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RASCAL OR REPRESENTATIVE? JOE OATS OF TALLAHASSEE AND THE "ELECTION" OF 1866

by PETER D. KLINGMAN*

EVER SINCE William Watson Davis, member of the so-called Dunning school of post Civil War historiography, popularized Florida's Reconstruction as a period of dark, corrupt, rapacious rule, the image of the personalities and the events from 1865 to 1876, has remained tarnished.¹ Revisionism, which overturned Davis's view by suggesting that Republican "rule" was tenuous at best and that corruption in politics was a sin of both parties, has only partially rehabilitated the traditional "tragic era."² One incident still offered as "proof" for the traditional view of Negro and Republican rascality in Reconstruction is the story of Joe Oats and his "election to [National Negro] Congress" in 1866.

The story originated in John Wallace's contemporary work, *Carpetbag Rule in Florida*, and it was later repeated by Professor Davis. According to these writers, Oats, "a mulatto of intelligence, of rascally practice, and of suave tongue," was a former slave on the antebellum plantation of Florida Governor David Shelby Walker. A carpenter by trade, he had learned to read and write before emancipation, and as a result, he was "elected" to go to Washington in February 1866 to represent the Leon County freedmen. Several hundred dollars were raised to finance his journey. Wallace described how many old men and women, newly emancipated and obviously impoverished, gave "their last dollar to send one of their race to the National Congress."³

When Oats returned to Tallahassee, May 20, 1866, he was met by a large throng of blacks. At a picnic celebration at

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1. William Watson Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York, 1913; facsimile edition, Gainesville, 1964), *passim*.
2. See, for example, Jerrell H. Shofner, "Political Reconstruction in Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XLV (October 1966), 145-70.
3. John Wallace, *Carpetbag Rule in Florida* (Jacksonville, 1888; facsimile edition, Gainesville, 1964), 38-39.

Houston's Spring, he told his assembled listeners what he had accomplished in Washington. Davis claimed that he spoke with "frank dishonesty."⁴ Later that day a fight broke out at the picnic; apparently some of the freedmen did not believe that Oats had actually gone to Washington. Wallace and Davis assumed that he had not. In the latter's opinion, he had traveled no further than Savannah, Georgia, before squandering the money entrusted to him.⁵ Thus, Oats has come down in Florida history as a classic example of the venal and corrupt politician. Left with no further evidence than that gathered by Davis, the revisionists have made no attempt to "revise" Joe Oats. Instead, he has largely been forgotten.

In fact, Oats did what he was elected to do, and what he announced he had done upon his return to Tallahassee. He did journey to Washington, and he did attend a national congress. Furthermore, on February 7, 1866, he was in the group of blacks who held a one-hour interview with President Andrew Johnson.

Oats had been elected by Leon County freedmen sometime in late January or early February 1866 at a meeting at the African Methodist Church in Tallahassee to represent them at the second post-war meeting of the National Negro Convention.⁶ Two years earlier the black leaders of the movement had gathered in Syracuse, New York, to consider the future goals and direction for their race. At that time, the delegates, including Jonathan C. Gibbs, who was to become Florida's secretary of state, were concerned that Lincoln's emancipation proclamation be permanently safeguarded by a constitutional amendment.⁷ In the period between the Syracuse meeting and the one in Washington in 1866, that goal had been accomplished with the thirteenth amendment. Now, however, new problems had arisen.

First, Lincoln's assassination had brought a Southerner to

4. Davis, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida*, 428. Houston's Spring is approximately one mile southeast of the capital. Old Houston Pond at the site was Tallahassee's first water plant, built in 1890 and later abandoned.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Wallace, *Carpetbag Rule in Florida*, 38.

7. National Negro Convention, 1864, *Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored Men Held in Syracuse, New York, October 4-7, 1864, with the Bill of Wrongs and Rights and Addressed to the American People* (Boston, 1864). Gibbs at this time was listed as a Pennsylvania theologian.

the White House. Andrew Johnson's views on the "Negro question" were unknown to most blacks. Like Lincoln, he, too, was born of poor white stock; both men were self-improved and self-made, and both were staunch Unionists. But Johnson was from the South and that worried the leadership of the National Negro Convention. A more serious problem for blacks in early 1866 was the forthcoming expiration of the Freedmen's Bureau legislation. Although the proposal for its renewal lay before Congress, there were strong indications that Johnson was unwilling to extend its operation. Despite the interpretations of more recent scholarship that suggest that the Bureau's agents cared but little for the freedmen and were more concerned with re-establishing order and productivity in the South, practically all nineteenth-century Negroes felt that it was indispensable.⁸ Blacks believed that Bureau agents had power enough to offset the former slaveowner. And, as Presidential Reconstruction witnessed conservative control of southern state legislatures and executive branches, this power was even more prized by the freedmen.

These factors resulted in the calling of a national congress of black people in Washington in late January and early February 1866. Its purpose was to lobby for the renewal bill for the Freedmen's Bureau and to express black sentiments on the course of Reconstruction. At the same time, the leadership of the convention hoped to ascertain Johnson's personal views on racial matters.⁹

On Wednesday, February 7, 1866, Oats, Frederick Douglass, representing New York in the convention, Lewis H. Douglass, his son, who represented Maryland, George T. Downing, representing the six New England states, John Jones of Illinois, and William Whipper of Virginia arrived at the White House for a 10:30 a.m. appointment with the President.¹⁰ The request for

8. William S. McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather: General O. O. Howard and the Freedmen* (New Haven, 1968), *passim*.

