

“Lordy miss, that’s a *man*”: John Eldred Swearingen and the Office of State Superintendent of Education in South Carolina

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Abstract

John Eldred Swearingen is a man whose name is not found in history books. However, his impact on South Carolina cannot be overstated. While Swearingen brought the state into the twentieth century in terms of education, his most significant legacy was bringing about awareness regarding the state of African-American schools. At the least, Swearingen represented a more enlightened attitude regarding race and education; at the most, he presented a voice of resistance against discriminatory practices.

Swearingen managed to excel in the worlds of academia, teaching, and politics. As a student at the South Carolina College in the late nineteenth century, his records of academic excellence remained unbroken for more than fifty years. As a teacher in the early twentieth century, he tremendously influenced the lives of hundreds of students. As State Superintendent, he kept office almost uncontested for fourteen years, only to be undone by his opponent’s unethical campaigning. Notably, Swearingen achieved all these things in spite of the fact that he was completely blind.

The question of why Swearingen chose to enter politics and advocate for African-Americans is one that is raised whenever an exploration of Swearingen’s life and career is presented. This piece will present one potential theory—that even though Swearingen worked against societal notions of the role of the disabled, he was influenced by societal definitions of masculinity in both his personal and professional lives. This work will utilize a variety of primary (i.e. Swearingen’s papers, interviews with his son) and secondary (i.e. contemporary research on masculinity) sources in both its presentation of Swearingen’s life and argument about the potential roots of his behaviors.

Keywords: education, biography, disability, masculinity, race, politics

Introduction

In her memoirs of her husband, John Eldred Swearingen, Mary Hough Swearingen recalls a story about her husband that occurred during their 1918 honeymoon. They were on board a train from Greenville, South Carolina, to New York City when, as she recalls,

On the train I asked the porter to see whether Mr. Swearingen needed any help in the dressing room. He unhesitatingly consented to do so, but in a few moments he came up the aisle chuckling. ‘Lady,’ he said, ‘that man don’t need nothing! He’s in yonder shavin’ himself with a long straight razor, and everybody is a gaping at him. They can hardly use their own little safety razors—but not him. Lordy, miss, that’s a *man!*’¹

This story is both summative and metaphoric of Swearingen’s life; societal notions of masculinity, of what it meant “to be a man,” had a direct influence on his career. This is further complicated, and the story made more remarkable, with the mention of one additional fact: Swearingen was blind. While notions of masculinity shaped Swearingen, much more so did societal notions of disability. While not explicitly shaping Swearingen’s acts personal or professional—that is, Swearingen was not out to prove his manhood or his ability—societal notions of disability and masculinity did shape Swearingen’s actions, both proactive and reactive, and were one means of providing the groundwork of his career.²

John Eldred Swearingen was elected South Carolina State Superintendent of Education for the first time in 1907. Throughout the fourteen years he held this office, Swearingen made great strides in improving the state’s education. James Garraty presents a three-tiered paradigm regarding biographical subjects, sorted based on the writer’s “over-all view of the importance of individual intelligence and character in determining the course of events.” There are three types of significance: subjects who are “significant only because of the times in which they live make them so;” subjects who are “forceful individuals” that have “change[d] the trend of events;” and subjects who are not controlled by themselves or their times, but rather an outside force such as luck, chance, or destiny.³

Within this paradigm, Swearingen is most definitely a forceful figure who worked to change the society in which he lived. Swearingen was unafraid to take on any and all challengers to his vision. During his term, he came in conflict with textbook vendors, state legislators, the governor, the General Education Board, and even the Ku Klux Klan. However, nothing deterred Swearingen from doing his utmost to improve his beloved state’s schools for all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, or income.⁴

He was willing to battle local, state, and national officials in his drive to increase state funding on schools, pass a compulsory education bill, implement the Smith-Hughes Act, and resist the Cardinal Principles report. However, arguably his most notable legacy is what he did for the hitherto undereducated populations in South Carolina—children of the mills and African-American students—more so than any previous State Superintendent. As noted by James Dreyfuss in his monograph,

Swearingen ultimately believed, in the broadest sense, that education should be equitably provided, funded, and available to all citizens, regardless of class, race, or gender. Even though guided by the precepts of *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896), Swearingen’s writings proves his commitment and dedication, time and again, to the

provision of educational opportunity for both races.”⁵

Swearingen is not merely a product of his historical context—but rather an advocate of issues years ahead of his time. While there are many reasons for his actions, for the sake of this work, only the effects of societal notions of masculinity and disability on his actions will serve as analysis. For purposes of this work, Gail Bederman’s paradigm of masculinity—as a “historical, ideological process...the cultural process whereby concrete individuals are constituted as members of a preexisting social category—as men” is used. In short, Swearingen was acting to prove his masculinity in the aftermath of a period during which “Northerners and Southerners also argued about what kind of men they were...the political and physical conflict over slavery’s extension also spawned a rhetorical battle over the meanings of manhood.”⁶

As biographer Robert Gittings explains, a category of biographical analysis is the physical being of the subject. Indeed, as noted by the author, the “physical states of the subject of biography” definitely have “far-reaching historical consequences.”⁷ Swearingen’s life proves an excellent example of this: he was acting to reject what he had been taught he was capable. Swearingen knew via his disability what it was like to be seen as “different” and have society immediately categorize him based on physical appearance. In this light, Swearingen’s actions to benefit underrepresented voices in the schools are fully understandable.

