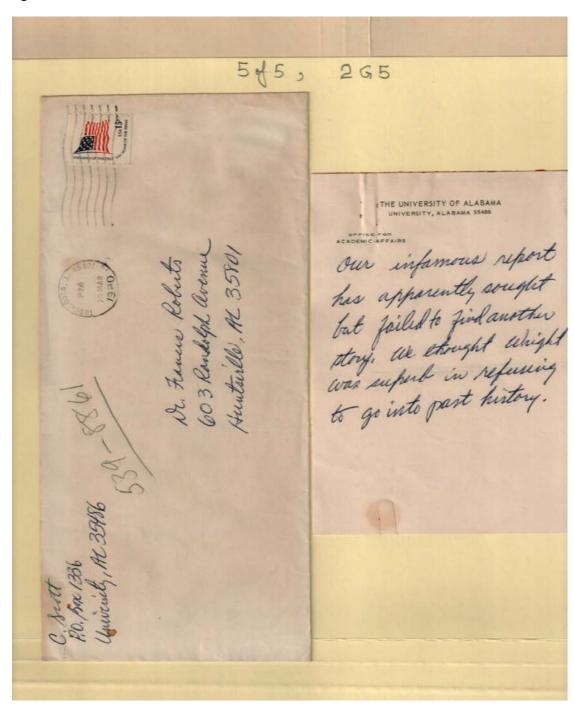
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Scott, C.

Wright, John, Dr.

Places:

Huntsville, AL

University, AL

Types:

address

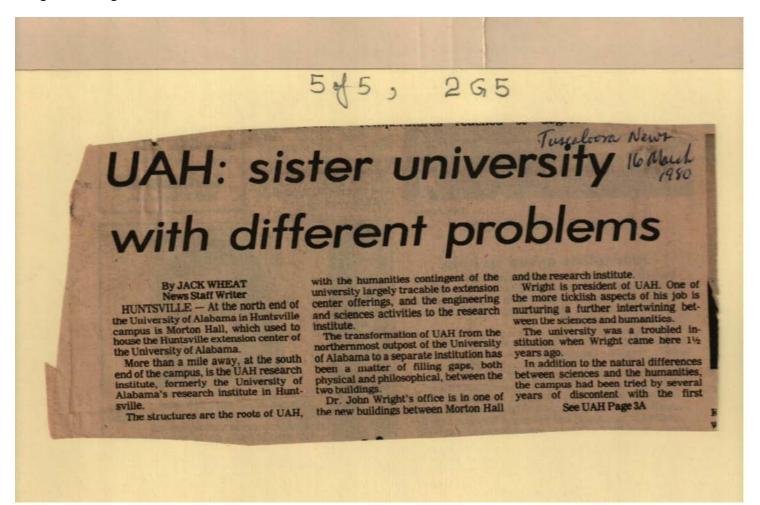
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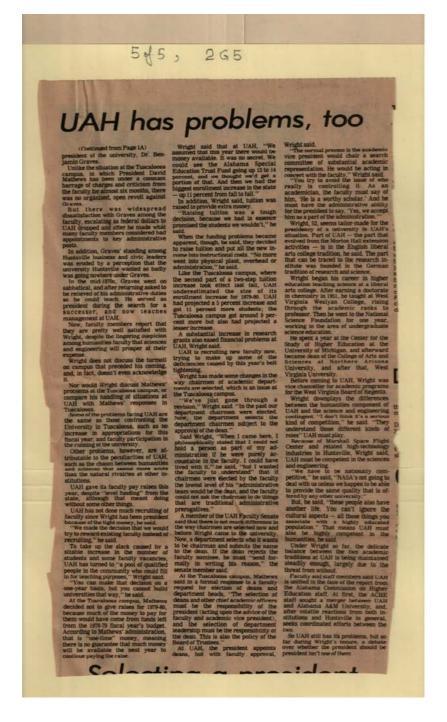
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Tuscaloosa, AL

