

# Evolution Controversy in North Carolina in the 1920s

## **Joint Resolution Restricting the Teaching of Darwinism in the Public Schools of North Carolina (1925)<sup>1</sup>**

Resolved by the House of Representatives, the Senate concurring:

1. That it is the sense of the General Assembly of North Carolina that it is injurious to the welfare of the people of the State of North Carolina for any official or teacher in the State, paid wholly or in part by taxation, to teach or permit to be taught, as a fact, either Darwinism or any other evolutionary hypotheses that links man in blood relationship with any lower form or life.

2. That this resolution be in effect from and after its ratification.

<sup>1</sup> D. Scott Poole, state representative from Hoke County, introduced this joint resolution at the beginning of the General Assembly session in 1925. (Legislative resolutions differ from bills in that they are expressions of opinion by the House or Senate; they do not have the force of law.) After its introduction, the resolution was sent to the House Committee on Education, where the membership evaluated whether or not this item should be sent back to the full House with a favorable or unfavorable report. The committee's vote split evenly on the question, and the chairman, Henry Groves Connor, Jr., cast the deciding negative vote against Poole's resolution. The resolution was returned to the House with the negative opinion of the committee stamped on it. However, the committee members who supported the resolution attempted to bypass the majority opinion by submitting a minority report, which enabled the resolution to return to the House for a vote. On February 19, 1925, the full House defeated the measure by a vote of 67 to 46.

## **A Bill to Be Entitled an Act to Prohibit the Teaching of Evolution in Certain Schools and Colleges in the State of North Carolina (1927)<sup>2</sup>**

The General Assembly of North Carolina do enact:

Section 1. That it shall be unlawful for any professor, teacher or instructor, to teach in any school, college or educational institution within the State of North Carolina, receiving aid from the State, any doctrine or theory of evolution, which contradicts or denies the divine origin of man or of the universe, as taught in the Holy Bible: PROVIDED, however, that nothing in this act shall be construed to prohibit the teaching in said schools, colleges or educational institutions of all useful arts and sciences, unless the same are taught in such a manner as to contradict the fundamental truths of the Holy Bible.

Sec. 2. That any professor, teacher or instructor violating the provisions of Section One, of this Act shall be guilty of a misdemeanor and upon conviction shall be fined or imprisoned in the discretion of the Court, and in the discretion of the court may be disqualified from teaching in such schools, colleges or educational institutions upon such terms and conditions, and for such a time as the court in its discretion may order.

Sec. 3. That this act shall be in force from and after its ratification.

<sup>2</sup> The text of this bill differs significantly from resolution proposed by D. Scott Poole in 1925. This bill was prepared by the North Carolina Bible League and approved by that group's executive committee before it was introduced in the legislature. It is not clear whether Poole, who sponsored the bill, had a hand in shaping the text.

**Benjamin Charles Gruenberg.** *Elementary Biology: An Introduction to the Science of Life* (1919)<sup>3</sup>

### 512. Evolution and man.

Fifty years ago much of the discussion among thinking people centered around the question of the validity of the evolution theory as applied to man. There were many who were prepared to believe that evolution has taken place among plants and lower animals, but who hesitated to accept the same explanation for the appearance of man upon earth. One of the strongest objections urged against the theory was the fact that it had been impossible to produce a complete record of a graded series connecting man of to-day with his supposed non-human or prehuman ancestors. This argument of the "missing link" carried a great deal of weight with people who did not appreciate how unlikely it would be for complete series of specimens to be preserved through geologic times. Of the millions of human beings and other vertebrates that die in a given region during a century, how many skeletons are likely to remain sufficiently intact to be recognized from ten thousand to fifty thousand years later? From a scientific point of view it would be sufficient if the scattered pieces found at widely different levels (geologic ages) do actually fit in with a supposed species.

The few bones found in Java by Professor Dubois in 1894 fit into such a series in a very satisfactory way. The type of animal to which these bones belong was named *Pithecanthropus erectus*, and probably represents a "missing link." This animal had among his contemporaries a form of elephant, rhinoceros, Indian hippopotamus, tapir, hyena, a deer, and an animal somewhere between a tiger and a lion. The climate and vegetation were similar in many ways to those we now find in southern India and the island of that region. This form is in many ways intermediate between the apes and more recent man, but we must not expect it to be an average between the two extremes. It is more like *Homo* in some ways and more like the apes in others and in some respects it is between, as in the character of some of the teeth.

<sup>3</sup> *Elementary Biology* and *Biology of Home and Community* were textbooks originally approved by the North Carolina Text Book Commission, but later rejected by the State Board of Education after Governor Cameron Morrison spoke out against the two texts, criticizing them for their treatment of evolution.

