Women, Race, and Progressive Social Reform in Charlotte and Greensboro, 1890-1920

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Southern Women, Race, and Progressive Reform

At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, groups of concerned American citizens began advocating for various types of social, cultural, political, and business reform. Progressive groups and politicians got many important laws passed, such as the Pure Food and Drug Act, the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Amendments, and the Sherman Antitrust Act. However, what's not as clear or as well-discussed is how effective these reform movements were in the still-industrializing South. We can't judge Southern reform efforts by the standards used for Northern reform, since that finds the region wanting and (of course) trying to cover up its racism. This may be true, but it's not the only thing people should know or assume they know about Southern Progressivism.

Southern white women exploited the connotations of being a “lady” in order to get support for Progressive laws. Temperance tracts, for example, focused on the damage alcohol did to families, and according to one book, the Salisbury WCTU actually stationed women and children outside polling places on election day 1913 to beg voters to approve a city prohibition law.

My thesis focuses on Charlotte women and how their reform efforts (and the racial tensions involved) compared with women-led reform efforts in Pittsburgh. “Reform efforts” here incorporates state branches of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, the Charlotte Woman’s Club, and other reform organizations. In particular, I will investigate how racial differences affected Northern Progressivism differently from Southern Progressivism. Racism is hard to get rid of, and doubtless Northern reformers had reasons to not want African-Americans to benefit from the Progressive era.
I plan to use contemporary newspaper articles (especially the *Charlotte News* and *Charlotte Observer*) and the Charlotte Woman's Club Papers available in Special Collections as my main primary sources about Charlotte women and reform. I have one good secondary source about the WCTU—Alison Parker's *Purifying America*—but that covers their pro-censorship activism, not necessarily their more famous temperance work. Since this is a comparative essay, I will use similar resources from both cities to show how reform-minded women affected a patriarchal society, how racial tensions undermined those women's effectiveness, and how African-American women reformers acted both to protect their gender and to elevate their race.

I believe that understanding the Progressive Era (and by extension the Gilded Age that it reacted to) is critical to understanding the social, political, and economic climate we live in today.