

*South Carolina Political Collections*

*University of South Carolina*

## **C. Kenneth Powell**

*(b. 1939)*

**Papers, 1964-1982**

- Volume:** 1.25 linear feet
- Processed:** 2002, by Herb Hartsook
- Provenance:** Donated by C. Kenneth Powell
- Citation Form:** C. Kenneth Powell Papers, South Carolina Political Collections, The University of South Carolina
- Copyright:** Copyright of the C. Kenneth Powell papers has been transferred to the University of South Carolina.

## **Biographical Note:**

C. Kenneth Powell (b.1939) served the South Carolina Republican Party as its chair during a critical time in its development, December 1971 to February 1974. He assumed the office following the defeat of Republican gubernatorial candidate Albert Watson in a highly charged campaign won by John West. The Watson campaign was characterized by many as having a racist tone and his defeat left the party at a crossroads. As chairman, the youthful Powell spearheaded a variety of reforms that changed the face of the Party and of politics and government in South Carolina.

Ken Powell was born in Greenwood, S.C., on August 11, 1939. He attended the Greenwood schools and was president of his high school senior class. In 1960, he was speaker of the South Carolina Student Legislature. He majored in Industrial Management at Clemson University and was elected president of both his junior and senior classes. He received his BS degree in 1961 and went on to attend the U.S.C. School of Law.

Powell worked as a page in the South Carolina House from 1961 to 1964. There, he was introduced to Floyd Spence, a young representative from Lexington County. Spence resigned from the Democratic Party in 1962 and announced he would forego almost certain re-election to the General Assembly to run instead for the U.S. House of Representatives as a Republican. Like many in South Carolina, Spence was bothered by aspects of the Democratic platform as well as the Party's loyalty oath requirement. Spence became the first prominent elected official in the state to change his party affiliation. The 1962 campaign is a landmark in contemporary history as it represents the first significant second party challenge to the Democratic domination of the state dating to the end of Reconstruction. Spence campaigned along side journalist William D. Workman, Jr., who opposed longtime incumbent Olin Johnston for the U.S. Senate. Although both Workman and Spence were defeated, the nascent Republican Party proved it was a force in the state. Powell worked for the Spence campaign as a speech writer and aide. Subsequently, and due to his Republican activity, he was fired from his job as a page. He was rehired through the personal intervention of House member Robert McNair.

After he received his law degree in 1964, Powell practiced law in Columbia. He continued his Republican activity and organized the South Carolina Teenage Republicans, serving as the group's first advisor. In 1966, he ran for the House from Richland County and received 48.3% of the vote in the general election. Two years later, he sought to represent Richland County in the state Senate and received over 48% of the vote, losing to incumbent Walter Bristow.

Powell was elected Chairman of the Republican Party of Richland County in 1970 and organized and conducted the first Republican primary held in the county. Accepting the position, Powell noted, "We must never lose sight of the fact that the only justification for the existence of any political party is to be a vehicle through which its candidates are elected. And in that purpose, we face a difficult task. For you see, our opposition is not just a political party. The Democratic Party in this state is an economic system to many people, a habit to others; and neither pocketbooks or [*sic*] habits are easily dispensed with." He became active in Party affairs at the statewide level and was a member of the committee to draft Congressman Albert Watson to run for governor. Party stalwart Arthur Ravenel had announced his candidacy, but Powell and others felt that the Party was gaining momentum and that the charismatic Watson could build on that momentum and wrest the governor's mansion from the stranglehold the Democrats had enjoyed since the days of Reconstruction.

In 1971, Powell sought and won the position of state Party chair. The hotly contested election pitted Powell, portrayed by the media as the candidate representing the conservative wing of the party, against Harry Dent's choice, moderate Cordes C. Seabrook, Jr. of Anderson. On his election, Powell, reported to be the youngest state party chair in the country, pledged, "I'm going to do everything I can to make everyone realize that the terms 'conservative' and 'racist' are not in any way synonymous." Columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak wrote an entire column on the importance of the race for the chairmanship. "Behind the defeat of President Nixon's political aide Harry Dent in the vicious battle for the soul of the South Carolina Republican party lies a political calculation of utmost importance to the 1972 Presidential election." They noted Dent and Thurmond "believe the new balance of power in South Carolina politics is the conservative – but non-racist – suburban vote."

Powell was a vigorous and at times controversial chairman. In May, 1971, President Nixon appointed former Republican Party chair Robert Chapman, and Democrat Sol Blatt, Jr. to federal judgeships. This was viewed as a political move to strengthen the 1972 re-election bids of both Nixon and Strom Thurmond. Powell argued against the Blatt appointment and criticized Harry Dent particularly after the fact. Powell had argued forcefully for the appointment of Republican N. Welch Morrisette, Jr. A statement dated 15 May 1971 notes, "The real issue is whether or not a Republican Administration prefers to appoint qualified Republicans or qualified Democrats to judgeships." If the Republican Party was to continue to grow and develop, choice political patronage appointments could not be given to Democrats. This divisive controversy further alienated Powell from Dent and the powerful Republicans who supported Dent.

