwar/war/facts.html> (accessed 11/15/09).

<sup>72</sup> Keegan, *The American Civil War*, 319.

the Medical Corps counted in its ranks only 98 officers.<sup>73</sup> The U.S. Medical service possessed only twenty thermometers, and other crucial supplies were also lacking.<sup>74</sup> Through the first several years of fighting, cleanliness was considered relatively unimportant. Surgeons would pile amputated limbs in the surgical area or just outside of medical tents. Temporary hospitals were overcrowded and very dirty. Union soldiers in the early years of the war often did not report wounds, or would have friends take care of wounds, instead of disclosing them to the medical corps. The medical “ambulance” teams that carried wounded soldiers off the battlefield were too few in number and untrained. The jostling of these early ambulance teams often caused further injury or the death of the wounded. With time, more resources, and better knowledge, conditions improved. Frederick Law Olmstead, later one of the principal architects and organizers of the 1893 Chicago’s World’s Fair, led the Sanitary Commission for the medical corps and helped surgeons and nurses understand and implement antisepsis.

Dr. Conover was much better trained than some of his medical counterparts, who often completed their training in only a matter of weeks. But even with his expertise, doctors in the United States often lacked equipment and training that were common elsewhere in the world. “Whereas stethoscopes, thermometers, syringes, ophthalmoscopes, laryngoscopes, and the like were widely used in Europe,” Stewart Brooks explains, “many doctors here at home had never seen them let alone used them.”<sup>75</sup> Conditions improved considerably by the end of the war, especially in terms of standards of cleanliness, and some 13,000 doctors served around the

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<sup>73</sup> Adams, *Doctors in Blue*, 4.

<sup>74</sup> Keegan, *The American Civil War*, 313.

<sup>75</sup> Stewart Brooks, *Civil War Medicine* (Springfield, IL.: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1966), 22.

country. Because of his training, Conover most likely earned the pay of the assistant surgeon with the rank of first lieutenant or captain at \$105.50 per month.<sup>76</sup>

By 1864, the medical situation of the north was much improved. There was access to more doctors and nurses who were better trained. There was also no longer the drastic shortage of supplies, including anesthesia, that the Confederates endured as a result of the Union naval blockade and under-funding. According to medical historian George Adams, a typical northern hospital, perhaps like the one where Conover served in Nashville, would:

Have twenty ward-masters, from forty to a hundred nurses, five or six cooks, eight or ten assistant cooks, from ten to fifteen carpenters, black smiths, etc, from ten to fifteen storeroom workers, three or four “dead-house” attendants, ten clerks in the headquarters office and library, and three attendants for the officers’ quarters and mess. The staff ordinarily varied from 120 to 200 men . . . . The surgeon was aided by record cards which war experience had developed. Each patient wore a tag on his chest, bearing his name, rank, and unit.<sup>77</sup>

Soldiers able to stand were expected to do so each morning upon the general arrival of the ward surgeon. Hospitals later in the war paid attention to morale by offering libraries, religious services, singing groups, and such.

In May of 1864, Conover was assigned to Haddington Military Hospital in Pennsylvania. There he became intimately associated with professor Samuel W. Gross, who later became Professor of Surgery in Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia.<sup>78</sup> In the spring of 1865, Conover requested a transfer to Cincinnati, where he was assigned to Woodward Military hospital. He had, by then, served Union soldiers for roughly two years. During this time he, like

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>77</sup> Adams, *Doctors in Blue*, 161.

<sup>78</sup> Hines, *Illustrated History of the State of Washington*, 703.

other surgeons, learned much about surgery and different surgical techniques. His medical acumen and experience helped him rise through the ranks in Cincinnati quickly, even though he resigned from this position in the fall of 1865. He returned to his home state of New Jersey and practiced there before accepting an appointment in Florida. This was to be of crucial importance, for Conover was then to serve in the Reconstruction government of Florida and as a U.S. Senator from the state.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Redefining Carpetbaggers, Two Honest Statesmen**

Following the Civil War, Simon Conover and William Prosser settled in the South and became active politically. The postwar South was largely destroyed and the political, social, and economic climate was extremely tense and often dangerous. Republicans continued their nearly unchecked control of the federal government after the war's end, and the largest problem confronting the nation involved how to bring the South out of economic ruin and reintegrate the rebels into the United States. These transitions aroused intense anger, resentment, and heartache for northerners and southerners alike. The former had lost their esteemed leader, Abraham Lincoln, to the assassin's bullet in 1865. Certainly many northerners sought retribution against the South for having seceded in the first place, for causing the war, and for the loss of Lincoln.

As post-war conflicts intensified, the will of northerners to gain the "fruits of victory," intensified. White southerners, on the other hand, returned to destroyed cities and country sides, rising unemployment and hunger, and the reality of a defeat that had caused a total transformation of their society. Many resented the continued presence of northerners now that the war had concluded, but northerners would stay for a long time to come.

Southerners returned home and reentered their pre-war lives. Politicians also sought out control of their governments. With the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and passage of black laws aimed at denying the freedmen equality, it became apparent to many northern Republicans that losing the Civil War would not change outright the behavior of white southerners. President Andrew Johnson sought to return the South quickly into the Union, but his means for doing so allowed white southerners too much latitude. With Lincoln's assassination and reports of injustice done against the freedmen, Republicans impeached Johnson by 1868, and passed key

legislation in the form of the three Reconstruction Acts of 1867. These acts began a period known as “Radical Reconstruction.” Ten of the former eleven states (Tennessee had already been admitted back into the Union) had to hold constitutional conventions and meet other congressional requirements, including the enfranchisement of the freedmen, before they could be considered for readmission into the Union. A number of white southerners who had fought on behalf of the Confederacy were barred from political office. Needless to say, southern Reconstruction was a tension-filled and highly volatile period in American history.

Many southern whites resented the presence northerners and the influence of northern government in their societies. They labeled these northern white men who assumed political office as Republicans in the South during Reconstruction “carpet-baggers” or “carpetbaggers,” an epithet used to insinuate that they were corrupt and came south carrying all their meager belongings in carpetbags while bent on robbing the South. Some deserved that reputation that followed the group for years. As we shall see many did not.

The southern state reconstruction era governments varied widely in their actions and effectiveness based on time and place. Republicans in some states worked in general agreement and cooperation. In others, like Florida, their partisans experienced deep rifts among party members. As each of the ten states drafted new state constitutions and eventually rejoined the Union, Republicans throughout the South ostensibly battled to secure equal rights for the freedmen. The aim of the Reconstruction governments was to ensure adherence to the new Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments while reestablishing the southern economy.

Northerners and Southerners alike relied on the creation of railroads at this time to revitalize the languishing economy. A certain “railroad mania” took hold in the South. Southerners needed any sort of economic rebuilding program. They believed railroads could

jumpstart southern economies. For Republicans, “railroads were more than a political ploy: they were intrinsic to the Republican program of economic restoration and patriotic regeneration.”<sup>79</sup> Many of these railroad projects ended in failure, and Republicans were accused of malfeasance. Even had Southerners known beforehand how the projects would turn out, they still would have welcomed the development. “Disastrous as government programs to foster construction might be, they could not compare with the disaster Southerners felt they faced by doing nothing at all.”<sup>80</sup> Republicans like Conover and especially Prosser channeled the national Republican agenda and federalist resources into southern states. Railroads were by far the most popular form of this assistance. That so many failed only further tarnished the already sullied reputation of carpetbaggers.

The year 1877 signaled the effective end of Reconstruction in the South. Rutherford B. Hayes won the contested presidential election of 1876 by compromising with Democrats and agreeing to remove federal troops from southern states. Historians associated with the “Dunning school” then soon followed that up by interpreting Reconstruction from a distinctly white southern viewpoint. “Dunningites” like William Watson Davis and southerners generally associated northerners with corruption and unwanted changes.<sup>81</sup> Until around the middle of the twentieth century most Americans accepted this unfavorable interpretation both of Reconstruction and of carpetbaggers. During the post-World War II years, however, historians such as Richard Nelson Current challenged these assumptions, arguing that Reconstruction and

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<sup>79</sup> Mark W. Summers, *Railroads, Reconstruction, and the Gospel of Prosperity: Aid under the Radical Republicans, 1865-1877* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 39.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>81</sup> Davis wrote the “Dunning” study of Florida’s Reconstruction. William Watson Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1913).

carpetbaggers had indeed aided the South and southerners in promoting needed institutions such as those associated with public education.

Contemporary historians continue significant work that revises the carpetbagger legacy. With respect to Tennessee, Thomas Alexander's *Political Reconstruction in Tennessee* showed how much northerners and southerners alike contributed to the state's welfare under the Reconstruction government. Jerrell Shofner's studies of the Reconstruction government in Florida have shed light on what occurred in that tumultuous state government. Professor Canter Brown Jr.'s 1994 article furthered the understanding on Republicans in Florida generally and Republican governor Ossian Hart, whom white Floridians had long decried as corrupt specifically.<sup>82</sup> These rich studies reveal how the tarnished reputation of carpetbaggers was often not merited; it derived more from southern resentment of northerners and from slanderous attacks of opportunist Democratic politicians than from the misdeeds of carpetbaggers themselves.

This study will now focus on postwar Florida and Tennessee as it examines the activities of Dr. Simon Conover in and around Tallahassee and of Colonel William Prosser in Nashville. Cessation of all Civil War military engagements occurred shortly after Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox on the afternoon of April 9, 1865. The end of the war, however, did not erase feelings of hardship and mistrust that had grown between northerners and southerners over years and decades. Other armed confrontations occurred in the west after that date, but Lee's surrender signaled the Confederacy's defeat. By its end, the Civil War claimed the lives of some 620,000 men, well more than the combined casualties of all proceeding wars the U.S. fought.

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<sup>82</sup> Canter Brown Jr., "Carpetbagger Intrigues, Black Leadership, and a Southern Loyalist Triumph: Florida's Gubernatorial Election of 1872," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 72 (January 1994): 275-301.

The South was decimated economically, politically, and materially. Entire cities were in ruins and southerners could scarcely feed themselves. Most ex-Confederate and Union soldiers arrived back in their hometowns, cities, and farms. Yet some Union veterans, including Conover and Prosser, elected to stay among the communities in which they had fought or served during the war. For various reasons, they, and scores of other northern men, determined to remain in the South. Meanwhile, the Republican-controlled Congress launched its Radical Reconstruction in 1867. Northerners like Prosser and Conover consequently found political positions in newly mandated southern governments.

At the end of the Civil War, Dr. Simon Conover retained his post of acting Assistant Surgeon with the medical department of the Army. Throughout the Civil War and following it, Conover honed his skills as a physician and before, during, and after his thirty-year political career he would return to this profession intermittently. In the spring of 1865, Conover requested that he be transferred to Cincinnati, and the army assigned him to administer the Woodward Military Hospital. He was, however, dissatisfied with this position and resigned in the fall of 1865, returning to his home in Trenton, New Jersey, where he practiced medicine until July 1866. He then accepted another appointment as acting Assistant Surgeon and moved from New Jersey to Lake City, Florida. In Lake City, Conover served as Surgeon in Charge of the United States military post there, a position he retained until the summer of 1868.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> H. K. Hines, *An Illustrated History of the State of Washington from the Earliest Period of its Discovery to the Present Time, together with Glimpses of its Auspicious Future, Illustrations and Full-page Portraits of some of its Eminent Men and Biographical Mention of many of its Pioneers and Prominent Citizens of to-day* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1893), 703.



**Figure 3.** Photo of Simon Conover, date undocumented. From Simon Conover Collection, WSU MASC.

Conover's decision to move to Florida was to shape his life significantly. There, he practiced medicine, met his wife, served in the state's reconstruction government, became a United States Senator, and ran for governor twice. He developed a network of connections with leading Republicans, state and national, that even later influenced his career trajectory in the

Pacific Northwest. Additionally Conover devoted a large portion of his time advancing Republican policies in Florida, as he would in Washington state later.

In March of 1867, congressional Republicans passed the first two Reconstruction Acts that began Radical Reconstruction in the South. Conover's political career was tied to the ascendancy and power of the Republican-controlled governments that these acts created. As noted, they mandated that former Confederate states hold constitutional conventions and meet different criteria as conditions to be restored to statehood once again. Fearing that the 'fruits of victory' would be lost, Republicans barred high-ranking Confederates from political offices. This opened the way for newly enfranchised freedmen, southern whites friendly to the Republican Party (called "scalawags" by southern Democrats) and northern Republicans (the aforementioned "carpetbaggers") to enter government and to serve in constitutional conventions as well as state government.

Conover was a delegate to Florida's state constitutional conventions of 1868 and 1885. In fact, he was the only Floridian present at both conventions, a measure of his political dexterity.<sup>84</sup> The constitutional convention of 1868 held in Tallahassee was one of the ten such conventions mandated by Congress through which former Confederate states could rejoin the union. Southern white opponents of Reconstruction mockingly labeled them the, "Black and Tan" conventions because of the mixed racial composition of their delegates. One editorial from the Democrat-run *The Weekly Floridian* newspaper captured southern sentiment generally, "Then came the carpet-bagger, this his saturnalia of rapacity and spoliation. With the simple negro dazed and wonder-stricken at his new life the victim was an easy prey."<sup>85</sup> What followed

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<sup>84</sup> Florida State Government: *An Official directory of the state government; for the use of members of the convention, officials and citizens* (Tallahassee: Floridian Steam Book and Job Office, 1885), 76.

<sup>85</sup> *The Weekly Floridian*, September 8, 1874.

after the March 1867 passage of the first two Reconstruction Acts, and since that time, has been a part of the historiographical controversy surrounding Florida's Reconstruction. William A. Dunning, quoted earlier in this chapter, and William Watson Davis provided histories that were generally critical of Reconstruction – in Dunning's case generally and in Davis' in Florida in particular.

Given this background, Conover's role in Florida is significant. The Republicans there split into factions immediately upon passage of the Reconstruction Acts. That factionalism directly influenced the framing of the 1868 constitution as well as future political developments. It resulted in the first constitutional convention dividing into two separate bodies and producing two separate constitutions; this led to continued troubles as Republicans later kept realigning themselves into revolving sets of opposing factions.

Unlike Republicans in other southern states, who drafted more radical constitutions and were by and large of one mind, a schism occurred early between Republicans in Florida. The convention's delegates consisted of two groups, one, the "mule team" that represented the more "radical" or "liberal" Republican element led by carpetbagger Liberty Billings that counted most black members amongst its supporters, and the other, mostly white "conservative" group, led by Governor Ossian Hart and Marcellus Stearns. While each of these Republican factions sought national Republican goals, the "mule team" Republicans drafted a constitution that went beyond simply enfranchising blacks by also offering them more access to positions of power. The more "ring" or "regular" Republicans, including Conover at this point in his career, split with these Republicans and drafted their own constitution in a separate meeting held in the community of Monticello. The Monticello Constitution allowed for black enfranchisement but limited county

representation in the state assembly to fixed numbers rather than proportional representation.<sup>86</sup> Because large numbers of freedmen lived in certain counties, such action narrowed their influence in government. This constitution was eventually accepted; the “ring” Republicans in Florida took control of Florida’s government until the end of Reconstruction, “to secure hegemony in Florida through a Republican party under white control.”<sup>87</sup>

In 1868, Governor Harrison Reed appointed Conover state treasurer.<sup>88</sup> Although Reed and Conover soon split, Conover attended the national Republican convention and was later elected a member of the party’s national committee, a position that he held for four years.<sup>89</sup> In Florida, he served only one term as treasurer and political opponents used his time in this position to attack him politically. These attacks, though, became most pointed once he had been elected to the United States Senate.

