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FLORIDA'S FIRST RECONSTRUCTION LEGISLATURE

A LETTER OF WILLIAM H. GLEASON

*Edited by* EDWARD C. WILLIAMSON

First lieutenant governor of Florida, a new office created by the constitution of 1868, William H. Gleason was political leader of the Northern settlers in South Florida who were Republican. A real estate developer, Gleason came to Florida in 1866 from Wisconsin via Virginia. After residing in Miami where he made his home until the early 1880's Gleason later moved to Eau Gallie in the Indian River country. <sup>1</sup>

As lieutenant governor Gleason played an important role in the administration of Governor Harrison Reed, 1868-1872. Newly freed Negroes from the Black Belt with no previous political experience held the balance of power in the Reconstruction legislature of 1868. White Republican leaders were forced to compromise with the Democrats in order to restore order from chaos. Writing Dr. G. W. Holmes, of Sharpes, twenty-two years later, Gleason described the problems facing these early Republicans.

Eau Gallie October 30, 1890 <sup>2</sup>

G. W. Holmes, M. D.

Dear Sir:

Under the Constitution adopted in 1868 all of the officers were appointed by the Governor, excepting members of the Legislature, and county Constables. The Governor Reed appointed his cabinet consisting of Democrats and Republicans, or rather the democrats were southern men who had served in the Confederate Army. <sup>3</sup> In the legislature, where the democrats were in a majority in the counties, or in the senatorial districts, the Governor appointed a democrat as County clerk, and a republican as County Judge, and gave the demo-

1. James Churchill Coon, *Log of the Cruise of 1889* (Lake Helen, 1889) pp. 45-46.

2. Original letter in the P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History.

3. Harrison Reed, governor of Florida, 1868-1872.

crats a majority of Commissioners. When a republican senator and member of legislature were elected, he then made the Clerk of Court a republican, and the County Judge a democrat. We had five judicial districts, and three out of the five judges were democrats. Governor Stearns, when elected usually followed the same course.<sup>4</sup> The inspectors of elections were appointed as now by the Co[unty] Commissioners. When Governor Drew was elected, he followed the old idea that to the victors belong the spoils. He retained all the democrats appointed by Reed and Stearns, many of whom held their positions until within three or four years. For instance, Oliveros of the St. John's County, and Dickens of Volusia, and others.<sup>5</sup> That Constitution was formed in consultation with leading southern men. Colonel Dyke editor of the *Floridian* and Col. McIntosh on the part of the southern gentlemen and Col. Osborne who at that time was at the head of the Freedmen's Bureau and myself.<sup>6</sup> At that time I had had my western experience, and had seen the clannishness of different nationalities which had congregated in the different counties of Wisconsin. Where the majority were Germans, we could elect nothing but a German. And where the majority were Welsh, nothing but a Welshman could be elected. I foresaw that where negroes were in the majority, negroes would be elected whether they were capable or not. In that respect history has repeated itself. At the first election, Duval County elected not a white man to the legislature. Leon, with four members to elect and a senator, elected one white man to the legislature. In Alachua, the senator to elect, and three members, only one white man was elected. One half of the legislative body was incompetent for

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4. Marcellus L. Stearns was elected lieutenant governor in 1872, succeeded to the governorship in 1874 upon the death of Governor Ossian B. Hart.
  5. John W. Dickens, clerk of circuit court of Volusia county, 1872-1884. B. F. Oliveros, similarly was clerk of circuit court of St. Johns County.
  6. Colonel Dyke - Charles E. Dyke, editor of the Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*; Colonel McIntosh - Judge McQueen McIntosh, a federal judge during the ante-bellum era; Colonel Osborne - Thomas W. Osborne, later a United States senator from Florida.

any office, and the work of legislation fell heavily on a few. The colored people knew their incapacity, and had a great deal of confidence in their republican leaders. As the Lieut. Governor and presiding officer of the senate I selected the committees, and I appointed as chairman the best men in the senate regardless of party. I appointed John W. Henderson chairman of the judicial committee.<sup>7</sup> The chairman of the different committees were one half republicans and are half democrats. Not a colored man was appointed chairman of any committee. In fact not one was fit for the position at that time. Afterward many of them fitted themselves to become competent to preside over any committee. On referring to that period I am astonished that the white race did submit without a murmur to be ruled by ignorant negroes, when there were so many prominent men who had served in the union army, Generals and Colonels set aside to make way for ignorant colored men, to say nothing of officers of the confederacy. Now we can see the cause of the trouble in the north portion of this state. The time must soon come when the race question will overpower every other subject in the south at least. It will require the ablest intellect of this nation to solve the question. The U. S. courts are powerless to enforce their edicts. Public opinion paralyses the courts. At some future time I may express my ideas more freely on this subject. I regret that I have not been able to answer your letter earlier.

Yours very truly  
W. H. GLEASON

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7. John W. Henderson, state senator from Tampa in 1868, a Democrat.