In the fall of 1971, Powell announced the GOP would take legal action to create single-member districts for the General Assembly if the legislature did not do so on its own. This would eliminate the full slate law under which voters cast one vote for each seat allotted to his or her county from candidates running at large and representing the entire county rather than a district within the county. Powell argued the full slate law protected the Democratic majority. Single member districts were enacted and the legislature was changed forever.

Powell argued the Party needed to build from the bottom up. Previous Party leaders had emphasized a top down focus, concentrating on state wide and congressional races. In 1972 the key Republican campaigns in the state were Floyd Spence for the House, Strom Thurmond for re-election to the Senate, and Richard Nixon for re-election as President. Each had his own campaign organization. Thus, the 1972 campaign cycle presented a perfect opportunity to try the bottom up approach and focus the state Party's efforts on gaining seats in the General Assembly and winning local elections. As reported in the *News and Courier* [12/23/71], Powell asserted, "We're going hunting where the ducks are. The court house and city hall really determine the quality of your life in South Carolina."

Powell was a late entrant in the 1972 state Senate race, unsuccessfully opposing incumbent Isadore Lourie. His candidacy ensured the Republicans were able to put a full slate forward in that campaign.

A major step was taken in September 1973 when the Republican State Executive Committee voted to recommend adopting the primary method for the nomination of state-wide candidates. The primary put the party more on a par with the Democrats, and was also a party building device, as for the first time, the party would have to organize at the precinct level. It would also gain a list of those citizens who publicly allied themselves with the party by participating in the primary.

In a press release, Feb. 8, 1974, Powell announced his decision to run for state Attorney General rather than seek a third term as chair. "My purpose in seeking the chairmanship in 1971 was to lead the party toward an issue oriented, positive, grass roots force in state politics – one which put equal emphasis on elections at all levels of government and one in which all people regardless of their sex, age, race, or economic status could freely participate. I sincerely hope that progress has been made toward this goal. . . ." Powell also remarked on the poor support he had received as chair from affluent Party supporters who had contributed in a variety of ways to the success of his predecessors. *News and Courier* reporter Hugh Gibson quoted Powell as saying, "There is a group of the well-to-do who support only those in their peer group. There is no secret that both times I ran for party chairman there were many of the well-to-do against me. . . . I have done all I can do and further service by me would serve no useful purpose."

In his unsuccessful bid to unseat incumbent Dan McLeod, Powell argued the need for reform and proposed that, as Attorney General, he would serve as a consumer advocate. His late entry to the race probably doomed his candidacy. After the election, he turned his full attention to his law practice. In 1975, Powell was appointed by Gov. James B. Edwards to the state Alcoholic Beverage Control Commission. He served through 1981 and chaired the Commission from 1978 to 1979. Powell continues to practice law in Columbia.

### **Scope and Content Note:**

The C. Kenneth Powell Collection consists of 1.25 ft. of material, 1964 to 1982, chiefly composed of correspondence, Republican Party publications, and news clippings documenting Powell's political activities as a candidate for public office and chairman of both the Richland County Republican Party and South Carolina Republican Party. The bulk of the material dates from 1973 to 1974.

Papers, 1966 to 1968, reflect Powell's interest in promoting a unicameral legislature for South Carolina. Two polls, July and October 1968, analyze voter sentiment in the U.S. Senate race in which incumbent Fritz Hollings was challenged by Republican Marshall Parker. The 1971 file on judicial candidate N. Welch Morrisette, Jr., consists chiefly of letters of recommendation to U.S. Attorney General John Mitchell by attorneys and other prominent South Carolinians including Julius W. McKay, Judge Julius B. "Bubba" Ness, Edward K. Pritchard, and Judge Theodore D. Stoney. Interesting materials exist regarding the Watergate scandal, including a letter from Barry Goldwater addressed to Harry Dent, Jan. 30, 1974. Other correspondents represented in the collection include George H. W. Bush, Hal C. Byrd, Harry Dent, Raymond A. Harris, Richard M. Nixon, Joseph O. Rogers, Jr., and Dan Ross.

**Box Inventory:**

Biographical Sketch

**Box 1 of 1**

General:

1966-1967

1968

1970

1971:

General

Judicial

1972:

Jan.-Apr.

May-Oct., c. 1972

1973:

Jan.-May

June-Sept.

Oct.-Nov. 8

Nov. 9-Dec., c. 1973

1974:

Jan.-Feb.

Aug.-Dec., c. 1974

1975

1978-1981

n.d.

Audio-Visual, Photographs

Clippings:

1964-1969

1970

1971

1972

1973

1974

1979-1982