On October 15, 1868, Conover married Elizabeth Hendrickson Ivins (c. 1845- Dec. 5, 1919), daughter of Isaac Ivins and Sarah Ann Hendrickson, at Penns Manor, Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Elizabeth Hendrickson Ivins, nicknamed Libby, and Simon Conover lived in Tallahassee during the rest of their time in Florida.<sup>90</sup>

Conover appears to have been fully in favor of measures to secure the political rights of blacks. An early indication of this came in 1868. Fearing for his own safety and for the rights of blacks he wrote, “the Rebels are thoroughly organized and are using every means to intimidate

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<sup>86</sup> Several of the most populous counties were heavily black and thus were underrepresented in legislative apportionment in the Monticello Constitution.

<sup>87</sup> Richard L. Hume, “Membership of the Florida Constitutional Convention of 1868: A Case Study of Republican Factionalism In the Reconstruction South,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 51 (July 1972): 17.

<sup>88</sup> Executive officers, under the new constitution, were appointed by the governor rather than elected.

<sup>89</sup> *Biographical Directory of the American Congress 1774-1961* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1971), 777.

<sup>90</sup> United States, Bureau of the Census. Ninth Census of the United States, 1870, Tallahassee, Leon County, Florida 3, 11.

and prevent the loyal people black and white from . . . exercise of their political rights.<sup>91</sup> In 1870 Conover, along with fellow Presbyterian churchgoers William H. Gleason and Milton Littlefield, donated various items to help establish a black college in Florida. The desire was to, “teach theology and classics and promote a liberal and complete education” for the freedmen.<sup>92</sup> Conover contributed a wagon and a team of mules towards the endeavor, which eventually failed because of a fire set to the grounds for the school. Conover became increasingly at odds with Governor Harrison Reed and also broke ties with Milton Littlefield, Reed’s political ally. According to Mark W. Summers in his *Railroads, Reconstruction, and the Gospel of Prosperity*, “Reed’s close ally, Milton Littlefield, was the guiding spirit in the [rail]roads in Florida . . . .”<sup>93</sup>

During his time as state treasurer, Conover was a member of the Republican National Committee. He served in this capacity from 1868-1872. During and after the Civil War, the Republican Party had control over both the U.S. House and Senate, until losing the former in 1874. Andrew Johnson, Lincoln’s vice president, assumed the presidency after Lincoln’s assassination. Republicans impeached him when he did not ascent to their will. Throughout this time he had little power and merely protested the actions of the Republicans. After Johnson left office, Republicans were successful in elevating Ulysses S. Grant, the military official most responsible for the Union’s recent victory, to two terms in the White House. Conover and his “liberal” Republican faction broke with “regular” Republicans by supporting Horace Greeley and Benjamin Gratz Brown in 1872. The liberal Republicans led by Conover and including in its ranks William Purman and many African Americans at times worked with Florida Democrats.

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<sup>91</sup> Jerrell Shofner, *Nor is it Over Yet, Florida in the Era of Reconstruction 1863-1877* (Gainesville: The University Presses of Florida, 1974), 225.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>93</sup> Summers, *Railroads, Reconstruction, and the Gospel of Prosperity*, 129.

Florida historian Canter Brown Jr. notes, “The political marriage of Democrats and Liberal Republicans was not as strange as it might seem. The national Democratic party had endorsed Greeley . . .”<sup>94</sup> On several occasions and issues, Florida Democrats and liberal Republicans joined forces to oppose the regular Republicans.

In a letter dated June 24, 1873, Conover, from Tallahassee, wrote to an unidentified constituent. In the letter Conover described his political career to that point. He began by telling his constituent that his (Conover’s) autograph was enclosed. He joked that he held, “every office from the justice of the peace up.”<sup>95</sup> He discussed his political path beginning with his election to the state constitutional convention in 1868, and he noted his involvement with the 1868 Chicago Republican National Convention, then how he became treasurer of the state.<sup>96</sup> He discussed his election to the state legislature in November of 1872, and how on July 31, he was elected to the U.S. Senate, “after 11 days balloting and 22 ballots.” He signed simply, “Republican Simon Conover.”<sup>97</sup> It is telling that in his closing signature Conover included that he was a Republican. As noted, Conover had split with the more powerful regular Florida Republicans and aligned with his former opponent, Liberty Billings, in espousing black rights.

As indicated in the preceding letter, Conover was elected to the state house of representatives and served in that role only for a brief while in 1873, during which he was house speaker. His political contributions during Florida’s constitution convention along with his ties to the state’s Republican Party propelled him to this position. During the 1868 drafting of the

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<sup>94</sup> Brown, “Carpetbagger Intrigues, Black Leadership, and a Southern Loyalist Triumph,” 296.

<sup>95</sup> “Letter from an unknown constituent,” Florida State Archives, Tallahassee, FL.

<sup>96</sup> The 1868 Republican National Convention in Chicago nominated Grant for President and Schuyler Colfax for vice president. Later in his life, Conover would travel through a small town in southeastern Washington named for the vice president on his way to Pullman, Washington.

<sup>97</sup> “Letter from an unknown constituent,” Florida State Archives, Tallahassee, FL.

Monticello Constitution, Conover had sided with members of regular Republicans. It was not these earlier ties, but those to freedmen, sympathetic Florida Republicans, and National Republicans, that explain his subsequent elections to the state legislature and to the United States Senate.

As early as 1868 Conover seemed to have broken with Florida's regular Republicans with whom he had written and passed the Monticello Constitution. Conover wrote that several of the regular Republicans approached him for illegal financial assistance. He refused to abuse his position as state treasurer. Because of his subsequent votes on black enfranchisement and financial matters, Conover then won the support of many of his former mule teamer opponents. Several Democrats also supported him, though this was clearly only a strategic ploy designed to foster division among Republicans.



**Figure 4.** Simon Conover, date unknown.  
From the Simon Conover collection, WSU MASC.

By 1874 regular or “ring” Republicans were led by Governor Marcellus Stearns, and opposed by Senator Conover, William Purman, “Bishop” Charles Pearce and Josiah Walls (the latter two were African Americans). Stearns’ group, according to Canter Brown, Jr. was led by, “northerners who were sometimes corrupt and perhaps deserved the epithet ‘carpetbagger.’”

Conover, on the other hand, was, “a carpetbagger of good reputation [who] enjoyed, as a Democrat put it, ‘in a great degree the support of the colored and mottled element.’”<sup>98</sup> In this split, “the Negroes were aligned with the senator.”<sup>99</sup>

During the 1872 gubernatorial election, Conover’s name came up amongst the “non-ring” Republicans for whom he was prominently nomination as governor.<sup>100</sup> Supporters included fellow politicians “Bishop” Charles Pierce, Sheriff Edmund C. Weeks, Liberty Billings and black leader John N. Stokes. Conover, at that time, had refused the prospect of having his name considered for nomination. Despite the support he had, he believed that the ring Republicans would retain control with their bribes and long-winded speeches.<sup>101</sup>

Conover was elected to the United States Senate in 1872. He then served in that post from March 4, 1873 until March 3, 1879. During his time in the Senate, Conover acted as chairman for the Committee on Enrolled Bills (enrolled bills are those that have passed both the House and Senate, and Conover’s committee verified their validity as pertaining to their status as eligible to become law).

Conover’s had to walk a tightrope during his term in the Unites State Senate. While in that office, he had to try to balance support from feuding factions among Florida’s Republicans, but he also attempted to sustain support from at least some Democrats who were willing to back him, albeit only to weaken the already badly divided Republicans. As respected Florida historian Jerrell H. Shofner noted with respect to Conover’s election to the Senate, “His strengths came from Democrats, Negroes, and the few white Liberal Republicans. [He] incurred the wrath of

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<sup>98</sup> Brown, “Carpetbagger Intrigues, Black Leadership, and a Southern Loyalist Triumph,” 292.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Shofner, *Nor is it Over Yet*, 281.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 278.

regular Republicans when he subsequently acknowledged his indebtedness to Democrats.”<sup>102</sup>

Conover earned both the scorn of Republicans critics for much of his time as senator, and later the Democrats turned on him when Republicans fell from power. Conover persisted and sought unsuccessfully the Republican nomination for governor in 1876, got that nomination in 1880, but lost that gubernatorial contest to Democrat William D. Bloxham.

Early in his tenure as senator, Conover appointed two black men to important positions; John R. Scott as customs collector at Jacksonville and William G Stewart as Tallahassee postmaster. These appointments angered Governor Marcellus Stearns and his supporters within the factionalized Florida Republican party. When their newspaper, the *Tallahassee Sentinel*, attacked Conover over the appointments, John Wallace (an African American Conover supporter) wrote in response that Conover was, “the only Republican who ever recognized the prominent colored men as office-holders.”<sup>103</sup> The split that occurred in Florida was mirrored as well at the national level. Horace Greeley emerged as the presidential candidate for the liberal Republican Party. In Florida, the liberal Republicans loosely allied with Democrats. Nationally, the Democratic Party endorsed Greeley. It is telling that Conover so vehemently opposed the Republican regulars that he said, “Every man who loves his country and State will fight them to the death.”<sup>104</sup> He would not be induced to act because of party obligations.

Conover was a notable physician as well as politician. In a book entitled *The Story of Florida*, W. T. Cash notes that Florida doctors worked to prevent the spread of malaria and other diseases. They were responsible for distributing quinine to prevent malaria. Cash mentions

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 290.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Brown Jr., “Carpetbagger Intrigues, Black Leadership, and a Southern Loyalist Triumph,” 292.

Conover as one of the doctors who promoted such health education efforts. It also stated that, “Probably the most popular Republican officeholder during Reconstruction was Dr. Simon B. Conover.”<sup>105</sup> Whether this perception was true or not, it suggests Democrats supported Conover.

Regular Republicans, though, lost no time trying to discredit Conover when they realized that he would not always follow the party line. The *Sentinel*, a newspaper operated by ring Republicans, accused Conover of embezzling funds from schools well after his time as treasurer had ended, as well as conspiring with a sheriff to commit election fraud during governor Ossian Hart’s 1872 gubernatorial bid. The Democratically owned paper *The Weekly Floridian*, always eager to divide Republicans, allowed Conover to address the allegations generally and then specifically. Conover believed the charges were made:

to destroy me politically. This was the object, end and aim. I was supposed to be an obstacle in the way of the political and personal schemes of a clique of restless, ambitious, and unscrupulous demagogues, whose power for mischief and evil in the Republican Party was supposed to have been destroyed by my election to the Senate. This faction found that I could not be dragooned and used, and they determined to ‘kill me off.’ They will learn that the Republican Party has ceased to ‘their property’ never more to be subjected to their domination and control. Four years under their leadership were years of turmoil and strife.<sup>106</sup>

Thus went the general trend as Conover was attacked during his first year as senator.

Republicans turned on other Republicans as the Democrats watched the party divide. Democrats then refashioned attacks that Republicans made against one another to further weaken Republicans.

Senator Conover, in the article above, methodically and meticulously defended himself from each charge. In the same matter relating to election fraud and his involvement with sheriff

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<sup>105</sup> W.T. Cash, *The Story of Florida* (New York: The American Historical Society, Inc., 1938), 749.

<sup>106</sup> *The Weekly Floridian*, November 11, 1873.

John. P Jordan of Gadsden County, Conover wrote to the sheriff forthwith. Jordan's reply exonerated Conover and stated that he (Jordan) and Conover had never before even written to one another, let alone conspired to tamper with votes. *The Daily Floridian* also printed a statement from Jordan inviting examination of the disputed letter from years before that the *Sentinel* had wrongly referenced as being from Conover.<sup>107</sup>

With respect to the accusations of financial impropriety, the *Sentinel* accused Conover of wrongdoing because his state treasury accounts were not settled upon his leaving office, and regular Republicans based their accusations on school fund issues and charges from an individual who was deceased. Conover's financial records exonerated him, at least to the point that official charges were not brought against him. He said that he had handled his duties with complete honesty as treasurer, knowing how scrutinized a Republican state treasurer would be. Millions passed through his hands, but the accusations related to only a few thousand dollars. His receipts, for all the accounts along with letters from past and current comptrollers, then actually suggested financial misdeeds from the past on the part of his accusers.<sup>108</sup>

Another accusation surfaced shortly after Conover was elected U.S. Senator. Several Republicans critics witnessed Conover handing a sealed envelope to a friend and fellow Republican, William P. Dockray, days before the legislature's vote on Conover's senatorial election. Because Conover was competing for the senate seat, and Dockray was a voting member of the legislature, charges of bribery were brought against Conover. A legislative committee was formed to investigate the matter and to determine whether thousands of dollars were used to buy Dockray's vote. In the ensuing investigation, Dockray, who said he had always planned to vote for Conover anyway, testified that he had loaned Conover whatever money he

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

had in his pocket. Testimony showed that Conover and Dockray, as friends, had loaned one another money on at least ten occasions. Conover testified, as to the exchange under investigation, that he had borrowed one hundred dollars from Dockray. He further testified that he returned fifty of those dollars in a sealed envelope later that week. This exchange is what several Republicans had witnessed. The sealed envelope had been seized as evidence and was in the committee's hands. Conover's opponents alleged that it contained thousands of dollars.<sup>109</sup>

The committee questioned many other legislators. None had ever received money or promises of appointment were they to vote for Conover. Dockray said the same thing. When questioned, Conover said that he regularly carried up to a thousand dollars on his person to make small loans to members of the legislature, a practice he had done for the past four years as treasurer and for which he had detailed receipts for all such transactions. Other house legislators corroborated this, testifying that at one time or another they would have need of a hundred dollars or so, which they would borrow from Conover and then repay shortly thereafter. During the senatorial campaign, Conover made no such loans to any of the testifying members. The committee then finally called for the suspicious envelope to be opened, and inside was the sum of fifty dollars. Because of the extensive testimony and in light of this, the committee found Conover innocent of the charges made against him.<sup>110</sup>

Senator Conover sought unsuccessfully the Republican gubernatorial nomination in 1876, which, despite his ties to the National Republican Committee, he lost to Marcellus Stearns. Democrats and Republicans alike challenged and criticized Conover. Among the Republicans,

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<sup>109</sup> *Senate Journal of the Proceeding of the Senate of the State of Florida at the Sixth Session of the Legislature, Begun and held at the Capitol, in the City of Tallahassee, Fla* (Tallahassee: S.B. McLin State Printer, 1873), 216.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

Conover's reputation was damaged. A story was released accusing him of exchanging federal appointments for Democratic support of his gubernatorial bid. During the unsuccessful nomination campaign, Democrats also accused Conover of embezzling funds while he was State Treasurer. As a consequence, he was jailed and released on a \$10,000 bond. Evidence had never materialized to substantiate the previous claim that Conover traded appointments for support. In the ensuing investigation, the former Comptroller, Robert H. Gamble, was forced to testify in light of the records that his error explained \$40,000 missing state funds. Conover had received the funds and given a receipt, which Gamble could not find. As the case received more public attention and it became apparent that Gamble was responsible for the missing funds, Democrats let the issue die. Conover was cleared of this set of charges, and the incumbent comptroller, Clayton A. Cowgill, published a statement exonerating the senator.<sup>111</sup>

Scandals and accusations involving Republicans appeared often in Florida's Democratic press. The Democrats impugned the reputations of many Republicans, rightly or wrongly. Quite often, their attacks came from infighting that occurred between the Republican factions themselves. Sometimes the accusations alone were enough to damage seriously a politician's reputation. Such was the case with Conover and the embezzlement charges from which he was fully exonerated.