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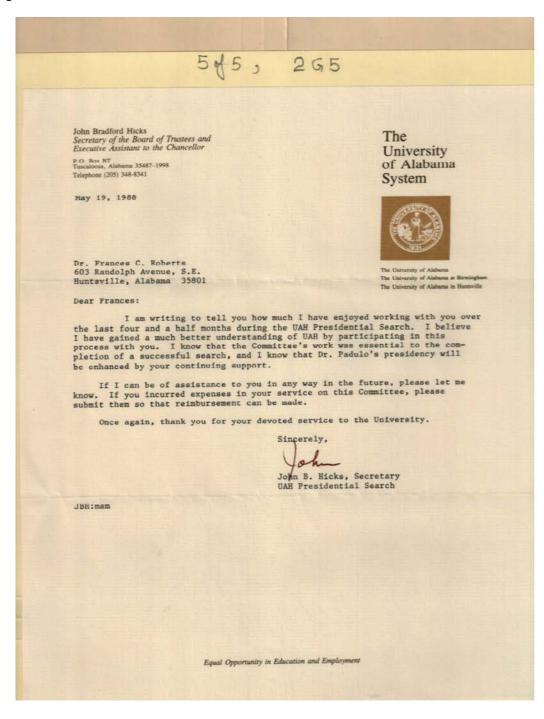
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Roberts, Frances C., Dr.

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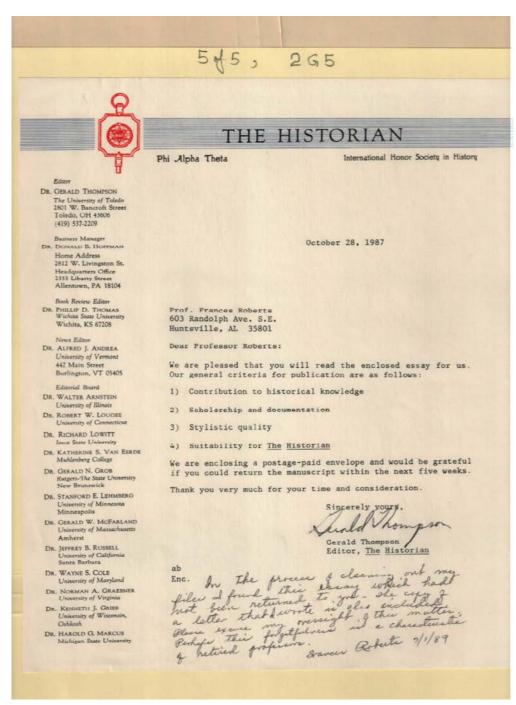
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Roberts, Frances Roberts, Frances, Dr. Thompson, Gerald

Places:

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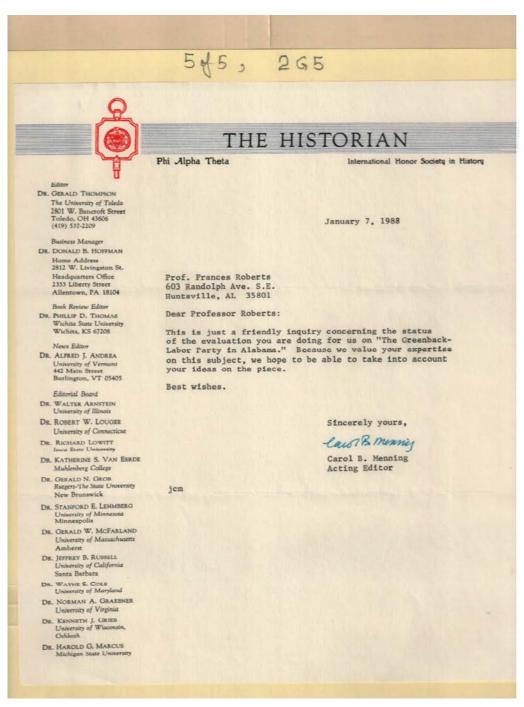
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Manning, Carol B.