Swearingen’s Life and Times

In the midst of the political and educational turmoil that was the Reconstruction South in the United States was born the man who would have the most lasting impact on public education and the public high schools of South Carolina than any other. John Eldred Swearingen was born January 9, 1875 near the town of Trenton located in Edgefield County. He was the son of John Cloud Swearingen, a confederate veteran and Red Shirt Rider, and Anna Tillman Swearingen, sister of U.S. Senator Benjamin “Pitchfork Ben” Tillman.⁸

Swearingen’s father had a distinguished career in the Confederacy. He was among the first troops to leave Edgefield County, fighting as an officer in the CSA. In spite of sustaining injuries at both Gettysburg and Lookout Mountain, John Cloud remained on active duty until war’s end. Anna Tillman was a woman widely recognized for her exceptional intellect. She hosted a private day school for her children and those of her neighbors. An avid reader, Anna loved poetry and literary classics. In addition, she was a skilled musician, needlewoman, homemaker, and planter’s wife. The love of reading and the desire for learning would be passed down to their son.⁹

Like many male children of planter families, Swearingen was taught to hunt at an early age. He received his first shotgun, against his mother’s wishes, for his thirteenth birthday. Also like many children with a new toy, Swearingen took it with him on most of his outings. Less than a week after receiving his gift, Swearingen went out on a firewood hauling expedition with some of the field hands from the farm. Swearingen saw a dove and shot it. In his excitement to capture his kill, he ran to pick up the fallen bird. A nearby bush tripped the trigger of the second barrel of his gun, discharging the entire load of bird shot through Swearingen’s right hand. The shot entered at the little finger and exited at the base of the thumb, shattering every bone in the hand before

settling into his forehead, face and eyes, blinding him.¹⁰

Initially, Swearingen's family hoped that his eyesight would return. His mother, ever the educator, would not stand to see her son go on helplessly. She began a strict program of re-education for him. She began by having him re-learn to perform simple household chores such as lighting stove fires and bringing in firewood. Tending an extensive garden, she soon had Swearingen fetching water for the garden. She advanced his training to include proper table manners, the techniques of which Swearingen would later use as a teacher of the blind. Next she had him re-learn activities such as basic exercises, acrobatics, wrestling, and horseback riding.¹¹

As Swearingen was re-mastering household duties and activities, his mother continued his education by reading to him. If there exists a "boy culture," as argued by E. Anthony Rotundo, that prepares boys to become masculinized, the lack of engagement in this culture cannot be neglected. If the culture formed by boys "helped to prepare them in many ways for life in the adultspheres they would inhabit," then Swearingen was not provided this opportunity. Further, if boy culture is what taught boys to reject the notions of feminized domesticity, then it is likely that Swearingen's extended term in the household prepared him for what was determined by society of the time to be a feminized career—that in education.¹²

Rotundo continues the argument that this break with domesticity and emergence of boy culture is what taught them "differences of ethnicity and social status." While Swearingen was most definitely exposed to a huge variety of other social structures that would reinforce social norms regarding the treatment of people who are "other", such as the disabled or of another race, Swearingen would not have these patterns set in him via his teenage play. This might help explain the progressive social attitudes held by Swearingen throughout his career.¹³

Swearingen attended the School for the Blind and Deaf at Cedar Springs, South Carolina, from 1889 to 1894. Upon his graduation from Cedar Springs, Swearingen was determined to continue his education. He applied to the South Carolina College, only to be rejected. It was his first taste of the discrimination society heaped upon the disabled of the time. In an effort to overcome the college's perception that he was intellectually incapable, Swearingen made a formal appeal to the president and board of trustees of the college, who granted him provisional admission. In contemporary society, universities provide a wide array of provisions for people who are differently abled; such was not the case at the turn of the century. Swearingen had to provide his own guide and readers for his textbooks, and any sign that he could not keep up with the other students would result in his being asked to withdraw from the college. Much to the surprise of everyone involved (except Swearingen), he excelled in all of his coursework. Swearingen doublestarred in all but three courses.¹⁴ Within two years, Swearingen had earned a reputation as being the most intelligent student on campus. As recalled by Swearingen's son, John Jr., college friends of his father's visited their house years after Swearingen had retired from public life. "As I was growing up, I observed many of them come by and shake hands with him, and say that 'I learned more from you than I ever learned from any one of our professors.'"¹⁵

By the time Swearingen graduated from the college, he was amazing his fellow students with his feats. He could walk unassisted anywhere on campus with no difficulty and could identify all 200 students on campus by voice. Returning to Rotundo's argument regarding boy culture, Swearingen likely was exposed to enough of it to foster his competitive spirit. Since boys were taught via their culture to "seek each other's

defeat and thus prove individual mastery,” Swearingen likely strongly desired to prove his worth in the academic arena—the only one perceived to be open to a blind student of the time.¹⁶ When he graduated June 17, 1899, Swearingen was the top graduate in the college.¹⁷