Despite the scandal, Senator Conover persisted with his 1876 campaign for the gubernatorial nomination. Matters only became more controversial. Stearns was governor at the time because previous governor Ossian B. Hart passed away while in office. Governor Stearns used his position on the Republican state executive committee to influence a relocation and date change for the nomination convention, doing this so that Conover's supporters would not be

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<sup>111</sup> Shofner, *Nor is it Over Yet*, 301.

present. Conover and his supporters vehemently opposed this action. The relocated convention proceeded with far fewer of Conover's supporters in attendance, but Conover and a few others managed to speak. William Purman attacked Stearns and read a letter from Frederick Douglass endorsing Conover.<sup>112</sup> Conover also spoke on his own behalf and criticized Stearns' bid for another term as governor. During a recess the battling factions argued and friends had to restrain Conover physically from fighting with Stearns' supporters. The convention ended with Stearns' nomination.

Conover was not finished, though. He doggedly clung to his chance at a gubernatorial nomination. A second, pro-Conover convention was held in the woods outside the Florida community of Madison. It nominated Conover, but more surprisingly it was the convention recognized initially by the Republicans 1876 national convention in Cincinnati. Senator Conover appears to have used his political ties in Washington to make this happen. Ultimately, though, the national Republican committee pressured Conover to end his bid for governor because it desired party unity in the extremely tight upcoming presidential election. Conover consequently withdrew his candidacy in September and threw his support behind every Republican on the state ticket except for Stearns. Even so, Democrat George F. Drew was elected governor. His election and the compromise of 1877 gave Republicans the White House in exchange for the effective end of Florida's Reconstruction. By January 21, 1879 the Democratic legislature chose Wilkinson Call as Conover's successor to the Senate by a vote of 69 to 22.<sup>113</sup>

Republicans divided on many issues in Florida; they also, in turn, disagreed with Democrats. One area all agreed upon, at least initially, was the construction of railroads. A

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>113</sup> Cash, *The Story of Florida*, 498.

bipartisan coalition made up of Democrats and all the various Republican factions moved quickly after 1868 to begin construction. “As long as government funds were not plighted, Democrats and Republicans were in complete agreement,” Summers explained. “Charters passed the legislature unanimously and would continue to do so late in Reconstruction.”<sup>114</sup>

Conover supported, throughout his political career, measures to advance the railroads. By 1872, a lack of safeguards about how money was spent, land allocated, and companies rewarded led to criticism of railroad aid. Critics emerged from various political factions to win points by criticizing railroad bliss, yet the need for such state aid was too great for either party to turn against it.

Conover successfully sought the nomination for governor in 1880, but that was not to be. Democrats had gained control of Florida concurrent with Rutherford B. Hayes’ presidential election and George Drew’s gubernatorial success. They immediately began undoing what Republicans had done, especially with respect to the freedman. Conover and a few other Republicans fought this for a while, but Conover’s bid for governor in 1880 was unsuccessful, as democrat William Bloxham was seated in Tallahassee.

Despite such defeat, at least one of the speeches Conover gave during his time in Congress reflects his sense of propriety. A debate raged in the senate about the seating of Mathew C. Butler from South Carolina. Republicans wanted to block the seating of this former Confederate, alleging that the South Carolina Judiciary had wrongfully appointed him. The issue was highly contentious because Butler’s appointment strengthened the Democratic ranks in the senate. After several Republicans spoke against Butler’s seating, Senator Conover addressed the senate with an impassioned speech on November 23, 1877. In the speech Conover presented, as

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<sup>114</sup> Summers, *Railroads Reconstruction, and the Gospel of Prosperity*, 79.

he saw them, the facts of the case: President Hayes recognized a Democratic government in South Carolina; that same government elected a Democratic senator to represent the state; the legal legislature of the state elected Butler; and Republicans, in a similar situation had seated William Pitt Kellogg, a fellow Republican (from Louisiana), with little scrutiny. Conover thus concluded:

Shrewd lawyers may see their way to vote for their party candidates under such conflicting circumstances, but I deem it safer for me to follow my duty, and to vote according to my convictions and conscience, regardless of opposing party interests. I have always been a Republican; I am one to-day, unless it is impossible for me to vote my convictions on a question we are deciding as judges and still be a Republican. I believe a man may be both an honest man and a Republican; if not, the former is preferable to the latter.<sup>115</sup>

Senator Conover voted to seat Butler. He went on to say that he had not joined in a coalition with the Democrats nor had Democrats offered him any compensation to do so. He then finished his speech by saying he would not take benefits offered him to vote with Republicans either. This was met by applause in the galleries.

This speech is emblematic of Conover's political career. He claimed he voted with his conscience, even though one might say that he had joined with Democrats for political purposes. After all, Democrats held sway in Florida. But Conover devoted his time as a public servant to doing what he believed just and honorable. Thus he had spurned requests from Republicans to misuse money when he was state treasurer. Had he allied with the regular Republicans during their predominance in the state he might have gained the governorship of Florida. Instead, Conover split with the Republican faction he had once voted with because he sensed what he believed to be ulterior motives and underhanded actions. He subsequently managed to win the

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<sup>115</sup> Simon B. Conover of Florida in the United States Senate November 26, 1877, *Congressional Record: Containing the Proceedings and Debates of the Forty-fifth Congress, First Session; also Special Session of the Senate VI* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1877), 643.

endorsement and trust of freedmen, as well as some fellow carpetbaggers, and a number of Democrats during his time in Florida.

The political environment in which Conover operated, and in which he strived to maintain his principles and an illustration offered in an 1879 journal entry from Thomas Donaldson, an assistant to President Hayes. In it, Conover who appears to have succumbed to some extent, to the politics of the Gilded Age, appears to request special consideration for a government post. Donaldson wrote:

Washington, D.C., [Friday] February 7th, 1879.—I went into a restaurant, cor. 7th and E Streets, at 3 P.M. to-day for lunch. Senator Simon B. Conover of Florida came in, in company with an Irishman [who was] slightly intoxicated, and his own son, say 6 years of age. They sat down and I paid for the refreshment which they had. The Irishman could only distinctly say ‘There is money in it’ at the end of any sentence Conover would finish. Conover said that he had stood up to the President and now as his time was nearly out he wanted to be stood up to. He said the President thought he [Conover] had no brains, and had intimated this. [Secretary of State William M.] Evarts, he said, was all right and wanted to aid him. He said he would like to be Governor of Utah, to which the Irishman said, ‘There is money in it.’ Conover said he might, if out there, hit a mine or get something good, but he preferred something else. Here he wrote on a slip of paper: ‘Minister Resident at Central America—Guatemala, Central America, . . .’ He said the salary was large and he could save money. ‘Yes,’ said the Irishman, ‘there is money in it.’ ‘Besides,’ said Conover, ‘I will not lose my residence in Florida, of which I expect to be elected Governor two years from now.’ He wanted me to speak to the President. This conversation convinced me of one of two facts, either Mr. Evarts was assigned to nurse him [Conover] to get his vote for confirmation of the New York customs appointments, which Conover voted for Feb. 3d, or else the administration had obtained him without promise.<sup>116</sup>

The preceding journal entry offers much insight into Conover’s political aspirations as well as into the political climate of the time. Similar perhaps to the Compromise of 1877 that brought Rutherford B. Hayes into the presidency (and effectively ended Reconstruction in the South), political favors and patronage, by then, played an important role in Conover’s political world.

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<sup>116</sup> Thomas C. Donaldson. The "Memoirs" of Thomas Donaldson, dated February 7, 1879. From the Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center <http://www.rbhayes.org/hayes/content/files/donaldsontc/donaldson18781880.htm> (accessed March 21, 2010).

Was Conover calling in a favor via Hayes' aid? He seemed to think he could dictate where he would be appointed. The politics of the time were such that Conover believed he could bring his six year-old son along with him to witness transactions such as those involving the drunken Irishman. Conover also claimed, which given Florida's political climate, that he expected to be elected governor in 1880.

Summing up Conover's votes on choosing to seat a Democratic senator because Conover believed it was the honest thing to do, President Hayes' secretary Donaldson said, "I have known Conover a long time and think him quite a decent man — an honest one, poor and badly treated. He is a carpetbagger, I think."<sup>117</sup> Conover wanted to gain a political position because he had met with Hayes and supported Republicans. He did not get this patronage and returned to Florida.

The claim Conover made about his chances for the governorship is surprising because by 1877 Republicans had handed southern governments back to the Democrats. All over the South chased carpetbaggers and scalawags were chased from office, and white conservatives took control of state governments. Given this, Conover could only count on remaining Republicans, the black vote, and virtually none of the Democrats who had voted for him previously. Troops had been removed from the South and Democrats now had the freedom to undo what Republicans had achieved, while making it a point, especially, to espouse the supremacy of whites.

Democrats were now quite emboldened in their attacks against the would-be governor. *The Weekly Floridian* now said of Conover's nomination, "Contemplating the matter, therefore, from a Democratic point of view, we are disposed to feel personally friendly towards [Conover]." Yet because of how he managed his senate seat as criticized by other Republicans, the Democrats had, "an opinion of the man that closely approximated to the sentiment of

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

contempt with which his carpet-bag brethren regarded his political imbecility.”<sup>118</sup> Thus when the time came, the Democrats inevitably turned their backs on Conover and used the slanderous remarks of hostile Republicans to make their case against him.

By 1880 Conover was again a practicing physician. He and his wife, Elizabeth, remained in Tallahassee after the failed 1880 gubernatorial bid. Conover returned to practicing medicine in Florida until 1883, at which time he moved to Philadelphia. In 1885 Conover returned to Tallahassee, practiced medicine, and, as previously noted, was elected as one of the few Republican delegates to the state constitutional convention of 1885.<sup>119</sup> As a convention journal from the time highlights, “Dr. S.B. Conover, delegate from Leon county, is the only member of the Constitutional Convention of 1868 in the [1885] convention.”<sup>120</sup> Even with his securing this latest convention seat, the tide had clearly turned against Republicans in the South and Conover’s position was largely symbolic. Conover could not be successful politically in the state. He turned his eyes to a new area that would benefit from his medical expertise and political acumen, the region of the Pacific Northwest.

During the war, Colonel William Prosser spent most of his time in Tennessee. His service in the cavalry there enabled him to see much of that state. He had developed social and political connections in Nashville and also admired the country. Prosser thus chose Tennessee as

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<sup>118</sup> *The Weekly Floridian*, May 25, 1880.

<sup>119</sup> Edward C. Williamson, “The Constitutional Convention of 1885” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 41 (October 1963): 116-126.

<sup>120</sup> Florida State Government: *An Official directory of the state government*, 76.

his home following Appomattox and located on a farm seven miles from Nashville.<sup>121</sup> Like other white northerners who stayed in the South after the Civil War, Prosser sought to make his new life in the region that he perhaps knew better than any other. While there, others recognized Prosser's leadership abilities as he wrote profusely and edited a Tennessee newspaper, although clandestinely while a congressman. He also served at various times as postmaster in Nashville and as a member of the Tennessee house of Representatives 1868-1869, and as president of railroad lines.

As he had in California, Prosser became active in politics in Nashville. He was surprised to learn that associates had nominated him in 1868, to serve as a Congressman out of Davidson County. At first he rejected the nomination. Yet, since Tennessee had reentered the Union and became embroiled in the violence of the Ku Klux Klan, Prosser agreed to serve. The intense fighting that occurred between Democrats and Republicans in Tennessee pushed Prosser into politics again. He had originally purchased his farm with the intention of simply farming for the rest of his life.

In 1867, Republicans elected Prosser a member of the Tennessee legislature's House of Representatives from Davidson County. He served only one year there, during which time he took an active and leading role in the House. In the legislature, as well as in Congress, Prosser frequently presented bills and motions having to do with the creation of new rail lines or other corporate matters. His attention to detail here is evident. Unlike in Florida or other states where concessions to railroad companies came with little oversight, Prosser and others drafted laws and created safeguards to hold corporations accountable for any state aid. Prosser was especially

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<sup>121</sup> William F. Prosser, *A history of the Puget Sound country its resources, its commerce and its people: with some reference to discoveries and explorations in North America from the time of Christopher Columbus down to that of George Vancouver in 1792, when the beauty, richness and vast commercial advantages of this region were first made known to the world* (New York: Lewis Publishing Company, 1903), 278.

active in the legislature. In the 1867 house journal, Prosser's name appears, in association with various bills, more often than almost any other legislator.

In an afternoon legislative session on August 10, 1868, Prosser offered House Joint Resolution No. 20 to enfranchise former rebels, arguing that in Tennessee many former Confederates were ready to contribute to Tennessee government. Just four days earlier various Republicans had also requested the removal of limitations on enfranchisement because they believed those restrictions would only worsen conditions. In the August 10 resolution Prosser stated:

Certain and able and influential men, who were the leaders of the soldiers of Tennessee who took part in the rebellion, have manfully and voluntarily come forward and tendered their services, influence and hearty co-operation in all necessary measures for the maintenance of peace, preservation of order, and the upholding and sustaining of the Constitution and laws of the State, as at present existing, and have pledged their honor and their efforts to the furtherance of these very desirable ends; and many good and peaceably disposed citizens, who once were soldiers in the rebel army under these same leaders, will imitate their example, as once they followed them in war, and thereby promote the objects and purposes of this General Assembly, to-wit: the peace of the county and the welfare of the State.<sup>122</sup>

Prosser's politics were conciliatory and he continuously sought to improve the lot of Tennesseans generally. He worked for various internal improvements including railroad lines, industrial developments, and development of natural resources. "He caused the improvement of the Cumberland River to be begun, a work that has since been continued by Congress down to the present tie [1903].<sup>123</sup> His ties with and involvement in railroad companies put him squarely in line to develop the state.