Roberts, Frances

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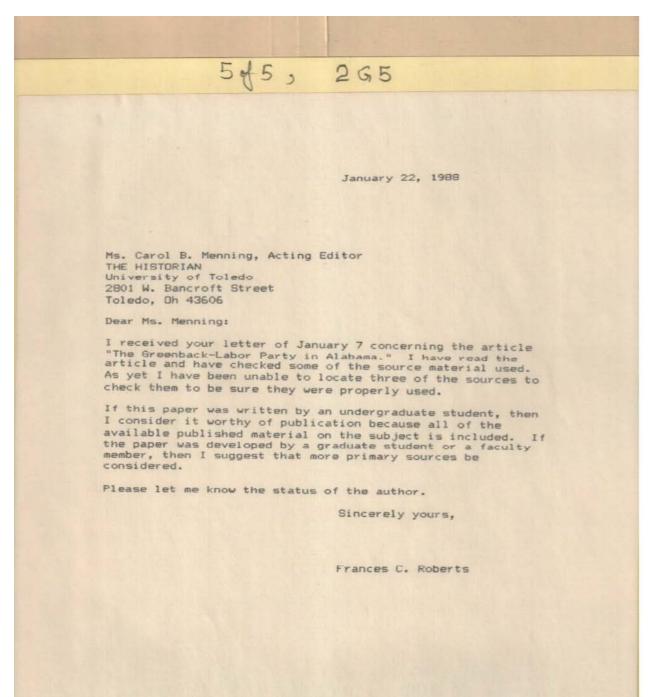
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Manning, Carol B. Roberts, Frances C.

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THE GREENBACK-LABOR PARTY IN ALABAMA

It was officially known as the "Independent-Greenback-Labor Party" of Alabama, although Bourbon Democrats gleefully labeled it the "Independent-Greenback-Labor-Socialist-Radical-Sorehead Party." Later, the epithet was shortened to simply the "hyphenated crowd." Those hyphens eventually destroyed the Greenback movement before it reached maturity, but the Greenback-Labor Party in Alabama functioned as the spokesman for the poor yeomen farmers and industrial workers in north Alabama, who were opposed to the detrimental effects of Bourbon economic policies.

The economic status of Southerners plummeted in the post-war years and poverty became a way of life in much of Dixie. Agricultural prices declined steadily throughout the Reconstruction period, as did the values of land, farm appurtenances and impliments, and livestock. Small farmers seeking credit found themselves caught in a vice. Since Alabama had few banks and virtually no capital, credit was ordinarily obtained by mortgaging land and personal property. Under the crop lien system, local merchants supplied farmers with seed and tools at the beginning of planting season and were paid off with a percentage of the harvest, taken from the top. Merchants

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moved into north Alabama as creditors after an 1871 law went into effect which gave the landowning planters the right to be paid first from the produce of tenants. That law divided those working the land by both racial caste and land-owning class. It thus became suddenly profitable for merchants to loan money to the yeomanry of north Alabama. 6

Always a precarious business at best, farmers were never assured of breaking even. Inadequate roads inhibited transport of agricultural produce; fluctuations in the market often proved as disasterous to the farmer as crop failures. When the inevitable occurred, farmers blamed the creditors for their fiscal wees—understandibly, since it was the merchant/creditor who foreclosed on farms. In addition, farmers grew increasingly critical of Bourbon Democrats, on whose political support the merchants depended. 7

Concurrent with the decline in the status of farmers was the development of the coal and iron industries in that north-central area of Alabama that would become Birmingham. In the 1870s, small amounts of northern capital trickled into that mineral-rich region, inspiring local investors to develop the mineral wealth. As the industry grew and coal mines opened, men from the farms began to seek employment. Despite the availability of such workers, mine operators around warrior (north of Birmingham) recruited workers from Pennsylvania in an attempt to flood the labor market. They paid one dollar per ton to the miners, but required 2150 pounds for a ton (the so-called

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"long ton"). Coal seams averaged only about two and a half feet thick. Furthermore, in order to mine the coal, miners had to take up six to twelve inches of fire clay for a road, besides laying down track, all at their own expense. The operators required the miners to draw all, or at least most, of their pay in purchases from the company store. If they did not do this, they were "drawn out." "Drawn out" was a term miners used for the practice of mine owners in laying them off until any money in excess of their store account was spent. Not only were miners forced to patronize the company store, they were discharged for complaining about high prices (which ran about thirty-five per cent above the prices in stores in Warrior).