Swearingen’s Teaching Career

Upon graduation, Swearingen returned to the Cedar Springs Institute as a teacher, one of the only careers open to a blind man of the time. During the first few years of his teaching career, Swearingen intended to pursue a career in law, political science, or economics. Since he did not have the money for graduate school, he applied for a Rhodes Scholarship to pursue a degree at Columbia University, New York. To this end, he secured effusive letters of recommendation from almost every professor he had at the college, as well as the political clout of his uncle Ben Tillman. In spite of these efforts, he was refused the scholarship due to his blindness.¹⁸

He quickly became principal of the blind department, earning a reputation as a tough, compassionate instructor. Eventually, Swearingen would rise to become superintendent of Cedar Springs. However, Swearingen quickly grew tired of the frustrations facing teachers of the time generally, teachers of students with disabilities specifically. For a variety of reasons, Swearingen opted out of teaching and into a career that would combine his loves: politics, service, South Carolina, and education: he decided to run for State Superintendent of Education.¹⁹

Proving masculinity likely helped Swearingen decide on this course of action as well. As described by Friend and Glover, “[a]s manifested through honor, civic identity shaped southern masculinity.” While this masculine honor was most frequently expressed in military service—something Swearingen clearly desired to do, but could not—serving the state in support of its schools is arguably an extension of this notion. If he couldn’t carry a musket and bayonet to serve his state on the battlefield, he would carry his beliefs and efforts to serve his state in its capitol.²⁰

Political campaigning during this period was difficult. Reflecting on following her husband on later campaign trails, Mary Swearingen writes that the process was “a grueling practice which may not be peculiar to South Carolina, but which is certainly peculiar.”²¹ Candidates had to speak in public debates held in the seat of every county in South Carolina creating the need for much travel. To make the traveling uncomfortable, the campaigns were held in the intense heat of late summer. In addition, all traveling was done by coal-burning train, with its associated discomforts of coal smoke and hot cinders in the cars.

During the campaign, Swearingen closely listened to his two competitors, two men who did not take the blind candidate seriously. Whether attempting to prove himself as a man or as capable, the campaign brought out Swearingen’s competitive nature. After listening to one of his competitors deliver the same speech at every whistle stop, Swearingen used his remarkable memory for humorous use. At the next stop, when Swearingen was slated to deliver his address before this particular gentleman’s, Swearingen rose and recited his competitor’s speech verbatim—leaving the poor man, quite literally, speechless.²²

Swearingen’s platform had multiple facets, most of which were highlighted in the

broadside pamphlet printed for his campaign, which he mailed to business owners in the larger towns across South Carolina. In it, Swearingen didn't try and hide his blindness; rather, he announced it in headline type. On the broadside, a photograph fills the center of the page, taking up almost one-third of the document, with highlights of his life printed in banner type alongside. To the right states his educational experiences: "Student at South Carolina College 1895-1899" and "Teacher in Cedar Springs Institute 1899-1908". To the left are two more biographical statements: "Born January 9, 1875" and "Made Blind by the Accidental Discharge of his Gun while out Hunting January 13, 1888."²³

This public declaration of his disability is arguably an extension of Swearingen's desire to prove his masculinity. Beneke explains that physical manifestation of suffering—such as tattoos, muscles, and scars—become symbols of masculinity: "[s]uch symbols convey a willingness and capacity to suffer for a masculine identity, an achieved and visible toughness." As such, Swearingen's blindness can be perceived as an ongoing symbol of suffering and, as such, a solid expression of his masculinity. Considering that many Civil War veterans hosted a variety of disabilities from the war, such a belief in the link between suffering and masculine worth is not a large leap.²⁴

Society dictated that the blind could only receive a limited education; Swearingen excelled through his tenure in Cedar Springs. Society dictated that the blind could not succeed at higher education; Swearingen excelled in his academic career at the South Carolina College. Society dictated that the blind would not make successful political campaigns; Swearingen led a very successful whistle-stop round of county seats in South Carolina. To further confound societal opinion of the capabilities of the blind, on that rainy election day in 1908, Swearingen was elected. Three months later, he assumed the duties of the office.²⁵

Handling the Office

Once elected, Swearingen knew he had to establish a routine that would allow him to work efficiently and keep his staff at ease. For starters, Swearingen applied his gifted memory to learn the route from his home on Blanding Street to his office so he could make the trip unaccompanied. As explained by his son John:

In his early days as state superintendent of education, his office was in one of those tall buildings...he used to walk from the house to his office by himself. He knew around, and in those days there weren't that many cars on the street. And he was able to manage those things for himself. He did it without any problem at all.²⁶

Organization governed Swearingen's professional life. His staff quickly grew used to his daily routine: enter, have mail dictated to him, type responses, make calls, handle other bits of official business. Assuming that the argument put forth by Timothy Beneke is correct—that success at work is a visible demonstration of masculinity—it only makes sense that Swearingen was not just out to prove his worth as a disabled man, but as a masculine man.²⁷

Swearingen did not just attend to straightforward office duties, however; as an elected official, there was much more to the job. Swearingen would hardly ever refuse an invitation to a barbecue, picnic, family gathering, political campaign meeting, graduation ceremony, or school dedication. Whether it was loyalty to the state, a real sense of duty

in his position, a means to prove his masculinity, or more attempts at confounding social opinion, Swearingen would travel the state frequently.