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<sup>122</sup> *Tennessee State Legislature Journal 1968* (Nashville: S.C. Mercer State Printer, 1868), 70.

<sup>123</sup> Lewis Publishing Company, *A Volume of Memoirs and Genealogy of Representative Citizens of the City of Seattle and County of King*, 555.

In 1868, he was nominated for a seat in Congress. In the fifth district, which was his, the race was a three-way contest between Prosser (a Radical Republican), Joseph Motley, (a Conservative), and (S.C. Mercer, a Tennessee native and a Radical but aligned with others who did not want to see “an outsider” obtain the position). Prosser’s physical well being was at times in jeopardy during the campaign, but he made speeches throughout his district and even held joint debates with his primary rival S.C. Mercer.<sup>124</sup> Mercer used his position as editor of the *Nashville Press and Times* to bring into sharp relief the differences between local and out-of-state candidates.

Upon his nomination for Congress, Prosser wrote, in the most important newspaper supporting him in the *Nashville Republican*:

“Gentlemen – I have this day received your letter in which I am honored with an invitation to become a candidate for Congress in this Congressional District. Such a mark of confidence and esteem would be flattering at any time, but is more highly appreciated at a time when Republican principles are struggling for success throughout the country. I accept your invitation with the hope that you may have no reason to regret the action you have thus taken, and if nominated and elected, I shall discharge the duties imposed upon me to the best of my ability, and with a view to the highest welfare of the entire country. Respectfully, W. F. Prosser.<sup>125</sup>

Immediately below Prosser’s statement appeared an article depicting what S.C. Mercer, Prosser’s primary opposition for Congress, thought of the blacks. The article alleged that he thought William Lloyd Garrison was a dirty dog. It went on to illustrate how Mercer had worked against blacks and was nearly a secessionist. Whether this was true or not of Mercer, the pro-Prosser paper printed it.

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> *Nashville Republican*, July 18, 1868.

Mercer and his supporters called themselves “Tennessee loyalists.” They appealed to voters saying that native Tennesseans and not outsiders should hold office. An editorial in the *Nashville Republican*, perhaps penned by Prosser but unsigned, responded that, “Both [local and outside union men] have been cemented into one by blood of their brothers and no ‘Mercer-nary’ wretch can succeed in planting the tree of discord between them.” The paper pointed out Mercer’s shortcomings often. It portrayed him as anti-black and friendly toward the rebels. Conversely, it portrayed Prosser as someone who could unify the party. Speaking about Prosser it said:

The nomination of Colonel W.F. Prosser for Congress gives universal satisfaction. The tide in Davidson county was all running one way prior to the convention, and it is still running in the same direction with increased rapidity . . . . The last effort has been made that probably ever will be made to divide the Republican party in the Fifth District. We have never joined in the rebel cry of ‘scallywag’ against the noble native Republicans of this District, and we never will. They are our brothers, they are fellow soldiers, fighting in the same great cause, and we will as we have done in the past stand shoulder to shoulder with them in every political contest and if need be, on the bloody field. We know full well, that no true Republican has justified the ‘State Printer’ [S.C. Mercer] in his unfortunate onslaught upon ‘carpet baggers.’ Henceforth we shall have a united party in the Fifth District.<sup>126</sup>

The *Nashville Republican* made accusations against Mercer that clearly hurt him. Their repeated attacks against Mercer, this political infighting amongst Republicans, allowed Prosser to garner more support from Republicans and to win the congressional seat.<sup>127</sup> “Grand Torchlight Processions” for Grant, Colfax, and Prosser held by Ward clubs on various evenings also helped.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., August 20, 1868.

<sup>127</sup> Thomas B. Alexander, *Political Reconstruction in Tennessee* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1945; reprint New York: Russell & Russell, 1950), 208.

<sup>128</sup> *Nashville Republican*, August 11, 1868.

The differences between native and non-native white Republicans had become a major issue. It was so pronounced that by the time of the Mercer-Prosser contest, that Congressman Thaddeus Stevens had written of Tennessee politics, “the native Tennesseans are jealous of such men aspiring to office and in many cases regard the northern born Tennesseans as mere office hunting adventurers who come south with no intention of permanently residing here.”<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 4.** William Prosser, date unknown. From the Library of Congress.

In the contest between Mercer and Prosser, voters elected Prosser a member of the Forty-first United States Congress from the Nashville district because, “the Union League kept Negro votes in line for him.”<sup>130</sup> Notably, Republicans in other districts, where activity of the Ku Klux Klan was high, had trouble being elected because far fewer blacks cast votes, but the Klan had less influence in Nashville.

In December of 1868, Prosser was also chosen a director of the Tennessee and Pacific Railroad Company, and then one of the directors of the Edgefield and Kentucky railroad the following March. Prosser, however, served only one two-year term in Congress (1869-1871) during which time he labored actively for educational reform and expanded access to education for everyone. Elwood Evans found that Prosser provided:

Practical services in both bodies [that] were not only highly satisfactory to the party by which he was elected, but were complimented by leading men of all parties without regard to their political proclivities. His efforts, more especially in behalf of internal improvements and general education, were highly appreciated.<sup>131</sup>

Certainly the Republicans in Tennessee were less divided than in Florida. Even so, a definite rift occurred between radical and more conservative Republicans it was evident in the Volunteer State. Prosser was a Radical Republican who supported fellow radical Governor (and soon-to-be senator) William Brownlow.

During his time as a United States Congressman, Prosser lobbied especially hard to encourage the government to enlarge its role in the realm of education. On January 25, 1870,

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<sup>130</sup> Alexander, *Political Reconstruction in Tennessee*, 190.

<sup>131</sup> Elwood Evans, *History of the Pacific Northwest: Oregon and Washington; embracing an account of the original discoveries on the Pacific coast of North America, and a description of the conquest, settlement and subjugation of the original territory of Oregon, also interesting biographies of the earliest settlers and more prominent men and women of the Pacific Northwest, including a description of the climate, soil, productions of Oregon and Washington*, 2 vols., (Portland, OR.: North Pacific History Co., 1889), 2: 528.

Prosser rose and delivered a sixteen-page speech. His “Promotion of Education” was thoroughly prepared and speech. In it, Prosser exhorted house members to remember the essential role of education plays in a nation’s greatness. He compared educational policy from a number of different countries to that of the United States, presenting detailed financial data concerning how much is spent and how much it would cost to better the educational system. In the speech he also considered education for all people, including blacks and Native Americans. Early on he declared:

So all there is of a nation that is good, that is mighty, that exercises influence, that is admirable in any respect, is the product of the education of its citizens; for it is not the numbers of human beings comprised under one form of government, nor the extent or fertility of the territory they occupy, nor their wealth which makes a nation . . . . yet if they lack the potent agent of education, which renders all material things available, they fall short of the power and influence they should possess. Whatever may be the distinction in a country upon which rank is founded, the rank that a nation occupies among the Powers of the earth will be found to rest upon the practical education of the people.<sup>132</sup>

Prosser was eloquent and passionate. He quoted Plato, John Locke, Daniel Webster, Alexis de Tocqueville and Baron de Montesquieu, among others, regarding the importance of education.

In the bulk of the speech, Prosser discussed the educational systems of other nations in comparison to that of the United States, concluding that the United States’ system was deficient. He highlighted the rate of illiteracy in the nation and tracked its growth among immigrants and citizens alike. Prosser summarized the material obstacles in the way of education, noting the lack of needed school buildings, libraries, and low staff salaries. He devoted several pages to documenting the abuses committed against American Indians and how forced relocations took

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<sup>132</sup> *Promotion of Education, Speech of Hon. William F. Prosser of Tennessee, delivered in the House of Representatives, January 25, 1870* (Washington D.C.: F. & J. Rives & Geo. A. Bailey, 1870), 4.

many Indians out of positive educational environments. He pondered whether, instead of war against the various tribes, education might have better served Indians and whites alike.

Prosser then spent five pages examining the needs of the freedmen and the benefits of educating them as voters. He closed his speech by examining the ways that the bill he presented, which would appropriate \$2,200,000 towards education throughout the nation, could be funded. In his final words Prosser contended that Reconstruction efforts could not be effective without addressing education because, “No measure of reconstruction short of universal education will accomplish the objects we desire to see brought about in the South,” Prosser warned. “The evil [of rebellion] lies too deep to be corrected by superficial schemes of national legislation.”<sup>133</sup>

Prosser was also a pioneer for the rights of blacks. During his time in Congress he appointed, in 1870, the first African American ever entering West Point Military Academy as a cadet, James W. Smith of South Carolina. His focus on education for all, the rights of freedmen, assistance for the needy, and even his requests to enfranchise former rebels summarizes Prosser’s social and political goals.

While in Washington Prosser had made political connections. When his term ended in Congress President Grant, in 1871, appointed him postmaster of Nashville. At that time the position of postmaster was a powerful and lucrative one, and he served in this position for three years.<sup>134</sup>

In 1872, the governor of Tennessee, John C. Brown, appointed Prosser as one of the commissioners from the state of Tennessee to the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. That Exposition, which was held in 1876, commemorated the 100<sup>th</sup> year of the signing of the

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<sup>133</sup> *Promotion of Education, Speech of Hon. William F. Prosser*, 16.

<sup>134</sup> Prosser, *A history of the Puget Sound country its resources, its commerce and its people*, 278.

Declaration of Independence. It also served as a venue in which the United States could put on display all of its improvements in technology for the world to see.

In Prosser's biographical sketch, *A History of the Puget Sound Country*, roughly one tenth of the information listed there is related to the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition and the 1873 World's Fair at Vienna, a city to which Prosser had traveled as a part of his responsibilities involved with the pending centennial. Prosser expounded upon many of the aspects of his involvement with these events. He revealed that he attended planning meetings for the Centennial Exposition for seven years before being appointed to a committee to visit the World's Fair at Vienna in 1873. In the latter instance, Prosser notes, he was able to see the, "principal European cities."

For several years Prosser also published the newspaper, *The Nashville Daily Republican*.<sup>135</sup> He was an editor for a time and contributed articles regularly. Meanwhile in 1876 and 1878, Prosser was again chosen by his party for a seat in Congress. Because of the changing political fortunes of the Republicans in the state, he did not win either election.<sup>136</sup> Then, as a consequence of health problems related to the Civil War (though he did not receive any direct wounds), and perhaps because of the changed political climate in Tennessee, Prosser decided to fulfill his longstanding intention to return to the Pacific Coast.<sup>137</sup>

Following the Civil War, Americans needed to rebuild the war-torn nation. Some northerners decided to migrate to or settle in the South. Some of these had fallen in love with the lands in which they had fought. Others were sent south by the federal government. Many were

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<sup>135</sup> This is how Prosser lists it in his autobiographical sketch.

<sup>136</sup> Lewis Publishing Company (listed as author), *A Volume of Memoirs and Genealogy of Representative Citizens of the City of Seattle and County of King, Washington, Including Biographies of Many of Those Who Have Passed Away; Illustrated* (New York: Lewis Publishing Company, 1903), 555.

<sup>137</sup> Elwood Evans, *History of the Pacific Northwest*, 528.

economic opportunists seeking to profit off the South, yet many others honestly sought to assist the newly freed slaves in their struggle for equality. By 1867, northern Republican politicians had decided that drastic action by the federal government was necessary to “secure the fruits of victory” and to reintegrate successfully the rebel states. Once again, as with the Civil War, the powerful federal government acted to curtail unlawful actions by dissenting individuals and groups.

So-called carpetbaggers were crucial in implementing the will of the federal government in the South. They led the governments in the reconstructed states that disenfranchised rebels, acted to insure the rights of freedmen, and rebuilt the decimated economies and infrastructure throughout the region. In a few instances, the war-ravaged states could put aside political affiliations and unite around the idea of economic growth through state aid, especially in the form of railroad projects. In Florida, Republicans accomplished much despite intra-party divisions. They wrote a new constitution and built or repaired railroads across the state, despite the fact that many such projects faltered. Some of the carpetbaggers there abused their positions of power, while others strove for transparency and honesty. Simon Conover worked hard for his party and for Floridians. He served as state treasurer and despite accusations appears to have served honestly in that role. Letters he wrote and speeches he gave suggest that he made decisions based on what he thought was right as opposed to what was politically expedient. Because of this, freedmen, other Republicans, and even some Democrats, supported him for awhile, but he eventually failed to attain the governorship and alienated some in his party.

In Tennessee, Colonel William F. Prosser returned to settle where he had seen much Civil War combat. Because of political developments that he found unacceptable, Prosser then entered politics in Tennessee. Like Conover, Prosser was a carpetbagger who did not

compromise his beliefs while in office. Disagreements among Tennessee Republicans were less pronounced than in Florida, but natives of the state, whether scalawags or conservative whites, resented non-natives like Prosser. Despite this, Prosser lobbied for those political policies that mattered most to him. He was a champion of education, for the rights of freedmen, and for the internal development in Tennessee.

Dr. Simon Conover and Colonel William Prosser were carpetbaggers who honorably represented their constituents and served their government. Both help balance negative press carpetbaggers have received. Both Conover and Prosser essentially furthered the achievement of the federal initiatives that had begun with the Civil War. For a time, white Southerners and Republicans, including Conover and Prosser alike, came together around the creation of railroads. Yet it was, “parochialism, not sectionalism or nationalism, that left the most serious marks on railroad policy,” Summers intones. “It was unfortunate, for it helped destroy the consensus on which railroad aid had been based, and with it the Reconstruction coalition.”<sup>138</sup> As their careers ended in the South, Prosser first in 1879, and Conover ten years later in 1889, moved to the Pacific Northwest, again to further the policies of the federal government.

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<sup>138</sup> Summers, *Railroads, Reconstruction, and the Gospel of Prosperity*, 97.

## CHAPTER 4

### Westward the Carpetbagger

Simon Conover and William Prosser contributed significantly to their respective communities during their early lives, Conover as a druggist and physician, Prosser as a teacher, miner, then soldier. During the Civil War, each applied himself and what he had learned to the Union cause. During Reconstruction, Conover served as a physician in Florida but became a popular, (albeit hated by Republicans critics) carpetbagger politician. Prosser settled in Tennessee and almost against his will was elevated to serve in Congress from there. Although the histories of these two men during Reconstruction have not previously been tracked in much detail, pieces from those years appear in short biographical sketches. Just as in the case with their individual contributions and efforts in Reconstruction being now clearly defined, the legacy of Reconstruction carpetbaggers continues to be revised.

For years, southerners portrayed carpetbaggers as corrupt and conniving. Richard Current's reinterpretation of this view showed that the majority were, by and large, well intentioned. More recently, historians have examined and reexamined specific carpetbaggers, finding that while Current's general assertions were valid, he missed the mark with several of his specific examples. For example, Current identified Ossian B. Hart as a carpetbagger who was not corrupt, but other historians, who examined evidence Current did not, and thus looked at the man from other perspectives, arrived at different conclusions about this particular Florida governor.