A few miners desired a labor organization; however, most retained their rural Jacksonian independentism. Two attempts to organize failed in 1876. A few meetings were held, resulting in discord and bad feelings. As one disgruntled miner observed, "those that ran fastest got to the bosses first." In spite of setbacks, by the autumn of 1877 organizers succeeded in establishing several clubs in and around Birmingham. They worked through the auspices of the National Labor Tribune, the national Greenback paper published in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. By the following summer, nine clubs were operating in Jefferson County, with six others in the formation process. Other clubs functioned in the mines south of Birmingham at Helena, in Shelby County. In an effort to broaden their political base, miners invited local farmers to join their clubs. The "boss" club of Alabama

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was at Jefferson Mines, just outside of Warrior, Alabama. that club was the most active in the state, and took upon itself the duties of organizing other clubs and conventions. 14

The first greenback clubs in Alabama were white, but before long clubs of black miners were organized. The most effective and charismatic of the Greenbackers in Alabama was produced by one of these black clubs. Willis Johnson Thomas, a twenty-nine year old miner, was elected president of the black Jefferson Mines Club. He spoke with a revivalistic fervor and conducted his Greenback rallies in the primitive and passionate tradition of the evangelistic camp meeting. A Thomas meeting included hymns and prayers, and those who heard the emotive W. J. Thomas preach had no doubt that Jesus Christ Himself was a Greenbacker. Financed by the white club at Jefferson Mines, Thomas traveled throughout Jefferson County as spokesman and organizer. His popularity cut across racial lines and he was even invited to address the white clubs -- an unprecedented event in perenially race-conscious Alabama. As a result of Thomas's outstanding work, interracial meetings were held. 15

Once the clubs were organized, they began to operate as collective bargaining agents for the workers. There had been earlier strikes but the companies broke them by firing two or three men. the rest would either stay loyal to the cause and wait to be fired, or quit, or go back to work. After the clubs were more organized, strikes proved more effective. The clubs appointed biracial committees, usually comprised of two whites

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and two blacks, to negotiate with mine owners and superintendents. All decisions to strike or settle were based on a vote of the club members. Times were economically bad, and workers could easily be replaced; thus the clubs were not totally effective. They did, however, force companies to give at least lip service to the demands and problems of workers. 16

The biggest problem facing workers was the competition of convict labor. The convict lease system had spread across the South during the post-war years. In Alabama, prisoners were leased from both the state penitentiary and the county jails to mine operators. They worked both summer and winter, without shoes, and ankle deep in water. The task system was used, with convicts working in units of three. A unit was placed in a small room in the mines, simultaneously swinging their picks in the crowded space. They were forced to mine a set amount of coal per day, with failure to reach the quota resulting in the whole unit being flogged. 17 Convicts were first introduced by the Eureka Mining Company at Helena, Alabama, in June 1878 in an effort to break a strike. All miners on strike were simply fired and ordered to leave the company's grounds, while prisoners were herded in to take their places. By the end of the year, there were eighty-nine convicts working the mines in Helena, with many others leased to mines in Jefferson County. 18

Greenback organizers used the rising threat of convict labor to move the clubs to political action. The first political action in Alabama was a county convention held at the court

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house in Birmingham on June 29, 1878, to nominate candidates for the State House of Representatives. Another convention was held the following week in Warrior to nominate State Senators. ¹⁹ Similar conventions in several other counties were held, with Greenback candidates being nominated for the legislature in Lawrence, Walker, Choctaw, and Mobile Counties. ²⁰ Of those, two were elected in the legislative races held in August. ²¹ John B. Shields of Walker County was originally reported elected. Then the county officials disagreed on the question of counting the votes from three precincts supposedly transferred from Walker to Blount County when Cullman County was formed. The Secretary of state ignored the votes from the disputed precincts and gave the certificate of election to the Democratic nominee. ²²

In light of what they perceived as voting fraud,
Greenback leaders immediately moved to combat the dishonesty by
improving their own party machinery. The Greenback party was
led, for the most part, by former Democrats who knew all about
the machinery of fraud as practiced by their former party. 23 A
state-wide convention was quickly called to be held in
Birmingham for early September 1878. J. N. Carpenter of
Birmingham was chosen as president and A. H. Brittin, a
Huntsville attorney, a Huntsville editor, as secretary. The
convention adopted a platform that placed responsibility for the
weak economy squarely on the two major political parties and
offered themselves, under the name "National Greenback Labor
Party of Alabama," as an alternative. A program was proposed

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Greenback-Labor Party in Alabama Shields, John B.