One typical duty that took Swearingen out of the office regularly was the inspection of new school buildings. At the outset, builders and superintendents alike would doubt Swearingen's abilities in this capacity; however, he took great pleasure in performing highly detailed inspections that frequently caught construction errors missed by his sighted colleagues. An inspection by Swearingen was amazingly thorough. Wife Mary recalls a county superintendent telling her once that Swearingen could "find out more about a building with one trip than [he could] by watching them build it." He was methodical in his work, as described by Mary:

With his cane he checked the height of the ceiling and quickly stepped off the width of the room. With his sensitive perception to light, he could face the windows and remark, 'I see you have your windows where you get good light.' Some spectators were ready to swear he had a magic sense of some sort. He tested floor strength by his shiver-the-timber method. He would find a strategic point and suddenly bounce up and down energetically. If from two or three vantage points he could hear no rattles, he was happy. If, however, a carpenter had not braced his sills well enough, Mr. Swearingen was quick to suggest with some asperity that 'these sills should be strengthened and steadied...' He would ask about the desks, the blackboards, and the heating facilities of the school building.²⁸

Clearly, Swearingen was able to not only compensate for his blindness while in office, but perform all of the duties in a much more direct fashion than many of his predecessors. This quality characterized not only the routine tasks of the office, but also of entire view Swearingen took of his professional responsibility. Not only was it good enough to maintain the public schools while he was in office, he wanted to affect significant change. To do so, he would alternately cooperate and battle political and philanthropic forces on the state and national levels. Two such battles embody the struggles Swearingen faced while in office: with the General Education Board and with Governor Coleman Blease.²⁹

Struggles in Office

While Swearingen was an advocate of vocational education, he was not a supporter of one of the nation's most significant philanthropic agencies that supported this work. One of the primary sources of private funding for African-American schools in South Carolina was the General Education Board (GEB), a group of private philanthropists operating out of New York City. As described by Charles Biebel, this organization sought to assist education in the South by "infiltrating Southern universities and government agencies with its own paid evangelists" in order "to promote a reorganization of 'general education' through a coordinated national effort."³⁰ The GEB clearly favored schools operating on a vocational/industrial track. Biebel, a critic of the GEB asks "whether the Board's contribution to the survival and success of particular organizations...and to the demise of others was in the long run in the best interests of the country." Biebel also describes the Board using the same tactics "disparagingly ascribed to the entrepreneurs whose fortunes had created and sustained

these large foundations,” in order to get their educational program approved across the South. After describing the Board members as wealthy, white, and Protestant, Biebel presents a harsh, but not unfounded critique of the GEB.

It is hard to escape the conviction that the officers and trustees, representing a foundation which by its nature was private, elitist, and paternalistic, could not transcend their collective vested interest in sustaining a social and economic order largely created by their class—all in the name of democracy and the public interest.³¹

Swearingen opposed GEB intervention in South Carolina’s schools for a variety of reasons. In his article on GEB funding, James Anderson describes Southern resistance to the GEB’s efforts as a “series of isolated incidents” in which GEB funded positions were seen as “unwanted agents of Northern philanthropy.” However, the only specific example of this resistance Anderson presents is that of Swearingen.³² If Swearingen was acting in a masculine, paternalistic fashion towards African-American schools, he might have viewed the transparent machinations of the GEB as a violation of his efforts, much like a father would resist parenting advice from a stranger.

Whatever the motivations, Swearingen frequently expressed his resentment of his role in GEB funding in South Carolina directly to the Board. Directors of the Board itself, as well as its representatives, were subjected to Swearingen’s frustrated invectives. For example, Swearingen was asked to present an accounting of all GEB funds spent in South Carolina, additional to his annual reports. In a letter of response to Wallace Buttrick, a director with the Board, Swearingen wrote, in part, “[y]ou have the absolute right to do as you choose with your own funds. I decline, however, to play the part of the fish dangling at the end of your line.”³³ Swearingen continued his rant to another director, Abraham Flexner. He wrote, “I have received three letters from your office that I do not relish and it is high time for a clear understanding between all parties. The use of your contributions means nothing to me individually and I cannot afford to be harassed and bedeviled by meddlesome dictation and afterthoughts.”³⁴

Swearingen had given the Board reason to voice their frustrations. Starting in 1921, Swearingen began openly opposing the GEB. In correspondence with the Board, Swearingen revealed that he was growing frustrated and mistrusting of the Board’s efforts. In June of that year, Swearingen wrote again to Flexner, clearly voicing his frustrations. “If you do not wish to support the work, simply keep the money,” Swearingen wrote of the Board-funded positions within the State Department of Education. “I am tired of being deviled with variations and uncertainties that will not allow me to plan definitely for the activities.”³⁵