This historiographical legacy surrounding carpetbaggers in the South relates, in this study, to the historiographical debates about the migration to the West. Many northerners went to the postwar South to help the freedmen with economic development, and to make a living.

Post-war migrants headed west also sought a livelihood and some wanted to “civilize” and Christianize the region as well. Historians have examined the consequences of both of these migrations. Conover and Prosser believed that their energies and labors in the Pacific Northwest would aid the region, and most certainly they did. In this sense, they seem to align closely with the “Turner thesis.” In other words, Conover, and Prosser especially, each trusted that he was aiding “progress” and helping to civilize the Pacific Northwest by sharing the fruits of what each of them believed was the greatest republican government in the world.

Conover and Prosser were acting in their own historical time and place, but their contributions can be evaluated by the tools that modern historians have devised to better measure change over time with respect, in their case, to Pacific Northwest history: how place mattered and the crucial role played by the federal government in developing the West. Since Frederick Jackson Turner’s time, historians have increasingly considered how non-whites were impacted by the march of white, progress-minded, “civilizing” pioneers. We need be mindful of some of these elements of western development as relative to Conover and Prosser in the context of presenting a more complete “new western” history.

By the time Prosser returned to the West, he had developed into a seasoned politician and able industrialist. He moved to the Pacific Northwest in 1879, specifically on appointment from President Rutherford B. Hayes as Special Agent of the Department of the Interior. While he cited ill health as one of the reasons for ever having sought this transfer originally. Conover departed Florida in 1889 after it was fairly obvious that his political career there had ended. He, as surgeon general to a quarantine station, also came on appointment from the federal government. Both men then quickly expanded their activities and put their talents to use in state and local government. They were experienced politicians, capable organizers, and self-reliant.

Different federal positions had allowed both to develop; Conover as a doctor, treasurer, and politician, and Prosser as a surveyor (connected with his recent department of the interior appointment) and politician.

Conover and Prosser were products of their own time, meaning that they celebrated their pioneering achievements, often unabashedly. The triumphant tone set by Turner and embraced by the nation as a whole at that time informed how both Prosser and Conover perceived their actions. Such pioneers were encouraged to act boldly and set up new institutions. Both had experienced the trials and tribulations associated with southern Reconstruction. They had tried to impose their ideas and beliefs upon white southerners who did not want them. In the Pacific Northwest, they found people at least marginally more open to such efforts.

As New Western Historians would say, “place matters.” Prosser, and later Conover, encountered vastly different settings than they had experienced in the South when they arrived in the Pacific Northwest. White southerners had held control over their homelands for decades before having to defer to northerners, whereas the Pacific Northwest was still in flux and governments were not yet firmly established. The terrain was more rugged, the coastline presented different trade scenarios and medical needs, and the lack of settlements offered opportunities for development. With so few people throughout Washington, especially eastern Washington, Prosser homesteaded as a pioneer in an area that later adopted his name. In seeking out a site for an agricultural college east of the Cascade Mountains, the availability of water and donations of large tracts of land was critical. Western Washington, with its ports and lush environment became the most populated and powerful region of Washington, but how would governance and power be distributed in the eastern part of the state?

After a crushing defeat in 1880 for Florida's governor, a position that he had bragged he would win, Simon Conover and his wife remained in Florida until 1883, at which time they moved to Philadelphia and Dr. Conover took a position there at a quarantine station. They returned to Florida in 1885 and Conover elected a delegate to the state's 1885 constitution convention. Legally, the document seemed sound, but the prevalence of Jim Crow laws and actions increasingly deprived Florida's blacks of their rights. As this reality became clear in Florida as elsewhere throughout the South, Conover had approached President Hayes as early as 1879 seeking a position outside of Florida. This was not initially granted him. He then lost the 1880 gubernatorial election but continued practicing medicine in Tallahassee until 1883.

As noted, the Conovers moved briefly to Philadelphia in 1883, where Conover had been appointed assistant surgeon at a marine hospital. The new role was satisfying, and Conover would work in marine hospitals caring for and watching quarantine patients for much of the remainder of his life. While in Philadelphia, Conover attended Jefferson Medical College to prepare him for the duties involved with quarantine hospitals.<sup>139</sup> He served and trained in this new medical role for two years before returning to Florida to resume his practice in Tallahassee and serve in the 1885 state constitutional convention. He then remained in Tallahassee practicing medicine until moving to Port Townsend, Washington Territory, in July of 1889.<sup>140</sup> There, Conover accepted the appointment of Surgeon in Charge of the United States Quarantine Station.

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<sup>139</sup> H. K. Hines, *An Illustrated History of the State of Washington from the Earliest Period of its Discovery to the Present Time, together with Glimpses of its Auspicious Future, Illustrations and Full-page Portraits of some of its Eminent Men and Biographical Mention of many of its Pioneers and Prominent Citizens of to-day* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1893), 704.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 704.

The practice of quarantining ill sailors was common in the mid-nineteenth century, and in 1855, a Marine Hospital had been founded to aid seamen at Port Townsend. The hospital relocated to Port Angeles in 1862. By 1877 it was advertised as the largest such facility north of San Francisco.<sup>141</sup> In 1878 Congress passed the National Quarantine Act, which barred vessels from entering the United States if carrying sailors with infectious diseases. Conover was appointed in 1889 to carry out the quarantine services at the Port Townsend Marine Hospital, where he then lived and served for four years. Later in 1893, Congress approved funding to build a quarantine station for the Puget Sound at Clallam Point (now Diamond Point). Conover then transferred to the newly-built quarantine station and was the “establishing physician” there in November of 1893.

At both the Marine Station and the Quarantine Station Conover oversaw the intake and release of sailors who showed signs of disease or sickness. The Quarantine Station was designed to disinfect vessels wishing to enter the Puget Sound as well as to isolate the sailors on board suspected of carrying infections or diseases. Between 1881 and 1889, the Marine Hospital averaged 238 admissions per year, and inpatient days averaged 6,248 per year, despite the decreased traffic related to the national depression of 1893.<sup>142</sup> Reports surfaced intermittently in the Puget Sound region of smallpox cases introduced by foreign travelers, and the Marine Station handled all of the quarantine services for the Washington and Oregon Coast until 1889, and even after that serviced many ships. Sailors and Washingtonians called the quarantine area

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<sup>141</sup> Meribeth M. Reed, “Describing the Life Cycle of U.S. Marine Hospital #17, Port Townsend, Washington, 1855-1933,” *Military Medicine*, (April, 2005): 260.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

the “pest-house.”<sup>143</sup> Sailors entered, were kept isolated, received some care from nurses, and only rarely had an actual visit from Conover or another doctor.

In his position at the quarantine station, wherein he served until his death in 1908, Conover carried out the will of the federal government. He was a government doctor who applied the latest medical knowledge to the quarantine services used on the Pacific Northwest coast. Beyond this role, however, Conover once again became politically active, this time in the affairs of the newly established state of Washington. In 1891, in addition to his medical profession, he accepted an appointment as Regent of the Agricultural College and School of Sciences, to be established and built in Pullman.<sup>144</sup>

Funds to establish an Agricultural College and School of Sciences became available through a process which began decades earlier in the halls of the wartime Republican-controlled Congress. With the nation engaged in Civil War, Congress passed a number of remarkable pieces of social and economic legislation including the Homestead Act, the Internal Revenue Act, and the Morrill Land Grant Colleges Act. The latter, introduced by Maine Congressman Justin Smith Morrill, allocated 30,000 acres of federal land per congressional representative of each state to be sold and the proceeds used to establish state colleges. Morrill, the son of a blacksmith, championed the legislation because he had been unable to attend college due to the high cost of tuition. Initially, the land-grant colleges were under-funded but the Second Morrill Act of 1890 passed and better supported them in augmenting the original 1862 act.

Washington gained statehood on November 11, 1889 and soon thereafter sought to use Morrill funds to create a land-grant college. Elisha P. Ferry, the first governor of the state,

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<sup>143</sup> Nancy M. Rockafellar and James W. Haviland, ed., *Saddlebags To Scanners: The First 100 Years Of Medicine In Washington State* (Seattle: Washington State Medical Association, 1989), 102.

<sup>144</sup> Hines, *An Illustrated History of Washington*, 704.

assumed his governorship on the same day that Washington became a state and soon began to consider how Washington would best establish its own land-grant college. The state legislature was given the opportunity to locate the college, but it failed to do so by a June 1, 1890 deadline. After the first commission appointed to do so also failed to decide on a location, a bill then passed which excluded from consideration any county that already had a state institution. As a consequence an act passed March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1891 entitled, “An Act to Provide for the Location and Maintenance of the Agricultural College, Experimental Station, and School of Science, of the State of Washington, and declaring an emergency,” George A. Black, Andrew H. Smith, and Simon Conover were then appointed to a second commission and asked to locate the site for the college.<sup>145</sup>

On April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1891, the three commissioners met in Olympia; Black was made president of the commission, Smith the secretary. Between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> of April, the commissioners visited North Yakima, Sprague, Davenport, Tekoa, Farmington, Oaksdale, Garfield, Palouse City, Pullman, Colfax, Dayton, and Pasco.<sup>146</sup> At each site they met locals, examined the attractions of the area, and considered proposed land donations. “In Pullman [the commission’s] train was met by a band in uniform that headed the commissioners toward Main Street. The artesian wells were flowing. The fire company showed its strength and flooded the streets with water.”<sup>147</sup> Despite a July 1890 fire that had burned all but two of Pullman’s principal buildings, the commissioners complimented the city’s stores, buildings, and natural resources.

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<sup>145</sup> Simon B. Conover Collection, Special telegram to *The [Pullman] Herald*, April 30, 1891. Cage 692, Box 1, Folder 1, Washington State University Libraries, Manuscripts Archives and Special Collections, Pullman Washington (hereafter referred to as WSU MASC).

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Enoch Albert Bryan, *Historical Sketch of the State College of Washington 1890-1925* (Spokane: Inland-American Printing Co., 1928), 79.

When its members departed on the Union Pacific railroad, after a one-day visit, Thomas Neill, among other Pullmanites, traveled to Olympia to encourage the commissioners to select Pullman. On April 17<sup>th</sup> at 11p.m., the governor and the commissioners asked Pullman citizens make a deed for the land offered for a campus and to execute a bond guaranteeing good title. This was done and Pullmanites celebrated the next day.<sup>148</sup> The commission did not then actually submit its choice of Pullman in a report to lieutenant and acting governor Charles E. Laughton until April 25.<sup>149</sup>

Upon learning of the selection, residents of several of the locations not selected were upset. North Yakima especially expressed the sentiment that it had been slighted. Some wondered why Pullman, at 2,200 feet above sea level and with long periods of frost, could have offered near as much agricultural diversity as that of North Yakima. When asked how well pleased he was with the selection of Whitman county for the site, Governor Ferry replied, “Quite well: however, I should have been equally as well satisfied with the college located at North Yakima. Both places are in the midst of fine agricultural localities.”<sup>150</sup> The controversy over the site selection then only intensified, and several papers from “losing communities” demanded an explanation from Conover and the other commissioners as to why they chose Pullman. Conover responded that, “*The [Tacoma] Globe* persistently calls for an explanation . . . I voted for Pullman because, in my judgment, it presented the most eligible site and best natural advantages; [I] did so without fear or favor, and that I [assume] the full responsibility for my action.”<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>149</sup> Simon B. Conover Collection, Special telegram to *The Herald*, April 30, 1891. Cage 692, Box 1, Folder 1, WSU MASC.

<sup>150</sup> Simon B. Conover Collection, *Olympian*, April 28, 1891. Cage 692, Box 1, Folder 1, WSU MASC.

<sup>151</sup> Simon B. Conover Collection, *Port Townsend Leader*, May 6, 1891. Cage 692, Box 1, Folder 1, WSU MASC.

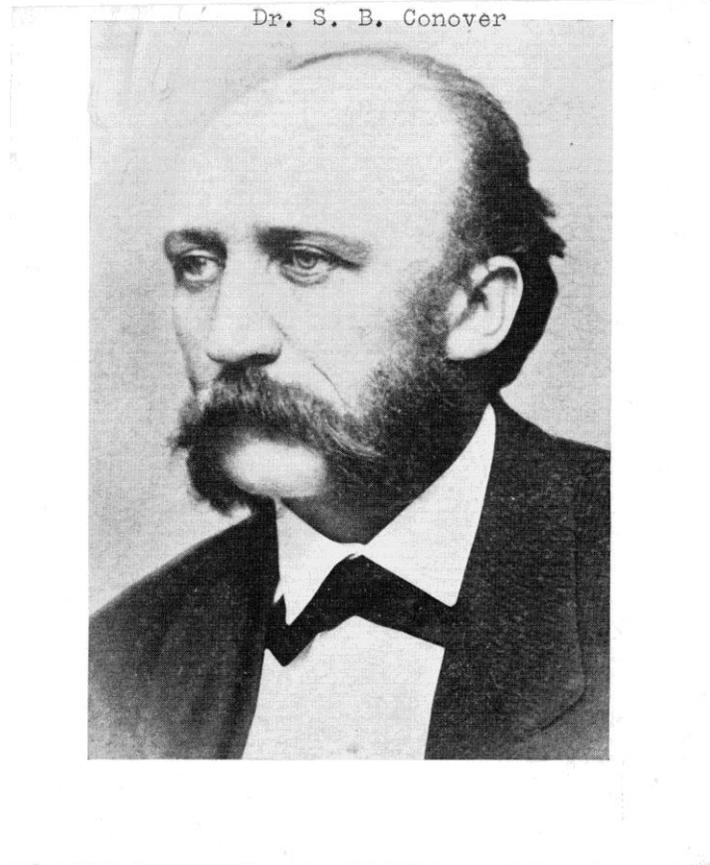
Governor Ferry when campaigning promised that the college would locate in Pullman if he were elected, that had also been a deciding factor. There were, however, continued allegations back and forth, and though the complaints continued, the first Board of Regents had convened already for the first time on April 22, 1891.

Governor Charles E. Laughton (who happened to be then acting temporarily for Governor Ferry) then appointed Conover and four other regents to lead the college and to begin its construction. Although much controversy about its location and timeline for growth ensued, those first regents got to work quickly in establishing what would become the state's Agricultural College, School of Science and Experimental Station. Under the supervision of acting Governor Laughton, the board officially convened in the parlor of the Hotel Olympia for the first time on April 22, 1891. The regents, at that time, were Eugene Fellows of Spokane, George W. Hopp of Sedo, Andrew H. Smith of Tacoma, Jacob H. Bellinger of Colfax, and Simon Conover of Port Townsend.<sup>152</sup> Daniel Lesh of Yakima would join the board later in 1892. Although this board of six regents would only serve for less than two years before being completely replaced, they would construct a number of buildings and open the college's doors to its first students.