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which included the increased circulation of paper money, coinage of silver, an end to the issuance of bonds, repeal of the Resumption Act, and equal taxation on all property. Congress was called on to provide full employment and to stimulate the economy. Public land was to be "donated" only to actual settlers, with no sales or grants to be made to speculators or railroads. Useless political offices were to be abolished. The convention called for a ten-hour work day, an end to convict lease and cessation of immigration. Finally, the Greenbackers proclaimed that wealth was the property of the laborer who produced it, and not "idlers" who became rich from the sweat of others. That statement was tempered by a denial that the Greenback party was either communist or agrarian. 24

Greenback candidates were nominated for Congress in four districts for the elections to be held in November. The Greenback party enjoyed a significant success in the Eighth Congressional District, when it succeeded in electing William Manning Lowe, a colorful Huntsville native. Termed by one historian as one of the most picturesque figures ever to participate in Alabama politics, Lowe was a Democrat until the election of 1876, and even then indignantly denied the charge of apostasy. Lowe became dissatisfied when he failed to win the regular nomination at the Democratic convention; thus he ran on the Greenback ticket because of a personal grievance against the Democratic party machinery and not because of the

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> Greenback-Labor Party in Alabama

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currency issue. Only later did he adopt the Greenback program of currency expansion. 28

Lowe emerged from the elections as the leader of the Greenback party in Alabama. The night after the election, jubilant Greenbackers gathered at the Madison County courthouse, formed a torchlight parade that was led by a brass band, and marched to Lowe's home. Lowe addressed the crowd from the colonade of his house. For the first time, he publically asserted his belief in the financial platform of the Greenback party. 29 Later in the month, Lowe privately wrote that he ran "as an independent Greenbacker on financial matters, and as an administration <Hayes> man in sentimental politics.*30 The charismatic Lowe attracted various reform groups to the Greenback party. As these groups became active in establishing policy, the party was absorbed by the much larger Independent Movement. 31 The Independent Movement was formed as a result of a series of anti-Bourbon political revolts that occurred in the South in the late 1870s and early 1880s. The movement developed in response to the control of state governments by Bourbon Democrats. Disciples of the movement were usually moderate on race and strong on such issues as electoral and social reform. Currency expansion was only one of many issues for most Independents, and as they moved in, the party of 1878 lost its identity.

Many Southern Democrats could see no reason for the Greenback movement in the South since many of its financial

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programs were the same programs espoused by Southern Democrats. The alignment of the Independents with the Greenbackers brought in other issues, and opened the party to other attacks. 32 Thus the Democrats equated the Greenbackers with the Independents as a threat to their party and the political unity of the white race. Labeling the Greenback party as a "nigger party," Democratic editors wrote, "He that is not for us is against us. *33 The Democratic press attacked the Greenbackers as "quasi-radical" and tainted with "communism and socialism." It claimed that "the Greenback party and the Communists are so closely allied in principle" that it was impossible to distinguish between them. 34 In some cases, miners who joined Greenback clubs were laid off or fired, and Greenback farmers found credit hard to obtain. 35 At the same time, the Democrats adopted a policy of "out-Greenbacking the Greenbackers," and claimed that their candidates were as much for "soft money and plenty of it as the Greenbackers. 36 By 1880, Democrats were urging white Alabamians to compromise on their differences in order to consolidate and produce a Democratic victory. 37

The Democrats sought to enforce this policy through other means. In early 1879 the state legislature, controlled by the Democrats, passed a law that required a ballot to be on white paper which bore no markings, figures, characters or embellishments (or even rulings). The names of the candidates to be voted for were to be printed or written, together with the offices for which they were running. These ballots were to be

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folded by the voters and handed to election officials who would place them in the ballot boxes without being numbered. 38 In effect, that placed a literacy test upon voters in the lower economic classes, i.e., those most apt to vote for Greenbackers. If the literacy test was not successful, Democrats could easily count their opponents out through the proven but illegal means developed in the Reconstruction period.

Greenbackers saw the intensified attacks from Democrats as a major threat to the entire Greenback movement in Alabama. In April 1880, the Greenback State Executive Committee adopted a new organizational format which transformed the local Greenback clubs into political organizations. They held meetings in each congressional district and designated representatives to attend the National Greenback convention in Chicago in June, 1880. J. N. Carpenter, the state Greenback president, issued a call for a state convention in Montgomery for June 24. He urged all Greenback clubs, farmers' organizations and workingmens' groups to send delegates. He also invited those who opposed the "ring rule" of the Democrats to organize and send delegates. 39

When the convention met, Carpenter was again elected president. After considerable discussion as to the question of what to name the new party, delegates chose the title "Independent-Greenback-Labor Party," to embrace the political spectrum of the movement. The convention adopted a platform favoring a better public school system and tax reform. Democrats were denounced for changing the election law "so as to open the

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door to fraud and perjury, and closeing the door to detention and punishment; for allowing the convict lease system to exist; for passing "local and special legislation" replacing the popular will with appointive power; and for attempting to restrict suffrage. At that point the Greenback-Labor party in Alabama shifted its primary concern from financial to social and economic reform.