9. Philip Foner, *Frederick Douglass* (New York, 1964), 238-240. The proceedings have not been preserved.

10. New York *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, February 24, 1866. Accounts of the interview were published in many newspapers and in Edward McPherson, *Political Manual For 1866, Including a Classified Summary of the Important Executive, Legislative, and Politico-Military Facts of the Period, From President Johnson's Accession, April 15, 1865, to July 4, 1866; and Containing a Full Record of the Action of Each*

an interview had been sent the previous Monday, and the reply granting it had arrived early that Wednesday morning. No one had prepared a written statement or a list of questions to ask Johnson, and as the men sat waiting in the anteroom to the President's office, George Downing hastily scribbled a few opening remarks. The delegation agreed among themselves that only Downing and Frederick Douglass would actually address the President; the others would listen. The President was delayed, and it was nearly noon before Joe Oats and the others entered the office and shook hands with Andrew Johnson.

Johnson was obviously irritated from the start. Newspapers that reported the event took special note of his confusion, incoherent remarks, and obvious hostility. Pro-Johnson supporters, on the other hand, attacked the black delegates, primarily Douglass, for trying to "trap" the President. After Downing opened the meeting by expressing black dissatisfaction with the enforcement of their rights, Johnson replied first by expressing his friendship for Negroes. "If I know myself and the feelings of my own heart," he explained, "they have been for the colored man." He offered his own leadership to the race, calling himself their "Moses." However, he did not enjoy being "arraigned by some who can get up handsomely-rounder periods and deal in rhetoric, and talk about abstract ideas of liberty."

Frederick Douglass pointed out that Negroes like whites were "subjects of the government." They paid taxes, fought in the war, and were responsible for their debts. As a result, they were entitled, he insisted, to share the benefits as well as the burdens of government. Johnson noted that the freedman had gained much from the war. At least he had secured his freedom, while the small white farmer had little if anything to show from the conflict. The whole subject of guaranteeing black political and civil rights, the President felt, belonged to the states and not to the federal government. At that conclusion of the unsatisfactory meeting, Douglass announced that Johnson's position was now clear; blacks would have to depend on the "people." And with that, the delegation withdrew. Afterwards, Johnson described the interview: "Those damned sons of bitches

Branch of Government (Washington, 1866). The following quotes are from the interview as recorded in the *Washington Daily National Intelligencer*, February 8, 1866.

thought they had me in a trap! I know that damned Douglass; he's just like any nigger, and he sooner cut a white man's throat than not."¹¹

Many people North and South sympathized with the President's view. The *New York Times* stated that the delegation's position rested on a "selfish and arrogant estimate of their importance in the body politic."¹² One man wrote to thank Johnson for standing firm against the "impudence" of Douglass and the delegation.¹³ Another recalled that the President's views were similar to those he had held since the end of the war. In the summer of 1865, Johnson had suggested that while Negroes should be raised to "our present level," white status must increase at the same rate. By doing so, "the relative position of the two races would be the same."¹⁴ In Florida, a brief reply written to the President by Douglass, Downing, Oats, and the other delegates the following day, was published by the Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian* under an editorial headline, "Nigger Presumption-Fred. Douglass Rebukes the President."¹⁵ One prominent black, Martin R. Delany, who had not been present at the interview, attached little hostility to Johnson's remarks. From Hilton Head, South Carolina, where he was stationed in the Freedmen's Bureau, Delany warned the delegates in Washington not to "misjudge" the President: "Do not expect too much of him – as black men, I mean. Do not forget that you are black and he is white. Make large allowances for this."¹⁶

The bill to renew the Freedmen's Bureau was enacted over Johnson's veto by a Republican Congress already estranged from the President. Neither the lobbying effort of the National Negro Convention nor the meeting with Andrew Johnson can

11. LaWanda and John H. Cox, *Politics, Principles, and Prejudice, 1855-1866: Dilemma of Reconstruction* (New York, 1963), 163.

12. *New York Times*, February 9, 1866.

13. William S. Hodge to Andrew Johnson, February 8, 1866, Andrew Johnson Papers, Library of Congress Manuscripts Division.

14. B. B. French to Johnson, February 8, 1866, *ibid.*

15. Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, February 20, 1866.

16. "To Messrs. G. T. Downing, William Whipper, Frederick Douglass, John Jones, L. H. Douglass, and others; Colored Delegation Representing the Political Interest of the Colored People of the United States, Now Near the Capitol and Government, Washington, D. C.," in Frank A. Rollin, *The Life and Public Service of Martin R. Delany* (Boston, 1883), 281.

be assessed. However, one thing is clear; Joe Oats had at least witnessed one of the more intriguing confrontations of Reconstruction.

Oats returned to Tallahassee on May 20. Unfortunately, it is impossible to know what he had done or where he had been since February 7. According to Wallace, Oats feared for his life if whites discovered what he had been involved with in Washington. As a result, a committee "armed with old cavalry swords and pistols," escorted him to Houston's Spring where he told his story.¹⁷ And, despite the fact that he later attended the Florida state constitutional convention in 1868, Joe Oats went down in Florida history as one of the earliest rascals of radical Reconstruction.

17. Wallace, *Carpentbag Rule in Florida*, 39.