At the first board meeting, Jacob Bellinger motioned to have Conover serve as its president. A vote was taken and Conover was unanimously elected. In his first official action, Conover announced that the board needed to elect a clerk, and it thereafter elevated Samuel Vinson to the position. Regent Smith was elected treasurer, even though later, when this board was dismissed, his continued role as treasurer caused much distress for the new board. This first meeting adjourned at 9:30pm with those present agreeing to meet again in Tacoma on May 1<sup>st</sup>.

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<sup>152</sup> Washington State University Board of Regents Minutes, 1891-1893, April 22, 1891 meeting, WSU MASC.



**Figure 6.** Simon Conover posing for a picture. From the Simon Conover collection at WSU MASC, date unknown.

At the second meeting, the regents elected Professor George W. Lilley, then chair of mathematics and physics, the first President of the school.<sup>153</sup> His appointment was temporary and to expire at the end of one year, or when a suitable replacement could be found. Over the course of 1891, faculty were hired, structures and dormitories erected, and architectural plans selected for future buildings, including the proposed administration building. The plan initially chosen for this building resembled the English Parliament building and was dubbed, “The

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<sup>153</sup> Regents minutes, May 1, 1891, WSU MASC.

Castle.”<sup>154</sup> During its first two years, expenditures of the board far outpaced the resources provided for the college. Although fully accounted for, there was simply not enough to pay all of the college’s obligations. Worse, the board selected an administration building that was to cost \$300,000 to build, though they only had a \$60,000 budget.<sup>155</sup>

Conover objected to plans that exceeded funding, as did others. According to a report prepared by Enoch A. Bryan that he later incorporated into his book, he, as the third president of the Washington Agricultural College and School of Science, engaged in, “acts [that] were those of a man who was genuinely interested in the welfare of the College. He objected to what he considered extravagant purchasing practices and once succeeded in halting contracts for inordinately large quantities of food for the dining hall.”<sup>156</sup> Given his efforts to balance the budget, Conover and other board members were often at odds about professorial appointments, expenditures, and the overall direction of the college. These problems and others would lead to the board’s removal in 1893, after just two short years.

Matters of the board were not all that troubled Conover’s mind. As Vice President of the Executive Committee for Washington state at the 1893 Chicago’s World’s Fair, a controversy had arisen over the Washington state building.<sup>157</sup> The committee had solicited architectural plans for the pavilion that would represent Washington at the fair, and more than ten such plans were submitted. Of these, the committee deemed Willis A. Ritchie’s design the first place winner and the only one suitable to represent the state. As a token prize, the committee

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<sup>154</sup> Bryan, *Historical Sketch of the State College*, 86-87.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>157</sup> Simon B. Conover Collection, Letter from Simon Conover to George R. Davis, January 5, 1892. Cage 692, Box 1, Folder 12, WSU MASC.

designated the plans of W.P. Skillings third place. Chief architect and planner of the fair, Daniel Burnham, saw the top three plans submitted (though he was supposed to only view Ritchie's) and decided that Skillings' plans, the committee's third choice, would represent Washington.



The Washington State building at the 1893 Chicago's World's Fair. Designed by architect Warren P. Skillings. From University of Washington Libraries. Special Collections Division, Warren P. Skilling Collection.

Conover wrote a letter in January of 1892 to George Davis, the Director General of the fair, in which he implored Davis to reverse the decision. Conover reminded Davis that they had served in Congress together. He went on to explain that the state had appropriated \$100,000 for

the World's Fair, and that lumber companies would provide all the wood for the building. He further noted that, "Had [the committee] foreseen that [Skillings' plans] might be approved as the accepted design of the state building, they might have hesitated on account of the recognized deficiencies, from giving it even the sanction of the smallest prize."<sup>158</sup> Conover asked that Burnham provide Ritchie with suggestions for improvement so that Ritchie's plans could remain, albeit in an altered form. He protested Burnham's seemingly arbitrary decision that went against the will of the committee. Historian Jeffrey Ochsner noted, "Burnham's choice for the Washington pavilion was thus based not on architecture or development in Washington but on what he imagined was fitting for the state."<sup>159</sup> What fit for the state had to do with frontier land, and Ritchie's design too closely approximated buildings found back east. Conover and the committee lost, and Skillings' building represented Washington at the Chicago World's Fair.

Amidst these other matters, the college opened its doors on January 13, 1892 to thirteen collegiate students and forty-six preparatory students. Conover was not present on the first day, but he wrote a speech that was read aloud at an opening ceremony and reprinted in the *The College Record* (the student newspaper that evolved into what is currently *The Daily Evergreen*). In it, Conover thanked those who had made establishment of the college possible and praised them for their foresight. He predicted that the college would teach future generations how to make the wilderness into productive farmland. Concerning this he had the following to offer: "Very practical ideas underlie the motives which impel legislatures to give support from the public purse to institutions of this character. For every dollar expended in this direction will be

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Jeffrey K. Ochsner, "In Search of Regional Expression: The Washington State Building at the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893." (*Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 86: 4, 1995): 175.

returned a hundred fold to the actual wealth of the community.”<sup>160</sup> He discussed the practical knowledge that would be passed onto students and farmers, noting that farmers were already beginning to make profit in the area, and he predicted that they would enjoy even greater prosperity. He concluded by noting the wise choice Pullman represented as the site for the college then said, “The seed has been sown in fruitful soil and I believe the harvest will be one of bounty.”<sup>161</sup>

Conover’s flowery prose, however, could not cure what ailed the Board of Regents. Although all of the college’s funds were tracked and spent as designated, the institution was beyond its means. This problem might have been resolved with future disbursement of Morrill Act funds, but a controversy arose over President Lilly’s dismissal that brought much negative attention upon both the college and the Board of Regents. The trouble stemmed from Lilly’s belief that the regents had too much control over appointment of professors. He and regent Smith disagreed over this publicly. After Lilly had been president for some time, a former associate of his approached the Board and complained about Lilly’s improprieties and misdeeds back east. When it was then later discovered that Lilley had received and cashed two paychecks mistakenly issued to him for one period of pay, and that he had not reported the error, board members opted for ending his presidency. Lilley’s appointment had been temporary from the start. The regents simply reviewed other applicants and elected John W. Heston the next president.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Simon Conover, “Address of Hon. S.B. Conover,” *The College Record* 1 (February, 1892), WSU MASC.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Bryan, *Historical Sketch of the State College of Washington*, 97.

Conover was the only regent who voted against relieving Lilley of his presidential duties. He believed that the error in payment had been corrected, that the allegations of impropriety back east predated any association with the college, and were thus irrelevant. Furthermore, he did not believe that professors or presidents should be dismissed on such short notice. In his letter to Lilley, Conover was somber and professional, perhaps understanding how popular Lilley was with the student body, yet telling Lilley that his services would no longer be required.<sup>163</sup>

Regent Smith and the new President, John W. Heston did not fully understand the extent of Lilley's popularity with students. In the winter of 1893, after introducing the new president to the student body in College Hall, students chased the participants of that ceremony and hurled eggs and decayed cabbages, hitting them repeatedly.<sup>164</sup> On December 22<sup>nd</sup>, from Port Townsend, Conover responded to the incident. He wrote, "This action of the students is inexcusable and will not be tolerated. While I differed from a majority of the board with regard to the removal of President Lilley, they had a perfect right in all respects to make such changes in the faculty of the college as in their wisdom seemed best."<sup>165</sup> He went on to admonish the students and told them that they were free to leave the school if they disagreed with the board. In what might have been an attempt to ensure that no such incidents would be repeated, and to strengthen ties with the board, Conover was rigid in his stance. Accounts of the "eggs and cabbage incident" appeared in newspapers around the state, and while some were exaggerated, the college once again received negative attention.

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<sup>163</sup> Conover letter to George Lilley, December 17, 1892, Cage 692, Box 1, Folder 10, WSU MASC.

<sup>164</sup> Bryan, *Historical Sketch of the State College of Washington*, 97.

<sup>165</sup> Simon B. Conover Collection, undocumented newspaper clipping, , Cage 692, Box 1, Folder 1, WSU MASC.

In archival materials related to Conover, his strict bookkeeping is evident. He meticulously tracked even the smallest expenses. In Florida, called upon to account for all of the money that had passed through his hands during his time as state treasurer, Conover had done so. Although never called into such question in Washington, Conover nonetheless tracked all state-related expenses very carefully. He carried on his person a receipt book in which he followed such state expenses as: a \$.50 telegram, \$1.50 paid to a driver for transport to Spokane, \$4.20 for a railroad trip to Pullman, and \$1.50 paid at Tacoma's Palace Hotel for board and lodging.<sup>166</sup>

On January 18, 1893, the meeting notes for the Board of Regents abruptly stopped. They began months later with a completely new board but with no explanation for the switch, which rid the college of the board led by Conover because of the exceeded budget and the Lilley incident. By action of the Washington legislature in March of 1893, the initially-appointed six regents were simply not confirmed and thus dismissed.<sup>167</sup> New regents were appointed and Conover's services were no longer sought.

Roughly two years later, the Board of Regents notes from April 25, 1895, are worthy of consideration. A request was made at that meeting to buy a new light 'team' tram in place of the current horses named "Smith" and Conover." This action was approved and President Bryan requested permission to buy a new set of harnesses as well the next day.<sup>168</sup> It is not known whether these horses were named during Conover's and Smith's time on the board, or later. Still, the horses would have been in service for only roughly four years, two during the new

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<sup>166</sup> Simon B. Conover Collection, Receipt Book, Cage 692, Box 1, Folder 6, WSU MASC.

<sup>167</sup> Bryan, *Historical Sketch of the State College*, 555.

<sup>168</sup> Regents minutes, April 25-26, 1895, WSU MASC.

board's term; it seems likely that here the current board members apparently wanted to distance themselves from the memory of Conover and Smith, the former Board of Regents members.

If so, this was especially true in the case of Regent Smith, less true in that of Conover. Bryan, in his history of WSU, praised Conover for honest dealings, noting that it was to Conover's credit that, "little, if any, criticism was directed against him at the time when affairs of the College were under investigation by a committee of the Legislature and almost everyone was blamed either with or without justice."<sup>169</sup> Regent Smith, however, left behind an altogether different legacy as treasurer of the original Board of Regents. When the legislature failed to confirm the first board, and replaced its members, it had not conveyed word of those changes to the federal government quickly enough. Former regent Smith received some \$17,000 in Morrill funds, but he did not feel bound to provide the money to the college.<sup>170</sup> The second Board of Regents, having learned of the oversight, promptly requested that Smith turn over the \$17,000. Smith refused. Perhaps he had been hit by one too many eggs or cabbages. A legal battle ensued in which Smith was eventually forced to forfeit the money to the new board. That event alone might have been motivation enough for the new board to rid themselves of a team of horses, including one which bore the name "Smith."

Following his time as the first president of the board of regents at the college that would later become Washington State University, Conover continued as a member of the Washington State commission to the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago, the same one where Frederick Jackson Turner would present his groundbreaking paper. Conover had been an active member of this body from its inception, serving as both Vice-President of both the General Commission and

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<sup>169</sup> Bryan, *Historical Sketch of the State College of Washington*, 93.

<sup>170</sup> *Spokane [Washington] Review*, June 16, 1893, 5.

Executive Committee. Additionally, Conover served in the Seattle Chamber of Commerce, and was well known in that city, even though he had apparently never actually resided there.

Back in Nashville, Prosser had entered the political field reluctantly. Once involved he championed the cause of education and applied himself to improving the economy and industry within Tennessee. Prosser served only one term in Congress (1868-1870) and was not reelected when he ran in 1876 and again in 1878. Immediately following his term in Congress, he was appointed Nashville's postmaster, a position he held three years, and he also served as a Tennessee representative to the Philadelphia Exposition of 1876 (he would later serve in a capacity as a Washington state representative to Chicago's 1893 World's Fair). After Democrats gained control in Tennessee, and Prosser lost the two elections in 1876 and 1878, "owing to continued ill health growing out of his service in the Civil War," he decided to return to the Pacific Coast.<sup>171</sup> There, he was to serve the government in a number of roles; as a land agent, a framer of Washington's 1889 constitution, auditor, mayor of North Yakima, and active historian.

In 1879, Prosser was appointed as special agent of the general land office in Washington D.C., for the state of Oregon and the territories of Washington, and Idaho.<sup>172</sup> He engaged in this position in the Pacific Northwest for six years, during which he surveyed the land, produced topographical maps, made contacts with people throughout the Pacific Northwest, assessed developments in various parts of the region, and reported his findings back to Washington D.C. Of his work one biographer said, "He discharged the difficult and responsible duties of that

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<sup>171</sup> Lewis Publishing Company (listed as author), *A Volume of Memoirs and Genealogy of Representative Citizens of the City of Seattle and County of King, Washington, Including Biographies of Many of Those Who Have Passed Away; Illustrated* (New York: Lewis Publishing Company, 1903), 555.

<sup>172</sup> William F. Prosser, *A history of the Puget Sound country its resources, its commerce and its people: with some reference to discoveries and explorations in North America from the time of Christopher Columbus down to that of George Vancouver in 1792, when the beauty, richness and vast commercial advantages of this region were first made known to the world* (New York: Lewis Publishing Company, 1903), 279.

position, not only to the entire satisfaction of the authorities at the national Capital, but of the people of Washington and Idaho Territories and of the State of Oregon, with whom he came in contact in the discharge of his duties.”<sup>173</sup> During this time, obviously, he became intimately familiar with the Pacific Northwest. His experience during these six years and thereafter shaped his outlook as captured in his two-volume history of the Puget Sound country and later writings in *The Washington Historian*, the journal of the Washington State Historical Society.

On June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1880, Prosser married Miss Flora L. Thornton, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Henry G. Thornton, at a ceremony in Seattle. Based on the age of 75 listed on her obituary of 1936, Flora was nineteen and Prosser forty-six. Flora’s father Henry had been one of the early settlers in the Oregon territory. Prosser described Henry as, “a pioneer who came across the plains from Ohio to Oregon in 1853, but who was for many years a well known resident of Seattle, where he held several official positions of trust and responsibility.”<sup>174</sup> Henry Thornton died in Seattle, January 1903.<sup>175</sup> Flora was born in Portland before the family moved to Seattle. She then attended the University of Washington and enjoyed the social life with three sisters before the “young bride” was married.<sup>176</sup> Colonel and Mrs. Prosser then had three children, William Thornton Prosser, a newspaperman, and two daughters, Margaret Helen and Mildred Cyrenia. The family lived at various times in Prosser, North Yakima, and Seattle.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Elwood Evans, *History of the Pacific Northwest: Oregon and Washington; embracing an account of the original discoveries on the Pacific coast of North America, and a description of the conquest, settlement and subjugation of the original territory of Oregon, also interesting biographies of the earliest settlers and more prominent men and women of the Pacific Northwest, including a description of the climate, soil, productions of Oregon and Washington*, 2 vols., (Portland, OR.: North Pacific History Co., 1889), 2: 528.