A more recent discovery of ancient remains in Sussex (England) seems to point to a more closely related ancestor. The skull is larger than that of *Pithecanthropus*, and the teeth are more like those of modern man.

Large numbers of specimens have been found in various parts of France, Germany, and Belgium that belong apparently to the same races of primitive men. The first of these was found in a cave in the Neanderthal in Germany, in 1856, and the type is frequently referred to as the Neanderthal race. Although these had much larger skulls than the Piltdown (Sussex),—even larger than is found among races living to-day,—the characters of the jaws and teeth, the low and retreating forehead, the prominent ridges over the eyes, and other features indicate a lower stage of development. This group has been named *Homo primigenius*, or *Homo neanderthalensis*.

**Gilbert Haven Trafton.** *Biology of Home and Community: A Textbook for High Schools* (1923)

## CHAPTER XXXVII EVOLUTION

Main problem. What are the chief reasons for believing in evolution, and how has evolution been brought about?

### I. MEANING OF EVOLUTION

Many people have a wrong notion as to what evolution means; and as you may have heard some of these people talk who have this misconception, it will be well at the very beginning of the chapter to explain what the word really means so that there will be no misunderstanding as you read the rest of the chapter.

Evolution means that the various species of plants and animals now found on the earth have descended from other plants and animals, and these in turn from still others; and if these could be traced back far enough, it would be found that these all came originally from one common ancestral species, which was a very simple form of life. Or, to put it in another way, the first form of life that appeared on this earth many millions of years ago was a very simple form, and from that form

have gradually evolved all the varied and complex forms of life that we find today. How long this has taken no one knows, but the time must probably be reckoned in millions, perhaps hundreds of millions, of years. Looking toward the future, evolution means that animals and plants will continue to go on changing and that thousands of years in the future they will be different from what they are now. In short, evolution means change, natural and orderly change.

One erroneous notion which some people have about evolution is that it means that man has descended from the monkey. What it really means is that if we could trace back far enough through thousands of years the ancestry of man and monkey, it would be found that they came from the same ancestor, an animal different from any now living. Man is related to the monkey but did not descend from one. The relationship is much like two twigs on a tree that come out of a common branch like a letter Y. One twig does not grow from the other but they both grow from the same branch. Or, to put it in still another way, man and monkey are like cousins in that they had a common ancestor.

**D. Scott Poole. "Why the Opposition." *Carolina Magazine* (October 1926)<sup>4</sup>**

*Prevented by illness from making a scheduled address before the student body of the University, Mr. D. Scott Poole, originator of the famous "Poole Bill," replied to a request for the manuscript of his address with the brief presented on this page.*

<sup>4</sup> The Dialectic Society, one of the campus debating groups at the University of North Carolina, invited Representative Poole to speak on campus about the anti-evolution bill that he had introduced. Poole accepted, agreeing to address the students in a talk at Memorial Hall on May 18, 1926. On the morning of the 18th, Poole canceled, writing to the Dialectic Society that he was unable to keep the engagement due to the serious illness of his brother. The *Tar Heel*, the campus newspaper, reported that Poole "hopes to be here and speak on the subject of evolution at a later date." It does not appear that Poole ever spoke on the UNC campus.

The article here appears to be working notes for the speech that Poole would have given. The *Carolina Magazine* is careful to note that the piece appears exactly as it was given to them, an important point to make for a journal that was at the time much more likely to reflect the views of the faculty and administration of the University, which opposed the Poole Bill.

*In printing this article, which should represent the candid opinions of the fundamentalists of this state as held by their acknowledged leader, there has been no attempt at editing. The brief was printed as it came to the office.*

I object to a mode of creation being taught in the public schools of this state for the following reasons:

1. Because parents, not the state, have the right to teach their children religion. Parents are responsible for the religious training of their children.
2. Because Evolution as taught in the schools, teaches a mode of creation, of the Creator, the Bible, and the philosophy of life, may be classed as religion.
3. Because state schools have no right to teach religion.
4. Neither the Evolutionist, nor the Christian Fundamentalist has a right to teach his peculiar views at public expense.
5. Because debarring Evolution from the public schools will not infringe upon the right of any Evolutionist from teaching or writing at his own expense.

This is the reasons for debarring evolution, legally, and now as further reasons, it is not fair to taxpayers to defray the expense of teaching their own peculiar doctrine, and then by a state supported educational system have all their work undone, and that also at their expense.

It is plain to be seen, that this conflict of view will amount to a menace of the welfare of the Commonwealth if allowed to go on.