The tensions between Swearingen and the GEB were truly manifest when, due to medical reasons, GEB and State Department agent J.H. Brannon had to retire. However high the Board’s opinion of Brannon, though, this esteem was not shared with Swearingen. In correspondence regarding Brannon’s replacement, the negative opinion of the Board towards Swearingen was obvious—or at least how the Board perceived the State’s opinion of Swearingen. Writing to Board Director Abraham Flexner, field agent Davis explained the difficulty with which the pursuit of Brannon’s replacement might meet. “You know Mr. Swearingen,” Davis reminded Flexner, “and realize that some of the best men in the state do not care to come into his office as it would be difficult for them to get along smoothly with him.”³⁶

Just as Swearingen was an outspoken critic of the efforts of the GEB, he also was critical of Governor Coleman Blease. The governor was a near-perfect example of someone working to maintain alpha-male status. He would physically threaten opponents, promising sound thrashings to anyone who questioned or opposed him. His messages to the state legislature frequently had to be censored due to the abusive and profane language they contained. However, on one level, this uber-masculinity appealed to South Carolina's voters: campaigns with Blease as candidate had the highest voter turnout in the 20th century. As summarized by Walter Edgar: "'Coley' might upset 'respectable folks,' but he surely had a lot of friends. Bleaseism was a last hurrah of a dying world, a world in which all whites were equal and blacks were the mudsills of society."³⁷

Blease, a racist populist, and Swearingen, a tolerant progressive, were almost ordained to clash from the start. On one level, Blease was opposed to reform, setting him in philosophical opposition to Swearingen. On another level, Blease had cast himself as a populist in opposition to Tillman; by extension, he would oppose Swearingen. On a deeper level, though, it appears Blease was unable to view Swearingen as anything other than a disabled person. While Swearingen continually proved himself by conflating and confounding notions of disability and masculinity, Blease would never accept Swearingen as an equal.³⁸

When it came to proving masculinity, Blease and Swearingen would be in direct competition for alpha status. Blease wrapped much of his rhetoric in notions of southern manhood, claiming that reform efforts were merely thinly veiled attempts at demasculinizing South Carolinians. Swearingen had a much more complex view of his masculinity and clearly viewed reform and service as extensions of his masculinity. The two views would collide frequently.³⁹

One such example of this collision occurred when Blease tried to expand his patronage system into the field of education, attempting to appoint friends to positions in the State Board of Education. Worse, Blease and his friendly appointees had exhausted the expense accounts of the State Department of Education—conditions that Swearingen had tried to counteract twice that year. When the funding was finally spent and members of the Board began to complain to Blease, the governor in turn railed against Swearingen. Swearingen's reply was characteristically direct:

I have twice reported these conditions and requested the Board to take action to correct them...My report was passed over in silence on both occasions. The appropriation for the State Board of Education has now been exhausted....The men who brought them about cannot expect me to assume to take up the matter a third time at this late date.⁴⁰

Blease would continue his openly racist practices in regards to the state's schools, even taking matters before the state legislature. In 1914, Blease urged the state legislature to pass a bill "forbidding white teachers in colored schools." This proposal ran counter to much that had been taking place in South Carolina's schools. Blease's proposal was something "that Charleston did not want" as white teachers serving African-American schools were common in the lowcountry. Fortunately, when the state legislature met, they "killed his two cent rate bill" and the teachers were allowed to remain in their schools.⁴¹

It was against the backdrop of the contentious 1914 campaign during which

Swearingen's uncle, Ben Tillman, attacked Blease publicly that the most bitter exchange of words between Blease and Swearingen took place. Writing to Blease, Swearingen asked the governor to explain his view on rural graded schools. He wrote, "[a]t the 1913 session of the Legislature, you opposed State aid to two-teacher and three-teacher schools in the country. I understand that your position...is still unchanged. If you care to express your views on this policy, and your attitude toward rural graded schools, I shall be glad to learn your position."⁴²

Blease's response was furious, full of invective, and typical of his attitudes in regardsto politics in South Carolina. "I want to state to you, sir, that that statement is absolutely and unqualifiedly false," Blease's defense began. Rather than address what his policy toward state support of schools actually was, though, Blease instead attacked in heated rhetoric. "I do not care to speak of your infirmity—but unless you have been imposed upon by reasons of your infirmity, I cannot understand this statement." Then, in spite of Swearingen's efforts to keep politics out of the office, Blease begins a political attack. "I can understand why your uncle, Senator Tillman, has endeavored to injure me politically, and I presume his influence over you, being afflicted as you are, caused you to write the willful [sic] and malicious falsehood."⁴³

The 1914 election was a turning point in South Carolina politics. Not only was Blease not re-elected (and wouldn't be again until 1924), every candidate who had aligned himself with Blease was defeated. Richard Manning, a progressive, prepared to move into the governor's office. Blease was in fact so anti-progressive that when South Carolina voters elected the progressive governor, Blease resigned five days before his term ended rather than have to meet his successor.⁴⁴