<sup>174</sup> Prosser, *A History of the Puget Sound Country*, 279.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Pearl M. Mahoney, *Prosser-The Home Town* (Prosser, WA.: Prosser Printing Company, 1950), 5.

<sup>177</sup> *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, September 24, 1911.

In 1882, while still a land agent, Prosser located a homestead in the lower part of Yakima valley. His very employment while homesteading led to legal battles (to be examined later) that in 1908 went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Before all this, Colonel and Mrs. Prosser chose their homestead site in the spring of 1882. They, “selected a scenic spot at the bend of the Yakima River to pitch their tent and call [home] until they could build their two-story frontier-day homestead.”<sup>178</sup> The area they sought to settle was just south of the Yakima River and by 1884 on the main line of the Northern Pacific. Surrounding the site are the Horse Heaven Hills, where in the late nineteenth century wild horses could occasionally be seen.

American Indians lived and fished along the Yakima River in Benton County long before white settlers came. They called their home by the river "Tup tat," meaning rapids. Though Prosser was not the first homesteader to the area, he was one of the most famous and residents named the emerging settlement “Prosser,” after its most prominent citizen. Throughout the 1880s and into the 1890s, settlers arrived in the Yakima region from all over the country, and in 1885 Colonel Prosser filed the town plat. Newcomers to Prosser during this time, “remember the ‘Prosser Homestead’ as it stood north of the railroad tracks near the west entrance to the city limits. The old landmark stood as somewhat of a sentinel to welcome newcomers into the unclaimed country.”<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Mahoney, *Prosser – the Home Town*, 4.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*



**Figure 7.** The Prosser Homestead, taken around 1883. From the Benton County Historical Museum, Prosser, Washington.

According to local historian Pearl Mahoney, the small family orchard, a part of which can be seen in the picture above, consisted of summer apple, peach, pear, and plum trees. Prosser chose the location for his homestead because of the bend in the river, due to the area's agricultural potential, and because it was situated on the line of Northern Pacific Railroad. At that spot, "[Prosser] maintained his home of a number of years, living in true pioneer style. The markets on all sides of him were at great distances and one had to travel many miles through a sparsely settled region, chiefly occupied by Indians, making the journey by team in order to bring the supplies to his locality."<sup>180</sup> It is not known whether any of his interactions with Indians

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<sup>180</sup> Lewis Publishing Company, *Volume of Memoirs and Genealogy of Representative Citizens of the City of Seattle and County of King*, 556.

on these trips were marked by violence but if so, they may have, like his previously noted California experiences, shaped his dramatic views about American Indians which Prosser later published.

Flora Prosser, the first woman in town named for her and her husband, was socially active. The first formal entertainment event in Prosser was a fundraiser dance to furnish the new schoolhouse, and Mrs. Prosser as well as the wife of fellow pioneer Nelson Rich were its hostesses. Mrs. Prosser, then, took and an active “woman’s role” in local affairs. Even after leaving the community of Prosser, she returned (from Seattle) in 1906 when a new bridge was dedicated.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Mahoney, *Prosser – The Home Town*, 20.



**Figure 8.** One of Flora Prosser's dresses. From the Benton County Historical Museum, Prosser, Washington.

The Prossers remained at their homestead for roughly ten years, during which time they helped establish a post office in 1883. Mrs. Prosser was the town's first postmaster, and the town was officially incorporated in 1890.<sup>182</sup> When the Prosser's moved away a few years later, their house fell into a state of disrepair; between 1912 and 1915 it was dismantled. Flora Prosser later deeded the homestead land to the city with the instructions that it be used for a park.<sup>183</sup> As such it was named Farrand Park, the town founder's middle name, and remains in the city today.

Prosser was elected Yakima County auditor in 1886 (Benton County, in which Prosser is located, was created out of parts of Yakima County and Klickitat County in 1905). He served in the position for two years and gained experience handling public finances. Then, elected mayor of North Yakima in May, 1893, Prosser and the family moved there. After only two brief years, in 1895, they moved to Seattle, living at North 1006 East Garfield Street.<sup>184</sup>

Washington moved from territorial status to statehood in 1889. William Prosser was a member of that year's constitutional convention representing the counties of Yakima and Klickitat. "In that body he was a leader in the deliberations which resulted in provision being made for the conservation of lands granted by the general government for school purposes."<sup>185</sup> Given his passionate labors in Congress related to the need for better public schools (he was the only former congressman in the convention), his efforts on behalf of education in Washington are not surprising.<sup>186</sup> He also focused his efforts on the state retaining or regaining control, from

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<sup>182</sup> Prosser, *A History of the Puget Sound Country*, 279.

<sup>183</sup> Mahoney, *Prosser- The Home Town*, 5.

<sup>184</sup> Prosser, *A History of the Puget Sound Country*, 279.

<sup>185</sup> Clinton A. Snowden, *History of Washington: The Rise and Progress of an American State* (5 vols., New York: The Century History Company, 1911), 5: 272.

<sup>186</sup> Robert E. Ficken, *Washington Territory* (Pullman, WA.: Washington State University Press, 2002), 207.

private developers, over its tidelands. In the convention, which first assembled in Olympia on July 4, 1889, Prosser described his experience by saying that he, “served on some of its most important committees, and took and prominent and active part in its deliberations.”<sup>187</sup> Clearly by that time he was an experienced politician and very well qualified to assist in the task involved in drafting the new state constitution. In this regard, by the way, had the delegates known of Simon Conover, with his experience in two Florida constitutional conventions, and had Conover arrived in Washington earlier, perhaps he too might have been a part of the convention. He, however, arrived three months too late for such to be the case.

Shortly after the constitutional convention adjourned, Prosser accepted an appointment from Governor Elisha P. Ferry to serve on the state’s harbor line commission. Prosser, and the other five members eventually appointed to the commission, were not necessarily Governor Ferry’s first choices, as at least four well-known politicians had previously turned down such appointments. The commission, which began work on July, 1890, focused generally on plumbing the depths of the tidewaters along Washington’s Pacific coast, creating detailed topographical maps of those areas, and deciding how different stretches of coastline could and could not be used.<sup>188</sup> Among the five commissioners, Prosser was elected chairman. Interestingly, Eugene Semple, Washington’s thirteenth territorial governor and unsuccessful Democratic candidate for Washington’s first governor (he lost to Ferry) was also a commissioner. Semple at one time worked to build a sizeable canal all the way through Seattle, but he failed in this effort. An exchange of telegrams between Semple and Prosser appears in

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<sup>187</sup> Prosser, *A History of the Puget Sound Country*, 279.

<sup>188</sup> Prosser et. al., *Second and Final Report of the Harbor Line Commission of the State of Washington* (Olympia, WA.: Government Printing Office, 1893), 8.

Semple's papers. In them the two discuss travel plans, logistics of harbor lines, engineering problems, legal issues facing the commission, and other matters.<sup>189</sup>

The Harbor Line Commission labored for approximately two-and-a-half years. During that time its members located the harbor lines and waterways in at least seventeen harbors, including Port Angeles, Vancouver, Olympia, Port Townsend, and others. They also did much work on the Seattle harbor and submitted maps on it before disbanding. Because millions of dollars were at stake, different city boundaries amended, and private interests were concerned about some decisions made by the committee, fourteen suits were brought against its actions, the majority of which were decided in its favor.<sup>190</sup> In a concluding section of their final report, the commissioners indicated that they would have accomplished more were it not for these cases. At the time of the commission's creation, the commissioners believed they could complete their task with only \$40,000 in state funds, not the \$60,000 the legislature had approved. Indeed they finished \$1,051.76 under budget, and would have spent far less were it not for the cost associated with legal matters.<sup>191</sup> By January 5, 1893, the Harbor Line Commission had successfully mapped, measured and identified harbor lines, thus reclaiming from private interests and proprietors jurisdiction for the state over Washington tidelands.<sup>192</sup>

After serving on the Harbor Line Commission, Prosser was elected Mayor of North Yakima in May, 1893. He served and lived there until 1895, when he and his family moved to

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<sup>189</sup> Eugene Semple Papers, 532, Box 9, Folder 16, University of Washington Archives.

<sup>190</sup> William F. Prosser, Eugene Semple, D.C. Guernsey, Frank Richards and William Sternberg, *Second and Final Report of the Harbor Line Commission of the State of Washington* (Olympia, WA.: Government Printing Office, 1893), 15. Similar commissions had operated in other coastal states, and the commission sought precedents set by those bodies. Thus, the commission generally had legal precedence on its side.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

Seattle, where Prosser then remained active in that city's political and social circles. In 1905 President Theodore Roosevelt appointed Prosser as a member of the board of visitors to the West Point Military Academy. By then, Prosser had become interested world trade and this interest may have encouraged Prosser's suggestion that the study of Japanese language be added to the curriculum at West Point, which he recommended especially in light of the growing importance of trade relations between the United States and Japan. The proposal was not incorporated.<sup>193</sup>



**Figure 9.** William Prosser seated, date unknown. From the Conover collection, WSU MASC.

Between 1898 and 1902 Colonel Prosser served as president of the Washington State Historical Society. His qualifications here seem well founded. He already had a long career as a public servant, and he had become familiar with many of the state's leaders and locales. Some of his writings appeared in *The Washington Historian*, a quarterly publication devoted to preserving the history of Washington state, and he wrote and published, in 1903, a two-volume, 1,189 page history of the Puget Sound country.

Like many historians around the turn of the century, Prosser compiled biographical data on a vast number of leading men, in this case those from around the Puget Sound. Elwood

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<sup>193</sup> Snowden, *History of Washington*, 272.

Evans, Clinton Snowden, and others compiled similarly huge volumes filled with summaries on the lives of hundreds of prominent men, consisting primarily of one to two page biographical entries each. All but roughly three hundred pages of Prosser's nearly 1,200-page book were devoted to such biographical vignettes. The practice of the time was to capture succinctly the most important details about each man's life. Each of the two volumes of his book begin with the Thomas Carlyle quote, "Examine History, for it is Philosophy teaching by Experience."

In chapters one through thirty-five of his book, Prosser explored the natural resources, discovery, and development of the Puget Sound area. The rest of the book, not arranged by chapters, (the remaining 900 pages or so) is devoted to brief biographical sketches. The first entries were devoted to explorers, the Lewis and Clark expedition, the Hudson's Bay Company, and the Indian tribes of the Puget Sound region. The thirty-five chapters, on the whole, seem informative; many of the events of the region are carefully documented. Absent from his work, and from similar histories from the time, is any documentation of sources consulted in compiling the histories and biographical sketches. This omission notwithstanding, much of Prosser's work remains useful.

Prosser's historical treatment of the Indian tribes provides insight into his thoughts about history in general, as well as to how he personally regarded them. Like so many other historians of the Pacific Northwest, Prosser highly celebrated the work of the white pioneers. He rightly praised their courage and ingenuity. Like Frederick Jackson Turner, though, he over-generalized when he marginalized native populations as savages and worse. In the conclusion on his chapter on Indians he stated, "The education of Indian children in the habits of industry and in the

principles of Christianity is the only way to remove the incubus which weighs down the Indian character, debases his imagination and shortens his life.”<sup>194</sup> He began this chapter by stating:

We may be sensible of some fleeting pangs of regret, that the aborigines of our country should be so rapidly melting away before the brighter light of modern civilization, and that already many tribes, clans, communities and families have become extinct, yet this is only in accordance with those laws of nature, or the purposes of Providence, which bring about man’s progressive development.<sup>195</sup>

Other such comments appear throughout his treatment of the Indians of the Puget Sound. The majority of the chapter, though, is relatively free of these value-laden comments, although attesting to the fact that he (like others) did not understand the complexity of the native religious, cultural, and social systems.

A conclusion follows the first several hundred pages of history and precedes the remaining 900 pages of biographical sketches. In it, Prosser commended the brave generation of men who, “fought with wild beasts and subdued a savage race that the beauties, the resources, and advantages of the Puget Sound, [might be] available to the world and its commerce.”<sup>196</sup> He praised them for taking steps to transform the natural landscape into a productive and flourishing society. In the last few sentences, Prosser explained how his generation had honored and furthered the aims of the pioneers, and though they were currently too busy making history to study it, he concluded that, “whether relating to its romantic incidents or its more important events, will be found of surpassing interest.”<sup>197</sup> Then follows the biographical entries detailing the lives of many leaders of his generation.

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<sup>194</sup> Prosser, *A History of the Puget Sound Country*, 1: 86.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

The *Washington Historical Magazine*, predecessor to the *Washington Historian*, and later the *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, opened with a mission statement of sorts pertaining to the Washington State Historical Society. The society's purpose was to "collect, formulate and preserve in permanent form, the traditional, record and object history of Washington, in all their branches, from its earliest Territorial period, in its Library, Museum and Picture Gallery."<sup>198</sup> The president and editor, Elwood Evans (soon to be replaced by Prosser as president), stressed that the society encouraged submissions of drawings as well, and perhaps these were used in his multi-volume *Illustrated History of Washington*. Colonel Prosser became president of this society in 1898 and served in that role until 1902. During this time, he oversaw the publication of the society's magazine. He wrote several of the articles therein, and these articles further exemplify Prosser's views about history and other subjects.

Volume one number one of the *Washington Historian* magazine (the name rotated between *Washington Historian* and "*Washington Historical Magazine*, but the subject matter remained the same) contains two entries written by Prosser. The opening pages listed the officers in the society (Prosser of Seattle is listed as President) and presented the objects of the society. Prosser's first entry was essentially a eulogy for the deceased "great man," Arthur Denny. He discussed Denny's many achievements and notes how readers felt the loss of this man. This tribute serves as an introduction to an autobiography written by Arthur Denny himself.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> *Washington Historical Magazine; A Record of State History* 1 (October 1893), 3.

<sup>199</sup> Denny was a pioneer to the Pacific Northwest and one of the founders of Seattle, Washington. He served in different government positions; he was Seattle's first postmaster and a territorial delegate to the thirty-ninth United States Congress.

The second article, entitled, “The Passing of the Pioneer,” was somewhat, but not directly, tied to the first. In it, Prosser signaled the dying off of a certain breed of courageous men. Frederick Jackson Turner’s, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, covered in a more theoretical fashion many of the same subjects raised by Prosser. Prosser opined, “The Pioneers, who have so long occupied the vanguard of civilization, and who have been all the time, on the skirmish or picket line in this march of progress, have completed their work as far as this continent is concerned.”<sup>200</sup> Much of the article praised those pioneers by vilifying the Indians who stood in their way.