A full ticket for state executive offices was named, headed by Rev. J. M. Pickens, a Baptist preacher from Lawrence County. No nominations were made for for the state supreme court, probably due to the absence of lawyers within the ranks of the Greenbackers. Nearly all the nominees were from north Alabama. Almost as soon as the ticket was announced, the Democratic press delightedly reported the declinations of several of the nominees. 41 The Democratic press had even more fun when, on July 12, 1880, the chariman of the Republican State Executive Committee, George Turner, issed an address that endorsed the Greenback state ticket and urged all Republicans to aid their "allies." The Democrats used that endorsement as proof that their earlier charges of radicalism were true and that the Greenbackers' party was indeed a major threat to the solidarity of the white man's party. The voters were told they faced the old choice again -- the choice between Democracy and white supremacy or the Republicans and black domination. 42

The tactic used by the Democrats proved successful and the Democratic gubernatorial incumbent, Rufus W. Cobb, was

p. 11 Names:

Cobb, Rufus W.

Greenback-Labor Party in Alabama Pickens, J. M. Turner, George

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reelected easily, with a better than three-to-one majority. 43
Besides being hurt by white voters who identified them with
Republicanism, the Greenbackers failed to reap the benefit of
the endorsement of the party of Lincoln. Blacks of central
Alabama, who normally voted Republican, failed to understand the
strategy behind the endorsement and did not vote. There was no
Greenback ticket in many black belt counties. 44 Greenbackers
vigorously charged the Democrats with counting out Greenback
votes by fraudulant and corrupt means. Those accusations were
later substantiated by Congress in 1882 when it decided a
contested election case in favor of Congressman Lowe instead of
Joseph Wheeler. 45

returned to Alabama to take control of the state convention, which met in Birmingham on July 5, 1882. A full state ticket was nominated, with James Lawrence Sheffield of Marshall County as its gubernatorial nominee. Pive of the six candidates on the ticket were from north Alabama. They adopted a platform that steered clear of any statement on national financial issues; instead, it advocated reform of the state's election laws, reform of the public school system, and abolition of the state's convict lease system. 47

As expected by most, the Democrats won the state offices easily. Greenbackers claimed a moral victory, noting an increase in their percentage of the vote to nearly a third. 48 The new confidence was short-lived. Before the congressional

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> Greenback-Labor Party in Alabama

Lowe, William Manning Wheeler, Joseph

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elections were held in November, the leader of the Greenback party in Alabama, Lowe, died. After his death, many of his followers returned to the Democratic party. They had been willing to vote for Lowe, the former Democrat and Confederate officer. In his absence, they were not willing to stay in a racially integrated political party. 49

For all pracitical purposes, the Greenback Labor party of Alabama was dead. Its origins in the small, localized Greenback clubs had represented the interest of coal miners and yeomen farmers who were on the brink of slipping into tenancy. The early state organization that embraced the platform of the national organization had its ideological purity tempered by the role it played in the Independent Movement. Not only was party ideology compromised, but the Greenback alliance with Republicans left it open to charges of radicalism. Finally, the Alabama Greenbackers allowed the movement to focus on a single individual, limiting the vitality of the party to a lifespan of one man. When William Manning Lowe died, the Greenback-Labor party died. Despite the party's problems, it did serve as a political outlet for the lower echelons of Alabama's economic society, and as an educational institution and testing ground for the next rebellion of the plain folk, the Populist Movement.