1922 was a year of great turmoil in Swearingen's life. Throughout his term, Swearingen was notably apolitical and honest in his office. Swearingen prided himself on never receiving any sort of questionable income while in office. When a book salesman threatened to campaign against Swearingen, the State Superintendent's reply was direct: "neither your bribe nor your threat makes any impression on me. When I have to sell my soul for political support, I shall gladly step out."⁴⁵

This resistance to politics was not more true than in the most tragic but interesting event in Swearingen's life, that of his final campaign in 1922. After fourteen years in office, Swearingen decided to run for governor. His opponent in the governor's race was his nemesis, Cole Blease. For a variety of reasons, Swearingen would eventually withdraw from the race. Swearingen's son, John E. Swearingen, Jr., explains that Swearingen was told the Ku Klux Klan would oppose him in his bid.⁴⁶ While his son did not remember the Klan ever threatening the family or making an appearance at the family's home, two pieces of information appear to corroborate the story. First, the best man at Swearingen's wedding was congressman J.J. McSwain, who historian Walter Edgar notes spoke frequently at Klan rallies. It easily could have been McSwain who was a participant in a story recounted by Mary Swearingen in her husband's memoir. She tells the following story, adding more credence to the Klan opposition theory: "I remember the night before his withdrawal, a group of men visited him. He had always considered them friends. They urged that he withdraw from the governor's race because the 'cards have been stacked against you.'"⁴⁷

Just two pages earlier, Mary also recounts Klan opposition to her husband in terms of his refusal to play politics with his position. "He never considered the political effects of his decisions," she recalled. "When the KKK accused him of giving teacher

certificates to Catholics, Jews, and Negroes, he said frankly, 'Of course I do. What do you expect me to do? Break the law to suit prejudice?'"⁴⁸

Whatever the reason, Swearingen withdrew from the gubernatorial campaign. With this decision, he decided to mount a bid for re-election to the State Superintendent's office that same year. Blease and the State Superintendent candidate he supported, Jasper Hope, campaigned actively against Swearingen. Blease, and the candidates he supported, still got the millworkers' vote. As explained by Bryant Simon, millworker politics was a blend of race and gender: male millworkers "interpreted Blease's rhetoric and actions as a defense of their manhood against the forces of industrialization and the reform agenda of the progressives." To these millworkers, the state's political system was broken into two parties: Bleasites and Anti-Bleasites. "Casting their vote for Cole Blease," explains Simon, "textile workers pressed their claims of patriarchal privilege and equality with all white men and asserted in the strongest language available to them that the economic and socially mighty did not control everything."⁴⁹ Swearingen, clearly, was an Anti-Bleasite. The millworkers knew the Superintendent's political bent and voted accordingly. Describing the election loss to Sophie Rasor, Swearingen explained that "[t]he cotton mill vote went against me about three to one. This was the strongest element in the opposition, so far as any one class of schools or voters was concerned."⁵⁰

Contributions/Legacy

Swearingen acted based on his desires to prove his masculinity and disprove notions of disability. These actions led him to becoming one of the most visionary superintendents in South Carolina's history. No more apt description of Swearingen's legacies exists than that provided by his wife, Mary:

The layman of today, or even the students of educational progress in our state, can scarcely believe the school system of South Carolina was as inadequate as it was when Mr. Swearingen became State Superintendent of Education fifty years ago. But I must admit that it gives me a feeling of infinite pride to see how he grappled with the situation, determined to correct abuses, to extend opportunities, and to create a worthwhile public school program.⁵¹

It would be easy for a contemporary reader to maintain that Swearingen's policies did not do enough for African American education. Such an argument, however, does not take into consideration either the political nature of Swearingen's office or the historical context of South Carolina in the early twentieth century, nor does it adequately credit a man who challenged the boundaries of accepted society at the time.

In fact, Swearingen's contemporaries in the African-American community viewed his time in office with high praise. No greater testament to Swearingen's efforts to assist the African-American population can be used than that of John Burgess, a young African-American man who was on the road to earning teacher certification upon Swearingen's election loss. On September 16, 1922, he wrote:

This letter, together with others and expressions made to you and about you will in a measure express my gratitude to you for the interest you have manifested in the education of the colored people of South Carolina in general and Marion County in particular. I want you to feel that in me you have a friend

that will ever cherish your good work. It is with regret that I noted your defeat, but you have begun a great work. The man that will follow you will not have as hard a road to travel as you had for you have made the way easier. To have been a teacher in South Carolina under you for fifteen years has been a pleasure that I shall never forget.

