

Senate Statistics

Secretaries of the Senate

William Ruffin Cox (1893-1900)



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On April 9, 1865, as General Robert E. Lee prepared to surrender his armies to General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Courthouse, a future Secretary of the Senate earned a unique distinction in American history. Within just a mile of the Lee-Grant meeting place, the future Secretary launched the Civil War's final military assault. With encircling Union forces outnumbering his brigade by a ratio of five-to-one, Confederate General [William Ruffin Cox](#) gave the order for one last — and entirely symbolic — artillery barrage.

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In the decades immediately following the Civil War, the Democratic party, which had long been associated with the states of the former Confederacy, struggled to restore its standing as a national political organization. Following the 1892 elections, many Democrats believed they had finally succeeded. In that contest, they had captured the presidency for the first time since the war and had added control of the Senate to that of the House of Representatives. This Democratic resurgence seemed particularly evident in the Senate's 1893 selection of its Secretary. A decade earlier, the majority Republicans had elected a former Union army general to that post. In 1893, the Democratic majority — almost as if to make a point of their new status — replaced that Union officer with a former Confederate army general.

William Ruffin Cox was born in Halifax County, North Carolina, on March 11, 1831. After the death of his father, Cox moved with his mother to Nashville, Tennessee. He graduated from Franklin College in 1851, and the Lebanon College Law School in 1853, and practiced law in Nashville for the next five years. He returned to North Carolina in 1857 to marry and settle on an Edgecombe County plantation owned by his wife's family. Two years later, he established a law office in Raleigh.

In the months leading to the Civil War, Cox actively encouraged moves to separate the states of the Old South from the Union. He studied military tactics and, at his own expense, equipped a light artillery battery. When war came, he organized an infantry company and won appointment as a major in the Second North Carolina Infantry Regiment. For most of the ensuing conflict, Cox campaigned with the Army of Northern Virginia. He suffered eleven wounds, including severe injuries at the July 1862 Battle of Malvern Hill and the May 1863 Chancellorsville Campaign. On the latter occasion, after Cox lost three-quarters of his regiment in just fifteen minutes of fighting, his brigade commander General Stephen Dodson Ramseur colorfully described him as "the Chivalrous Cox, the accomplished gentleman, the splendid soldier, who fought in spite of five bleeding wounds, till he sank exhausted." (Although Ramseur, a fellow North Carolinian, later died in battle, Cox lived to command Ramseur's brigade and write his biography.) Soon after being promoted to brigadier general in June 1864, Cox accompanied General Jubal Early on a raid designed to capture Washington. They reached Silver Spring, Maryland — the closest threat to the capital of any rebel unit — before withdrawing in the face of superior forces. Cox ended his military career with the artillery assault at Appomattox.

After the war, William Cox returned home to Raleigh, resumed his law practice, and joined former secessionists in organizing a political faction hostile to the "Radical Republicans" who temporarily controlled political power in that city and throughout the South. In 1868, by a narrow margin, he won the post of solicitor for the Raleigh district. He held that office until 1874, when he gained the chairmanship of the state Democratic committee. As the state's highest-ranking Democrat, he led a successful campaign to restore Democratic rule to North Carolina. When Democrats regained control of state offices two years later, Cox became a district judge.

In 1880, Cox won a seat in the United States House of Representatives from North Carolina's Fourth District, and was reelected in 1882 and 1884. In 1885, he chaired the House Committee on Civil Service Reform. An outspoken civil service reformer, Cox characterized the system under which workers were hired according to their merit as representing "the very essence and genius" of democracy. While this was a noble reformist sentiment, it was not one that his district's party leaders shared, and they denied him renomination in 1886. President Grover Cleveland rewarded his fallen ally's support with the offer of a position in the Interior Department's General Land Office. Although Cox declined the offer, he came to appreciate Cleveland's good will six years later when Senate Democrats sought a loyal and experienced candidate for the post of Senate Secretary.

In April 1893, during a brief Senate special session called to confirm cabinet nominees in Grover Cleveland's second administration, the new Democratic majority selected Cox as Secretary. Republican senators, not yet reconciled to their new minority status, immediately objected to a plan that would allow Cox, along with the Democratic candidates for Sergeant at Arms and Chaplain, to take office at once. The Republicans contended that it was not the practice of the Senate to change its officers during these short special sessions.

Republican Senator [Charles Manderson](#), a warm ally of incumbent Republican Secretary Anson McCook, lamented the Senate's departure from its pre-Civil War practice, when "a political change of the Senate did not cause a change of its executive officers." He noted that during the Senate's first seventy-two years, only four individuals had served as Secretary — "that important office so essential to the good conduct and well-being of this body." He acknowledged that his own party had changed that pattern in 1861 by replacing all the Senate's elected officers. "But a new order of things has come and we on this side of the chamber recognize it fully and bow to the inevitable." Manderson continued, "We acknowledge not only the right but to a certain extent we recognize the political duty of a majority of this body to place in the position of the Secretary of the Senate, Sergeant at Arms, and perhaps even of the gentleman who invokes the Divine blessing here in the morning, those who are in political accord with the majority of the chamber." The Senate then agreed that the new officers would not begin their terms until the start of the upcoming regular session.

When the Senate convened for that session on August 8, 1893, Cox took his oath of office. Described as a man of "striking physical appearance, cultured and courtly," he carried out his Senate responsibilities "with acceptance and distinction." During his nearly seven years on the job, most of which coincided with a severe economic depression, Cox oversaw several major changes in the Senate's legislative operations. These innovations included the December 1893 decision for the Senate and House to end the practice of engrossing all bills by hand. From that time, all Senate-passed bills were to be produced in printed rather than handwritten format.

Secretary Cox also helped establish separate payrolls to distinguish specialized staff from patronage employees. This move reflected the growing concern of committee chairmen and key floor staff that political considerations might cause the unwarranted dismissal of otherwise competent, loyal, and effective employees. Cox also supervised hiring professional staff for party caucuses.

When the Republicans regained the Senate majority in 1895, party leaders agreed to keep Cox in office. This decision owed much to his genial nature, but even more to the political realities of a Republican caucus sharply divided on larger policy issues. The Sergeant at Arms and Chaplain also retained their posts.

On January 31, 1900, after another five years, the nearly seventy-year-old Cox retired as Secretary and returned to his Edgecombe County plantation. He lived for nearly twenty more years, during which time he served as president of his state's agricultural society and established the *North Carolina Journal of Education*. Just prior to his death on December 26, 1919, he earned a final Civil War-related distinction as one of the last-surviving general officers of the Confederate army.