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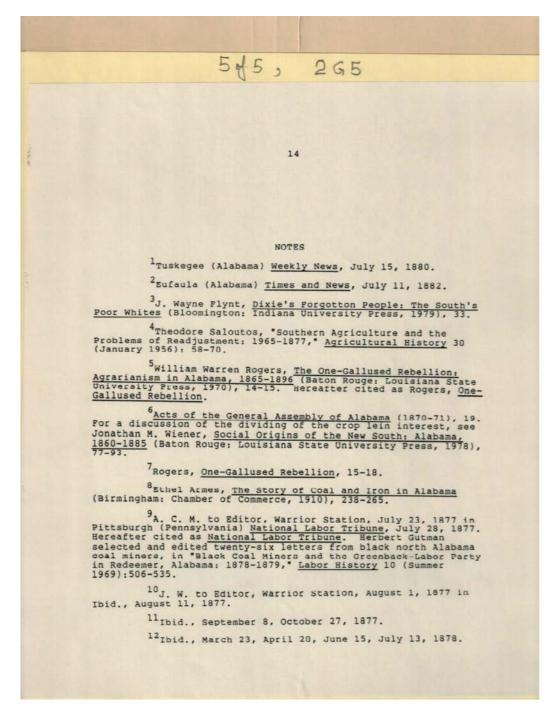
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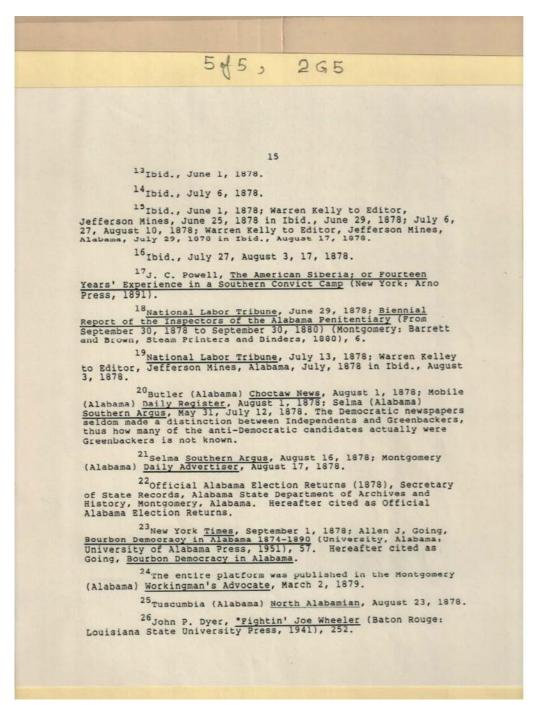
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545, 265 27 Tuscumbia North Alabamian, May 11, 1876. 28 Prancis Roberts, "William Manning Lowe and the Greenback Party in Alabama," Alabama Review 5 (April 1952): 116-117. Hereafter cited as Roberts, "William Manning Lowe." ²⁹Huntsville (Alabama) <u>Democrat</u>, November 13, 1878. 30 William M. Lowe to R. M. Reynolds, November 22, 1878, Rutherford B. Hayes Papers, quoted in C. Vann Woodward, The Origins of the New South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 78. Hereafter cited as Woodward, Origins of the New South. 31 Roberts, "William Manning Lowe," 109. 32 Woodward, Origins of the New South, 83; Going, Bourbon Democracy in Alabama, 56-57; Irwin Unger, The Greenback Era: A Social and Political History of American Finance, 1865-1879 (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1964), 353-385. 33 Por example, see Selma Southern Argus, March 22, 1878; Birmingham (Alabama) Iron Age, July 10, 1878; Carrollton West Alabamian, July 17, 1878. 34_{Tuscaloosa} (Alabama) <u>Gazette</u>; Montgomery <u>Daily</u> <u>Advertiser</u>, July 11, 1878. 35 National Labor Tribune, June 29, July 27, 1878. 36_{New York Times}, October 8, November 3, 1878; Birmingham Iron Age, September 4, 1878; Woodward, Origins of the New South, 83. 37 Huntsville Democrat, March 10, June 24, 1879. 38 Huntsville Advocate, February 5, 1879; Huntsville Democrat, February 5, 12, 1879. 39 Huntsville Advocate, April 14, May 10, 26, June 23, 1880. 40 Birmingham (Alabama) Observer, July 1, 1880; Mobile Daily Register, June 27, 1880; Montgomery Daily Advertiser, June 25, 27, 1880; Opelika (Alabama) Times, July 2, 1880; Tuskegee Weekly News, July 15, 1880. Albirmingham Weekly Independent, June 26, 1880; Mobile Daily Register, June 27, 1880; Montgomery Daily Advertiser, June 25, July 4, 8, 1880; New York Times, July 2, 1880; Opelika Times, July 2, 9, 1880.