I had looked forward to the day when I would hold a High School Certificate signed by you. Mr. Dominick told me that in the last examination I was low in two subjects. I am going to pass the next one in October so that I will have the honor of holding a certificate to teach in the high schools of South Carolina signed by the State Superintendent of South Carolina under whom the educational movement of the state was really and truly vitalized. I pray that whatever you may do after you leave your present office that God's richest blessings will be upon you and that will continue to guide you as I believe he had done in the past.⁵²

Swearingen accepted the dual educational system as the framework for education in South Carolina, nevertheless, he worked within that structure to pursue greater equality of educational opportunities for African American children. Although his accomplishments were financially rather meager during his tenure, he established a climate in which more equitable funding and the improvement of African American schools, as well as identical standards for all of the state's schools were at least a part of the discussion surrounding South Carolina's educational system. In his final *Annual Report*, Swearingen explained that he had tried to do what he could for African-American students, but reminded all that the work was just beginning: "Our white folk and black folk must work together if the State is to be health [sic], educated, intelligent, God fearing, self-supporting and self-respecting." He admitted that he had been "criticized severely" for these efforts, but concluded nonetheless that there was still much work to be done: "[t]he negroes have much to learn and much to undertake".⁵³

Lamentably, Swearingen's successors had little inclination to carry on the work he had begun. South Carolina's segregated black schools would remain appallingly underfunded for the next thirty years and the gross inequities of the state's segregated school system grew increasingly stark. While virtually all of South Carolina's public officials in the first half of the twentieth century were content to neglect the African American schools and avoid a serious appraisal of separate but equal schools, John Swearingen was not among them. Despite his blindness, Swearingen saw with greater clarity the inequality of the segregated system and endorsed some of the steps necessary in order to improve the educational opportunities of African American students. Nevertheless, his recommendations gained little traction. Three decades later, the black schools of Clarendon County were classic examples of the inequity of segregation, and *Briggs v. Elliott* was one of the five cases heard collectively as *Brown v. Board of Education* that would destroy the façade of separate but equal education.

In today's divisive political climate when populism seems to be making a comeback, it is particularly interesting to reflect upon Swearingen's tenure as a politician as well as an educator. Would that those elected to public office today—particularly those who hold positions overseeing education committees—would take a lesson from Swearingen in doing what is right and good instead of what is most politically expedient.⁵⁴ It is a question best left rhetorical to wonder what significant acts of educational legislation such as No Child Left Behind resemble had Congress more politicians cut of the same cloth as Swearingen.

Endnotes

- 1 Swearingen, M.H. *A gallant journey: Mr. Swearingen and his family*. P. 98.
- 2 For a more contemporary take on the intersection of masculinity and a lifelong disability such as Swearingen's blindness, see Charmaz, K. (May 1994). Identity dilemmas of chronically ill men. *The sociological quarterly*, 35, 2. Pp. 269-288; and Gershick, T.J. & Miller, A.S. (1997). Gender identities at the crossroads of masculinity and physical disability. In Gergen, M.M. & Davis, S.N. (Eds.) *Toward a new psychology of gender*. New York: Routledge Press.
- 3 Garraty, J.A. *The nature of biography*. Pp. 4- 6.
- 4 Janak, E. (2003). Conclusion: Swearingen's legacy in South Carolina schools. *John Eldred Swearingen and the development of the public high schools of South Carolina*. Pp. 235-255.
- 5 Dreyfuss, J.V. *John Eldred Swearingen: Superintendent of education in South Carolina 1909-1922*. P. 2.
- 6 In order, Bederman, G. *Manliness and civilization: A cultural history of gender and race in the United States 1880 – 1917*. P. 7; and Oertel, K.T. (Autumn 2002). 'The free sons of the north' versus 'the myrmidons of border-ruffianism': What makes a man in bleeding Kansas? *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains*, 25. P. 176.
- 7 Gittings, R. *The nature of biography*. Pp. 49 & 52.
- 8 Whyte, K.L. (1987). Swearingen/Vanswearingen and related families. P. 249.
- 9 Swearingen, M.H. *A gallant journey: Mr. Swearingen and his family*. Pp. 16-19.
- 10 Ibid. pp. 30-33.
- 11 Ibid. pp. 33-36.
- 12 Rotundo, E.A. (1990). Boy culture: middle class boyhood in nineteenth-century America. Pp. 15-17. This notion of boy culture as a means of teaching favored traits is contrasted with that of girl culture in Hunter, J. (2002). *How young ladies became girls: the Victorian origins of American girlhood*. New Haven: Yale University Press. P. 1.
- 13 Ibid. p. 21.
- 14 The grading scale at the college was broken into divisions; division I meant marks between 80-100% down the scale to division IV that meant marks less than 40%. Swearingen never was marked out of division I. Within the division, a single star meant a mark between 90-95%; double stars signified 95-100%.
- 15 Swearingen, John E. Jr. (30 July 2002). Unpublished interview, Saratoga, Wyoming. Tape 1 Side 1.
- 16 Rotundo, E.A. (1990). Boy culture: middle class boyhood in nineteenth-century America. P. 22.
- 17 Swearingen, M.H. *A gallant journey: Mr. Swearingen and his family*. Pp. 43-44.
- 18 For the full correspondence regarding his application to Columbia, see Swearingen, John E. papers, Box 2 Folders #56-57.
- 19 For the full correspondence regarding his interest in the campaign, see Swearingen, John E. papers, Box 2 Folder #58.
- 20 Friend, C.T. & Glover, L. P. viii.
- 21 Swearingen, M.H. *A gallant journey*. P. 100.
- 22 Ibid. P. 102.
- 23 John E. Swearingen: Candidate for State Superintendent of Education. Swearingen, John E. papers, Box 2 Folder #58.
- 24 Beneke, T. (1997). *Proving manhood: reflections on men and sexism*. P. 42.