Prosser referred to American Indian people as, “an enemy to whom pity was a stranger and sympathy an unknown quality,” “blood-thirsty barbarians,” “marauding, murderous and warring savages,” “the most vindictive and cruel race,” “bloody and treacherous [butchers],” “inhuman foes,” “dusky but remorseless [rapist] warriors,” and with other such epithets.<sup>201</sup> In complete contrast, the pioneers in his article were, “peaceful, industrious, prosperous,” “intelligent and progressive,” “civilized in the highest form,” “the vanguard of civilization,” “sacrificing themselves,” “stalwart men, brave women and innocent children,” who “shared liberty and were humanitarian.”<sup>202</sup> The harsh words used in regard to the natives are striking, and perhaps Prosser’s experience fighting Indians in California contributed to his prejudice here. Clearly Prosser admired the achievements of those who pioneered westward across the country, but the blatant dualism he creates between those he considered “good” and those he considered “evil” lacks sophistication and depth. His manner of presenting the pioneers, the subject of his

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<sup>200</sup> William Prosser, “The Passing of the Pioneer,” *The Washington Historian* 1 (September, 1899): 23.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-25.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

sketch, is triumphal in nature and lacking in historical substance. Near the end of the article he praised the pioneers in the Philippines (a reference to the Spanish American War of the time) and Alaska who were still advancing this good work.

Prosser's next contribution to the *Washington Historian* appeared in 1900 . This was an annual address originally read at a meeting of the Washington State Historical Society, held in City Hall at Tacoma on December 15, 1899. The address is an exhortation and invitation to record past events so as to remember, honor, and celebrate what came before and the present. Prosser stated that his belief that history is more than "philosophy teaching by example" and that, "it teaches us man's nature and character better than anything else could possibly do, and if we could learn these things we would be much better fitted for the battle of life, than we could be in any other way whatever."<sup>203</sup> He considered the developments of the pioneers and the dominant whites, and he argued that by studying history one could see how that race was destined to lead. He ascribed the activities of Washingtonians (presumably whites) as beneficial in nature and as improving all humanity. The historical society, he explained, was to track the history of all peoples so as to better understand and celebrate the present.

Issue number three of volume one of the magazine contained a reprinted address that Prosser read before the Alki Camp of the Native Sons of Washington, dated March 16, 1900.<sup>204</sup> In the reprint, he explained how industrious men won the country as they moved from east to west. With respect to Washington, he noted that Congress had once debated whether Oregon was worth having at all and how that Congress had seriously considered whether the, "states, of Oregon, Idaho, and Washington should be left to the occupation of the Indian population under

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<sup>203</sup> William Prosser, "Annual Address," *The Washington Historian*, 2 (January, 1900): 82.

<sup>204</sup> This group was formed of descendants to honor the original pioneers to the Washington territory.

the joint supervision of England and the United States.”<sup>205</sup> He then lauded the many improvements made by industrious pioneers in Washington since that time. It seems that Prosser appreciated that the Alki Camp of the Native Sons of Washington had pledged its aid in securing and tracking Washington’s history, for which he noted that they would “not only accomplish a praiseworthy undertaking, but they [would] beyond question be held by the future inhabitants of our state in loving, grateful and lasting remembrance.”<sup>206</sup>

In the magazine’s issue of July, 1901, Prosser penned yet another article in this vein, titled, “A Vanishing Age Remembered.” The first two-thirds of the article were similar to his previous ones. He took great care to point out the successes and diligent labors of the pioneers and their way of life. In concluding, though, he responded to, “those who would detract from the merit of [the pioneers’] achievements, who would impugn their motives and depreciate the value of the work they did.”<sup>207</sup> He referenced the fact that even professors at universities, who never lived the hardships endured by pioneers, disparaged the labors of these men. Prosser was unwavering in his adulation for pioneers, and attacked those who would even question their achievements. By 1902, Prosser, who was no longer president of the Washington State Historical Society, finished his book on the Puget Sound and published it in 1903. While doing so, while still in Seattle, he involved himself in real estate speculation.

In 1908, Prosser was elected Seattle city treasurer, receiving some twenty thousand out of a total of some twenty-five thousand votes.<sup>208</sup> Prosser served in this office for two years, until seventy-six years of age. Prosser then went on to become the president of a newly organized,

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<sup>205</sup> William Prosser, “Native Sons of Washington. Address before Alki Camp,” *The Washington Historian* 4 (April, 1900), 137.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>207</sup> William Prosser, “A Vanishing Age Remembered,” *The Washington Historian* 7 (July 1901), 207.

<sup>208</sup> Snowden, *History of Washington*, 272.

“Conservative Casualty Company of Seattle.”<sup>209</sup> He remained there for over a year before his death in 1911.

Colonel William Farrand Prosser died in his home in Seattle on September 23, 1911. The illness that led to his death lasted only briefly. “Complications from dilation of the heart brought the end, with but short warning.”<sup>210</sup> Services were held on the 25<sup>th</sup> of September at Trinity Parish Episcopal church, where Prosser was a senior warden. He was interred at the Lakeview cemetery. Announcements of Prosser’s death were printed in several newspapers. Most recounted Prosser’s many life experiences and the services he had performed, and one such clipping even claimed that Prosser had been a personal friend of Lincoln and Grant. An obituary appeared on Mrs. Prosser on December 27, 1936. It reported that she was 75 when she passed away, and that she had been on holiday in Seattle, visiting from her home on Bainbridge Island, where she died.

Dr. Simon Conover practiced medicine until his death on April 19, 1908, at Port Townsend, at age 67. He was buried in the Masonic Cemetery in Port Townsend. An obituary appeared entitled, “Former U.S. Senator Succumbs to Old Age,” and then in smaller font, “Dr. Simon B. Conover, Prominent in Reconstruction Days, Dies.”<sup>211</sup> The obituary listed that his health had declined over the last few years preceding his death, and that for some time he had experienced difficulty in tending to his responsibilities at the Marine Hospital.

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<sup>209</sup> *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (September 24), 1911.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>211</sup> Simon B. Conover Collection, Undocumented newspaper article. Cage 692, Box 1, Folder 1, WSU MASC.

An obituary for Emma Conover, Dr. Conover's wife, from *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer* on December 9, 1919, gave tribute to the thirty-year resident of Washington. The cause of death listed in the article was paralysis. Mrs. Conover died at 11 A.M. in her home at the Lincoln Hotel in Seattle.<sup>212</sup>

Both Conover and Prosser had been secured appointments from the federal government to venture to the Pacific Northwest, and both accepted those positions amidst their crumbling political situations in the post-Reconstruction South. Dr. Conover relied on medical expertise gained in Florida to continue to serve at the Quarantine Station and Marine Hospital in Washington. Leaders in Washington sought out Conover's political leadership, skills he had developed in Florida. Prosser, aside from time homesteading, likewise devoted his life to public service in Washington. He surveyed land extensively in Oregon, Idaho, and Washington, he was influential in Washington's constitutional convention of 1889, he founded the town that bears his name, he served in a number of other public roles, and he articulated views of the historical development of the state of Washington.

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<sup>212</sup> *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (December 9), 1919.

## CONCLUSION

Dr. Simon Conover and Colonel William Prosser lived through the Civil War, the era of Reconstruction, and brought what they learned during those times with them when they came to the Pacific Northwest. They were Union men who headed South after the Civil War and who subsequently had meaningful political careers there. In their early lives, throughout the Civil War and Reconstruction, and later in the Pacific Northwest, Conover and Prosser extended federal authority. The life story of each is remarkable as both served in numerous government positions in various regions of the United States.

Simon Conover was the epitome of a self-made man. He came from humble beginnings and worked his way up the social and political ladder to become a United States Senator and accomplished doctor. Before the Civil War, Conover was a pharmacist and a physician. His association with the federal government began as a result of the Civil War, during which time he became a surgeon in the Army. Conover then earned a medical degree and obtained extensive additional experience before being assigned to a federal post as a Florida doctor. Thus began Conover's public service.

In the South, Conover, a Republican, advanced the rights of freedmen. He served on the National Republican Committee and he broke with the majority of Florida Republicans, who seemed to him corrupt and insufficiently interested in the rights of blacks. During his political career in the Reconstruction South, Republican critics accused Conover of several misdeeds. To put this in proper context, these same Republicans themselves were often found guilty of the excesses that lent impetus to deriding carpetbaggers. When Conover refused to use money in ways that he thought illegal, a majority of Republicans were often upset with him. It was only when he won a federal senate seat and appointed blacks to important positions, that charges were

brought against him. These charges often appear as political maneuvers by his opponents among Florida Republicans to undermine the political base that supported an uncooperative Senator Conover. The charges brought against him were summarily dismissed. Although damning claims were made by some Republican newspapers of the time, Conover refuted these vehemently, though he believed the accusations were serious enough to damage him politically.

An ongoing debate among historians pertains to the effectiveness of Reconstruction and the legacy of carpetbaggers. This is seen clearly by the title of Jerrell Shofner's book on Reconstruction in Florida, *Nor is it Over Yet*, which obviously refers to the contentious debate over the achievements and shortcomings of Reconstruction. Still, it appears that Conover served Florida honorably and should not be associated with those carpetbaggers who took advantage of the state.

In his medical practice, Conover benefited Florida communities, bringing some of the latest medical knowledge to areas that did not have such expertise. As his political prospects waxed and waned, he repeatedly returned to his medical practice. The training he received in the army and in Florida, prepared him for service in the Pacific Northwest, where he slowed the spread of outbreaks and infectious diseases.

Upon arriving in the Pacific Northwest, Conover was appointed to lead in the establishment of a new college in eastern Washington. To this effort he committed himself as President of the Board of Regents for the Washington Agricultural College and School of Science. For two years he took steps to establish the new college. Although he drew criticism for helping to select Pullman as the site for the school, he defended his actions, saying that this choice offered the best opportunity for the college to succeed. Internal divisions among college administrators and early financial difficulties led to the firing of the college's first president and

to the dissolution of its initial regents. Although strict in his accounting and wholly dedicated to his position, Conover and the other regents saw their services terminated. As previously discussed in Florida, Conover then fell back upon his medical practice and worked the remainder of his life in that field.

Colonel William Prosser was a teacher, a miner, a soldier, a farmer, a politician, the editor of a newspaper, the president of a railroad, a postmaster, a surveyor, an historian, and a city treasurer. While his days of mining and fighting Indians in California seem to have shaped his opinions of Indians irrevocably, they also pushed this rugged frontiersman to excel in combat during the Civil War. Prosser initially refused an appointment as an officer, but his courage, bravery, and discipline then earned him promotions, eventually all the way to the rank of colonel. Prosser's propensity for hard work then propelled him in his later political career. In Congress, Prosser focused on improving the nation's educational system. A lifelong Republican, his devotion to education and to internal improvements bettered Tennessee, Washington, and the nation. He founded Prosser, the community that bears his name, and helped Washington become a state in 1889. His interests in his new state led him to become president of the state historical society and to publish a book on the history of the Puget Sound.

An uncritical appreciation of white pioneers and an unmistakable disdain of American Indians appears in Prosser's histories. Social Darwinism and its concomitant philosophical tenants were widely held by many during Prosser's time, and are advanced in Prosser's repeated dehumanizing comments and vehement attacks displayed in his narrative involving Indians. When others suggested he temper his passion, he merely defended what he believed all the more fervently. While his Indian-fighting experiences in California might help to explain his beliefs

here, what is perhaps striking was his divergent views about another minority, blacks, toward whom he was sympathetic.

Prosser, in fact, was a champion for African Americans in Tennessee and elsewhere. He led the way in appointing the first black man to West Point academy. During his time in Congress he shared the views of other national Republicans about the importance of Reconstruction and the political equality. In Tennessee, he worked with black leaders. Some of this dichotomy in regard to race may have been do to the fact that Prosser actually witnessed African American troops in action and in the struggle to end slavery. Furthermore, during Reconstruction, African Americans were vital to Republican success in the southern states. Prosser fought for blacks, worked with them, and championed their rights while dedicating himself to bettering their lot. In the case of American Indians, however, he seems mostly to have engaged them in fierce battles and skirmishes. Given his intellect, broad experience, and general knowledge, his prejudice is tragic but not unusual. Perhaps the social Darwinist elements of the so-called Turner thesis gave Prosser license to voice his negative opinions about Indians; but he did not accept the tenants of that same social evolutionary theory, in regard to blacks in the South. Perhaps “place” does matter after all.

Simon Conover and William Prosser, Republicans during the Civil War, Reconstruction, and post-Reconstructions years, brought the federal government with them wherever they ventured. They enacted the will of federalism through their service in the Civil War. During southern Reconstruction both of these carpetbaggers worked to regenerate the broken economies of the South while securing political and social rights for the freedmen. When southern Democrats regained control over the South and undid much of what the carpetbaggers and other Republicans had done, Conover and Prosser turned their federalist energies to the Pacific

Northwest, where they aided development of what became Washington state. Prosser, as a member of the 1889 constitutional convention, helped establish the state itself, assisted the state to gain control over its coastline, and then established the city of Prosser and worked in other governmental capacities. Through different means and positions, he encouraged Washington's development, and he also recorded this progress through historical accounts. Conover brought new medical practices to Washington, and he helped establish the college that is now Washington State University. Both transferred their aspirations for progress and order from the South to the Pacific Northwest, and in so doing shaped the history of both of these regions.

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### **Afterword**

At the time of their deaths, Simon Conover's in Port Townsend in 1908 and William Prosser's in Seattle in 1911, a sort of "historical consensus" had evolved regarding both the Reconstruction of the South and the westward movement of the latter nineteenth century. In the first instance, "Dunningite" scholars had carried the day – carpetbaggers were simply scoundrels who had been bent on robbing and plundering the devastated postwar South. In the second, however, the day belonged to the disciples of Frederick Jackson Turner – the pioneers who carried American institutions westward were noble and dedicated totally to the advancement of both civilization and progress.

Today, roughly a century after the passing of both Conover and Prosser, the "historical consensus" is quite different. Revisionist scholars have captured the narrative of the Reconstruction years; carpetbaggers, generally speaking, are seen as idealistic white northerners determined to modernize the South and to promote the political interests of its recently

emancipated slaves in so doing. Only a handful of notable “corrupt” carpetbaggers do not fit this narrative. Today’s New Western Historians have now also created a new consensus, informing us that Turner’s view of westward movement, in which Conover and Prosser took part, was in fact, flawed; it omitted “others” - Indians, Hispanics, Chinese and Japanese immigrants, etc. from the story and unquestioningly praised the “advancement” of white settlers.

In this context, then, this thesis tells the life stories of two men – Simon Conover and William Prosser. Both of them, so to speak, were, in fact, “carpetbagger-pioneers.” In telling their story, this thesis places each of them, and each of their life experiences, in the context of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Westward movement. However much historians from various eras disagree in their interpretation of these events, all agree that they were central to both the broad narrative of American history and in the evolution of the historical memory of the American people generally. The examination of their lives complicates broad historical perspectives, as any good history should do. Their lives demonstrate change over time, both in their own day and in how historians have come to understand the meaning of their actions. This said, as actors in each of these shaping events, both Conover and Prosser deserved to have their life stories told. That is why this thesis has been written.

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