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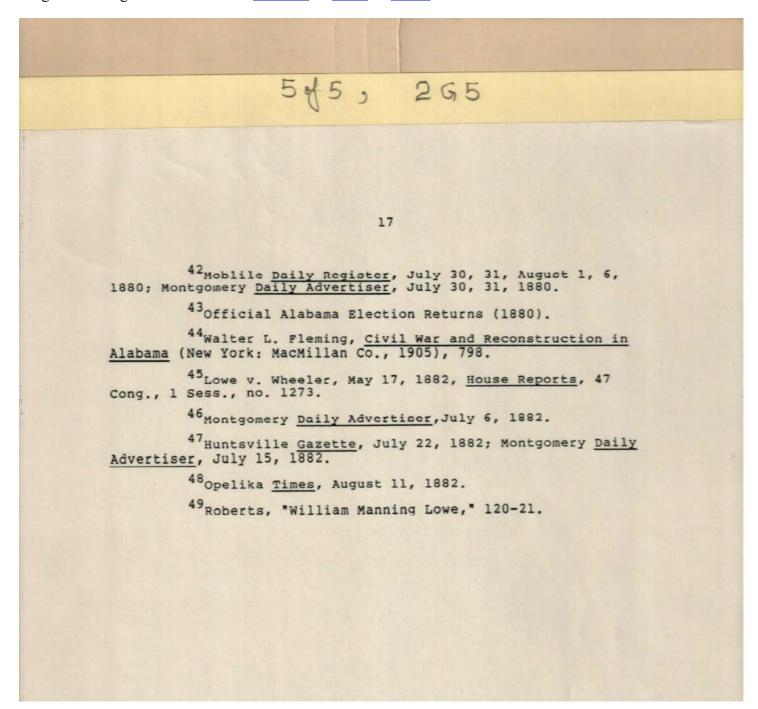
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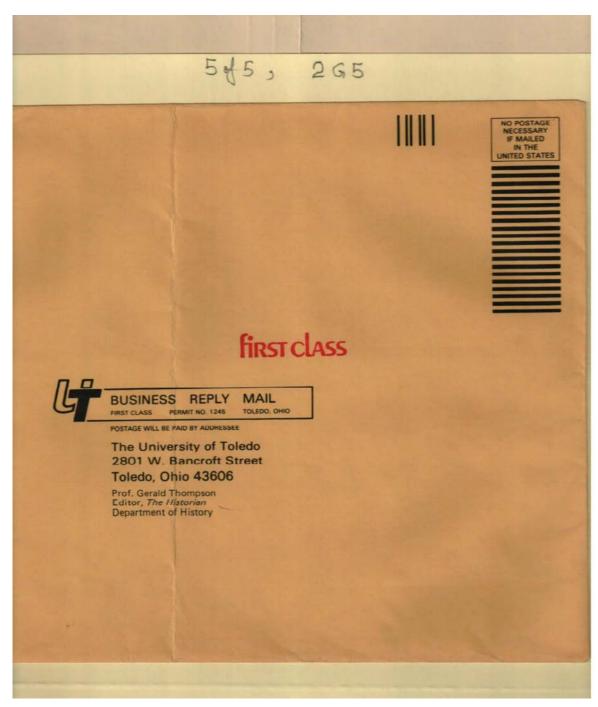
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Thompson, Gerald, Prof.

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Roberts, Frances C., Dr. 4	Wheeler, Joseph 19	
Roberts, Frances C. 7	Wright, John, Dr. <u>1</u> , <u>2</u> , <u>3</u>	

Frances Cabaniss Roberts Collection

Preferred Citation: Frances Cabaniss Roberts Collection, Archives and Special Collections, M. Louis Salmon Library, University of Alabama in Huntsville, Huntsville, AL.

Collection Scope and Content: The Collection of 114 Linear ft. includes a total of 156 Archival Boxes. The Frances Cabaniss Roberts collection covers the historical records of the Cabaniss Roberts family. This collection contains extensive correspondence records of the Cabaniss Roberts family circa 1830 to 1930.

Archives/Special Collections Access Restrictions: None

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