Pardon for 1871 gov. pondered

He battled Klan violence

By Gary B. Robertson

RALEIGH — North Carolina’s lawmakers are deciding whether to pass judgment on a decision by their Reconstruction-era predecessors 140 years ago to impeach and kick out a governor whose chief offense stemmed from stopping Ku Klux Klan violence after the Civil War.

The Senate wants to debate this week a resolution pardoning the late Republican Gov. William Woods Holden, who became the first governor removed from office in the United States on March 23, 1877.

Holden’s impeachment took place months after Democrats — the party that had favored secession and the formation of the Confederacy — took back control of the statehouse from Republicans, the party of Lincoln. Republicans did not take charge of the North Carolina Senate again until this year.

Democrats were angry with Holden for bringing in a state militia to quell a Klan insurrection that killed newly freed slaves and Republicans, both black and white.

The Senate approved eight impeachment articles against him, including several for failing to suppress the Klan without duress. The Senate convicted him on six of the articles and removed him from office.

In 1868, Holden said he acted “purely as a defensive measure to save human life and to protect and secure free suffrage to all.”

“I had solely in view the vindication of the law, the protection of the citizen and the good of society,” Holden said, according to a historical review article.

Supporters of the pardon resolution say the Senate’s debate will help set straight an injustice from a painful chapter in the state’s history.

“He definitely warrants a pardon,” said GOP Sen. Neal Hunter of Wake County, one of the resolution’s three primary sponsors. “He was standing up for what is right. He was impeached by people who had very bad views about appropriate treatment of citizens, whether they were black or white people supporting bad policies.”

Senate debate on the resolution scheduled for Tuesday was delayed until at least today after senators were given a document citing a nearly 200-year-old book by a University of North Carolina history professor criticizing Holden for supporting carpetbaggers and scalawags.

It was not immediately clear who put the document on their desks. It cited a 1996 book by professor Jeff de Roulhac Hamilton that it said berated Holden’s administration and called his appointees corrupt.

Contemporary historians have been more sympathetic to Holden.

The debate was delayed to ensure Republicans had the correct information. “We’ll be overturning something in the Senate from 140 years ago,” said Sen. Tom Apodaca, R-Henderson, the chamber’s rules committee chairman.

The House would have to approve the resolution to give it formal weight to remove the conviction.

Holden never sought a pardon before his death in 1923 at age 73. A pardon was something Holden viewed “as some admission that he had done something wrong, which he said he didn’t do,” said Arch Alexander, a Raleigh attorney who made the case to legislators to consider the resolution.