

Capitol

'80s were chock-full of changes

Era brought stronger GOP, gains for blacks, mixed economic bag to N.C.

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The Associated Press

The 1980s saw gains by Republicans and blacks in North Carolina, an economic upheaval that took the state through a recession, and a continuing battle to handle the waste generated by its advancing society.

It was a decade that featured the second Republican governor elected this century, James G. Martin; the first Republican lieutenant governor of the 20th century, James C. Gardner; and the GOP's biggest share of the General Assembly, with 46 of 120 House seats in 1988 and 13 of 50 Senate seats. Yet the '80s began with Democratic Gov. James B. Hunt Jr. becoming the first North Carolina governor ever to succeed himself.

"The state has become a two-party state for real," said Thad Beyle, a political scientist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "What the 1980s has shown is the decline of the Democratic Party, especially at the leadership level after Jim Hunt was defeated [for U.S. Senate] in 1984."

Mr. Hunt and Republican Jesse A. Helms waged the most expensive Senate campaign in history when they combined to spend \$25 million.

Richard Erwin became the first black appointed a federal judge in North Carolina in 1980. At the same time, the University of North Carolina system agreed with what was then called the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare to erase the last vestiges of racism there.

In 1983, Deneen Graham became the first black woman to be crowned Miss North Carolina; a year later, Henry Frye became the first black elected to the state Supreme Court; and in this past year, former Charlotte Mayor Harvey B. Gantt began to seriously consider a bid for U.S. Senate.

But blacks in general have been left behind in North Carolina's economic and social growth, said Craig J. Calhoun, a UNC-CH sociologist.

"It's a kind of good news-bad news thing," he said. "There have been these high-visibility appointments. But there has not been a dramatic shift in racial equality in the state. Blacks and, in most cases, Indians remain heavily segregated and are largely poorer than whites."

There are still counties in North Carolina — most of them predominantly black, northeastern counties — where 15 percent to 20 percent of houses lack complete indoor plumbing, Dr. Calhoun said. "That's eight to 10 times the U.S. average," he said.

Meanwhile, the economy had its ups and downs, with an early recession, textile plant closings and the loss of some large corporations to buyouts and relocations. Yet things kept improving, said Campbell R. Harvey of the Finance Group at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business.

"One thing that distinguishes this decade of the '80s from some other ones is that it has been characterized by robust economic growth," he said. "We're in this growth phase that just doesn't want to end."

"There were a lot of shocks that could have potentially derailed this growth, like the '87 stock crash, but no, the economy was resilient and was able to ride that out."

The buyout of RJR Nabisco, shortly after it had moved its headquarters from Winston-Salem to Atlanta, marked a period of "takeovers of a scale that we had never seen before, never thought possible," Dr. Harvey said.

"Certainly, North Carolina was affected by this in a big way with the RJR takeover," he said. "It could have been potentially disruptive for the state's economy, but it's turned out that it hasn't disrupted it in any significant way."

Even the decline in smoking nationally has not significantly hurt the tobacco state's economy, Dr. Harvey said, noting that tobacco companies have expanded into foreign markets and diversified their holdings.

Even the textile industry, which unsuccessfully sought protectionist legislation during its roughest times, bounced back.

"What helped a lot was the depreciation of the U.S. dollar," Dr. Harvey said. "These textiles that were cheap in the early '80s became expensive, and there really wasn't as much a threat."

Dr. Calhoun agreed there had been a lot of economic expansion, but he said it had been largely confined to the Interstate 85 corridor.

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showing unprecedented prosperity and having extremely good growth prospects for the future," he said. "But some other parts of the state have been completely left out of that picture."

Plant closings outstripped openings by nearly a 5-1 margin, although there was a lot of publicity for the new companies, Dr. Calhoun said. Still, unemployment declined as the state's service sector grew faster than the national average.

North Carolina got a preview of things to come when it was discovered that polychlorinated biphenyls, toxic chemicals used in electrical transformers, had been sprayed along state roadsides. The state scraped the soil into trucks and, with much controversy, disposed of it in a landfill in a rural, predominantly black area of Warren County. Residents responded with weeks of protests during which they blocked trucks and were arrested in demonstrations reminiscent of the civil rights movement.

North Carolina was later chosen as the next host state to take low-level radioactive waste from eight Southeastern states — a decision sure to create similar protests. And in 1989, the state agreed to enter another compact to handle hazardous wastes — an agreement that will necessitate the building of a waste incinerator and other facilities.

The legislature, struggling under an increasing burden as Washington cut back its involvement in state issues, approved gasoline tax increases in 1981 and 1989. But legislators gave up the largest tax cut in state history in 1985 under Mr. Martin's prodding. The General Assembly, with considerable pressure from Washington, also agreed to raise the drinking age from 18 to 21 and approved mandatory use of seat belts.

The 1980s also marked the loss of some well-known political fig-

ures with the suicide of Republican Sen. John East and the death of former Democratic Sen. Sam Ervin, who distinguished himself and North Carolina in his handling of the Watergate hearings that prompted Richard M. Nixon's resignation as president.

The state also mourned the deaths of former Gov. Dan K. Moore and singer Kate Smith, known for her stirring rendition of "God Bless America."

The 1980s saw some other firsts: The state's highest temperature ever — 110 degrees — was recorded in Fayetteville Aug. 21, 1983; July 1986 became the hottest July on record, with 24 days in excess of 90 degrees; and Velma Barfield became the first woman executed in the United States in 22 years when she was lethally injected in 1984.

The '80s also saw the coming and going of the highway bid-rigging scandal, the birth of the state's first National Basketball Association franchise — the Charlotte Hornets — and North Carolina's drop to last place in Scholastic Aptitude Test scores.

Education reforms remain a high priority, and some improvements are already in place, Dr. Calhoun said.

"We've seen improvement of lower-level education at the elementary school level," he said. "Unfortunately, they did not particularly improve at the high school level."

One thing that did improve was the percentage of college graduates in North Carolina, Dr. Calhoun said. North Carolina's low ranking on high school and college graduation rates has been blamed in part for the poor achievement of children.

But the state remains among the lowest in voter turnout in national elections in spite of a brief surge in the Hunt-Helms race. "And that could be related to those other factors," Dr. Calhoun added.