From the writings of evolutionists we make the following deductions:

1. All gods and devils are the creations of human imaginations.
2. There never has been a divine relation of God's will to man.
3. No extant moral code possesses Divine authority.
4. The Christian's hope of heaven is based on myth.
5. The fall of man is mythical.
6. Conscience is the product of group opinion.
7. Christianity is wrong in its basic purpose of moral conduct.
8. Christian teaching as to purity and modesty is wrong, based on mysticism and superstition.
9. Christianity has degraded woman, and retarded progress.

## 10. The world has no true code of morals.

In reviewing these extreme views, you may call them, is it any wonder that Church has arisen to oppose such teaching? Scientists say the Bible was not given to teach science. I grant this. Neither should scientists undertake to teach the Bible. The Bible is supernatural. It must be what it is believed to be, the revelation of God's will to man. The Scriptures teach what a man is to believe concerning God, and what duties God requires of man.

By following the teaching of the Bible a man does not become a worse citizen; but rather, he who follows more closely the teaching of this wonderful Book is the highest specimen of the race. The Bible is the only source of light that shines across the cold, dark silence and shadow of the death. Surely none would extinguish this.

**J. R. Pentuff. "Dr. Pentuff on Poole Bill." *Biblical Recorder* (4 March 1925)<sup>5</sup>**

Dear Dr. [Livingston] Johnson:— In the main I agree with you in what you say about the Poole Bill in your historical sketch. But there are two points on which I do not agree. To my mind the Poole Bill was not and is not in any sense a religious Bill and that is the main reason I spoke in favor of the Bill. The Bill, so far as I observed, made no reference to religion, no reference to the Bible, no word about any body's faith. To claim "blood kin" to the lower animals places the one who claims it outside the Bible, for it makes no such claims. It is begging the whole question to say that the Legislature cannot bar the teaching of such "blood kin" without infringing on somebody's religion, on the Bible, or on Christianity.

<sup>5</sup> James Robert Pentuff, pastor of McGill Street Baptist Church in Concord, N.C. wrote this letter to Livingston Johnson, editor of the Baptist state paper, the *Biblical Recorder*, in response to a previous article by Johnson about the Poole Resolution debates of January and February 1925. An anti-evolutionist, Pentuff takes this opportunity to explain his view of the deliberations and arguments in the General Assembly and at the resolution's public hearing, the methodology of the Poole Resolution's opponents, and the "pseudo-scientific" nature of the Darwinian theory of evolution.

The Darwinian Theory of Organic Evolution and Descent of Man from the animals is Scientific, or it is pseudo-scientific and has no connection with the Bible, except that it was invented as a weapon with which to fight the Bible [...] Mr. [D. Scott] Poole's aim was to try to stop the State from teaching things that are against the Bible, and irreligious propaganda. [...]

Dr. [Harry W.] Chase endeavored to twist the whole discussion over to his fallacious interpretation of the freedom of speech and over on religious grounds [...] That is a favorite dodge of Evolutionists when asked to give a sensible argument for their theory. They at once pose as martyrs to the cause of science. And they begin to call us "pious hoodlums," "religious bigots," "suspicious," "prejudiced," and "uninformed," while they are the wise, good, and the persecuted. [...]

In the second place, the legislators were made to believe that the passage of such as Bill would violate the freedom of speech measure in the Federal Constitution. The good men of those days when the Constitution was made, probably did not dream that the time would ever come in our country when Agnostics, Atheists, or traitors, or others who would destroy our homes, subvert our government, destroy peoples' faith in the Bible, would invoke the protection of the Constitution and Stars and Stripes while doing such work. [...]

J. R. Pentuff  
Concord, N. C.

**"Current Topics." *Biblical Recorder* (23 March 1927)<sup>6</sup>**

**The Poole Bill**—The Poole Bill has gone through several stages, but we have reserved comment until it was finally disposed of, in order to let our people know just what disposition was made of it. There was

<sup>6</sup> The *Biblical Recorder* usually took an editorial stance firmly against the teaching of evolution in public schools; however, this summary of the legislative actions regarding the Poole bill is very even-handed. The author of the article suggests that the failure to ban the teaching of evolution in schools does not suggest that the majority North Carolinians supported Darwinism. On the contrary, most North Carolinians remained staunchly conservative, but were discouraged by the tenor of the debate over the Poole Bill and were uncomfortable with the idea of legislating what could and could not be taught in schools.

a public hearing on the bill in the House of Representatives on February 10 [1927] [...] A young man came to the front stating that he was never so badly scared in his life, but felt it his duty to speak a word in behalf of the young people. His name is Paul J. Ranson, of Huntersville. He said he was reared in the A. R. P. [Associate Reformed Presbyterian] Church. He believed the bitter discussions among Christian people was doing far more harm than the teaching of evolution. He did not know anything about evolution and never expected to know anything about it, but he knew he was a Christian, and pleaded for more of the spirit of Christ among our people, which would settle all our difficulties. [...]