- 25 For a good overview of social expectations of the blind during this period, see Klages, M. (1999). *Woeful afflictions*. Pp. 28-55. For information on Swearingen's election, see Swearingen, M.H. *A gallant journey: Mr. Swearingen and his family*. Pp. 101-103.
- 26 Swearingen, John E. Jr. (30 July 2002). Unpublished interview, Saratoga, Wyoming. Tape 1 Side 1.
- 27 Beneke, T. (1997). *Proving manhood: reflections on men and sexism*. P.40.
- 28 Swearingen, M.H. *A gallant journey*. Pp. 116-17.
- 29 For Swearingen's opinion on education as a force for change, see Swearingen, J.E. to Editor. (n.d.). Swearingen, John E. papers, Box 2 Folder #58. For Swearingen's battles with forces such as the GEB, see Janak, E. (2003). *John E. Swearingen*. Ch. 3-5.
- 30 Biebel, C.D. (1976). Private foundations and public policy: The case of secondary education during the Great Depression. *History of Education Quarterly*, 16, 1. Pp. 3-4. For a more detailed description of the GEB's efforts in vocational-only funding, see also Anderson, E. & Moss, A.A. (1999). Chapter 4: The general education board's choices. *Dangerous donations: Northern philanthropy and southern black education, 1902 – 1930*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press. Pp. 85 – 107.
- 31 Biebel, C.D. Private foundations and public policy. Pp. 22-23.
- 32 Anderson, J.D. Northern foundations and the shaping of Southern Black rural education 1902-1935. P. 383.
- 33 Swearingen, J.E. to Buttrick, W. (29 January 1921). *General Education Board Archives*. (1993). Series 1: Appropriations; Subseries 1; The Early Southern Program. [Supervisor of Rural Schools—White, 1912-1927]. New York: Rockefeller University.
- 34 Swearingen, J.E. to Flexner, A. (11 April 1921). *General Education Board Archives*. (1993). Series 1: Appropriations; Subseries 1; The Early Southern Program. [State Agent for Secondary Education 1919-1926]. New York: Rockefeller University.
- 35 Swearingen, J.E. to Flexner, A. (9 June 1921). *General Education Board Archives*. (1993). Series 1: Appropriations; Subseries 1; The Early Southern Program. [Supervisor of Rural Schools—Negro, 1917-1952]. New York: Rockefeller University.
- 36 Davis, W. to Flexner, A. (25 August 1919). *General Education Board Archives*. (1993). Series 1: Appropriations; Subseries 1; The Early Southern Program. [Supervisor of Rural Schools—Negro, 1917-1952]. New York: Rockefeller University. Ibid. P. 34.
- 37 Edgar, W.B. (1998). *South Carolina: A history*. Pp. 473-74.
- 38 For evidence of Blease's opinion of Swearingen, see Blease, Coleman S. to John E. Swearingen. Papers of Gov. Coleman L. Blease, Box #13, Letters, State Officials. Governor's Papers Collection, South Carolina Repository of History and Archives.
- 39 For more on Southern manhood during this period, see Friend, C.T. (2006). *Southern masculinity: Perspectives on manhood in the South since Reconstruction*.
- 40 John E. Swearingen to Alex Rowland, Private Secretary to the Governor. Papers of Gov. Coleman L. Blease, Box #13, Letters, State Officials. (27 December 1911). Governor's Papers Collection, South Carolina Repository of History and Archives.
- 41 A.T. Smythe to B.R. Tillman. (17 March 1914). Tillman, Benjamin Ryan. Incoming correspondence. Manuscripts—Political Collections. Clemson, SC, Special Collections: Robert Muldrow Cooper Library.
- 42 J.E. Swearingen to C. Blease. (27 January 1914) Coleman Livingston Blease (1911-1915). Miscellaneous papers. Letters to State Officials. Box #14. Governor's Papers.

- Columbia, SC, South Carolina Repository of History and Archives.
- 43 Blease, C. to Swearingen, J.E. (29 January 1914). Coleman Livingston Blease (1911-1915). Miscellaneous papers. Letters to State Officials. Box # 14. Governor's Papers. Columbia, SC, South Carolina Repository of History and Archives.
- 44 Edgar, W. *South Carolina: A history*. P. 664.
- 45 Swearingen, M.H. *A gallant journey*. P. 113.
- 46 Swearingen, John E. Jr. (30 July 2002). Unpublished interview, Saratoga, Wyoming.
- 47 Swearingen, M.H. *A gallant journey*. P. 114.
- 48 Ibid. P. 112.
- 49 Simon, B. *A fabric of defeat*. P. 34.
- 50 Swearingen, J.E. to Rasor, S. (19 September 1922). John E. Swearingen Papers, Box 3, Folder 90.
- 51 Swearingen, M.H. *A gallant journey*. P. 107.
- 52 John E. Swearingen Papers, box 3, folder 88.
- 53 *Fifty-fourth annual report*, P. 19.
- 54 Janak, E. (2003). Conclusion: Swearingen's legacy in South Carolina schools. *John Eldred Swearingen and the development of the public high schools of South Carolina*. Pp. 235-255.

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