**The Committee Report**—The committee met on Tuesday 15 [February 1927], and after a short speech by Mr. Poole, who was crowded out at the public hearing, Mr. Townsend of Harnett moved that the bill be reported unfavorably. This motion was adopted by a vote of 25 for and 11 against [...] The vote of the committee this year was quite a surprise. Many thought there might be a favorable report, and none, perhaps, thought the majority against the bill would be so large—more than two to one. [...]

**Some Comments on the Poole Bill**—The defeat of the bill does not mean that the people of North Carolina do not believe in the Bible as strongly as they ever did. It is safe to say that most, if not all, of those who opposed the bill are as firm believers in the Bible as those who favored it. They simply thought that it was a dangerous thing to begin to legislate on matters of religion, as that is a long step toward union of church and state. So let no one interpret the action of the Legislature as an endorsement of Modernism. The people of the State are true to the old faith, and the Bible is the most popular book here, as it is everywhere it is known.

While the Legislature defeated the bill for the reason given above, the teachers in our schools must not take this action as giving them license to teach anything that denies the Bible—not the interpretation that men may put on the Bible—but the Bible itself. Teachers of science have no business attempting to teach theology, any more than a theologian has business teaching science, unless he has studied the subject sufficiently to treat it intelligently. [...]

**Frank Porter Graham. “Evolution, The University and the People.” *Alumni Review* (1924-1925)<sup>7</sup>**

[...] Evolution was taught at the University by North Carolinians before President Chase was born. Though modified from time to time with the increase of knowledge, the theory of evolution has moved from conquest to conquest and is now an important part of the teaching of geology, physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, and sociology. It is taught in most of the colleges in every civilized nation in the world. It is taught by Christian missionaries in the colleges of Asia and Africa. Today students in many of the high schools in both hemispheres accept the theory as freely as they do the Copernican system and the circulation of the blood. By papal edict it was handed down that the earth did not move around the sun and by solemn law it was enacted that the blood did not circulate from the heart through the body. But fortunately for the human race the earth continued on its celestial course and the blood went on its arterial way. Despite reports to the contrary, *ex cathedra* in medieval times and *ex lege* in modern times, the earth revolves, the blood circulates, and life evolves not only biologically, from simpler to more complex organisms, but also socially, with restless searchings of men for the kingdom of God. The great evolutionary process wins its way to acceptance around the world in accordance with laws higher than the constitution, whether joined or opposed by the misconceptions of men and the laws of states.

The Poole Bill raises issues older than the State of North Carolina. The inquisition, the index, and the stake are the unclaimed ancestors of the Poole Bill. Bruno chose to be burned to death rather than be saved on ecclesiastical terms. The teachers and the youth of North

<sup>7</sup> Frank Porter Graham, a popular faculty member at the University of North Carolina, wrote this article for the *UNC Alumni Review*, published in April 1925. Graham has a couple of objectives in this piece. He is strongly opposed to restrictions from the legislature on what may or may not be taught in the classroom, particularly in the case of evolution, which he regards as a well-established fact. Graham also comes to the defense of Harry Woodburn Chase, who was at the time the President of the University of North Carolina, and who had been sharply criticized after speaking out in opposition to the Poole Bill.

Frank Porter Graham would later succeed Chase as President of the University of North Carolina, serving in that role for nearly twenty years, becoming one of the most beloved figures in UNC history.

Carolina today would revolt against this ancient tyranny in its latest form. A tyranny that commanded them to be dishonest with themselves is not their idea of the way of salvation. All honor to President Chase for speaking clearly and standing squarely to the issues raised. May we also salute with equal respect President William Louis Poteat, who, by his stand at Wake Forest, as been, for all our colleges, the buffer state against unreason, the shock absorber of intolerance, and the first line trench against bigotry all these many years. President Chase, confronted with the issue, went out to meet it—‘God helping him, he could do no other.’ Then and there he revindicated his leadership and holds more tightly to his side the fighting loyalty of university men. Let us all close ranks solidly about him. He has raised the University standard to be seen of all our people. Freedom to think, freedom to speak, and freedom to print are the texture of that standard. That freedom the great Virginians led the way in writing into the first amendment to the constitution of the United States. It was one of the conditions of North Carolina’s ratification of the federal instrument. Upon this three-fold freedom Thomas Jefferson founded our oldest national political party. It is the cornerstone of the motto of the first American university to open its doors in the name of the people—in a little North Carolina village one hundred and thirty years ago. [...]