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## A NEW JERSEY CARPETBAGGER IN RECONSTRUCTION FLORIDA

by JERRELL H. SHOFNER

**D**URING THE TROUBLED years following the Civil War many individuals from the North were involved in the economic, social, and political affairs of the former Confederate states. Because the elevation of freed blacks to full citizenship was one of their goals— and deeply resented by Southerners— these men were often castigated by contemporary native whites and subsequently by historians. Denounced as “carpetbaggers” who came into the South to plunder for personal gain while native leaders were disfranchised and unable to prevent it, these men received low marks from historians of all regions who studied the Reconstruction South.

While such a generalization was undoubtedly based on some valid evidence and provided immense satisfaction to Southerners who deplored the changes of the post-Civil War years, like all such broad categorical assertions it failed to account for the exceptions whose numbers may have been large enough to render the “carpetbagger” theory invalid. There were certainly Northerners in Florida during Reconstruction whose presence it did not take into account. One of those was Captain George B. Carse of New Jersey, who was twenty-three when he enlisted in the Union army.<sup>1</sup> After two years of combat as a private, a citation for bravery at Chancellorsville, and a battlefield commission, Carse was assigned by Major General Philip H. Sheridan, commander of the Middle Military Division, to command two companies in charge of a “Freedmen’s Village.”<sup>2</sup>

As Union military forces advanced and President Lincoln issued his proclamation of emancipation, Negroes gathered in large

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1. *New Jersey Manual of the Legislature* (1874), 72.

2. *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, 1880-1901), Ser. I, XLIII, 979.

numbers near the army camps and created serious logistical problems for the commanders. Placed in charge of the "Freedmen's villages," officers such as Captain Carse were responsible for feeding the blacks, maintaining order in the camps, and sometimes using their labor on non-combat assignments.

By the end of the war, the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, usually known as the Freedmen's Bureau, had been established to assist Negroes in the transition from slavery to freedom. Captain Carse, who was then serving as a brevet colonel, was ideally suited for service with the quasi-military Bureau. Headed by General Oliver O. Howard, it lasted about four years during which it provided relief for destitute freedmen and some whites, supervised labor contracts between the former slaves and white planters, established educational facilities, and tried to obtain justice for the blacks as they began participating in free society. It was a task which unavoidably placed Freedmen's Bureau agents in confrontation with native whites who resented this unwelcome middle man between themselves and their former slaves.

Captain Carse was assigned to the Florida branch of the Bureau, serving first in Jacksonville and then for nearly three years in Leon County.<sup>3</sup> With the capital city of Tallahassee as its principal community, Leon County was one of the most populous and prosperous planting counties in the state. Carse and another military man were assisted by two or three civilians in overseeing freedmen's affairs, including the drawing up and settling of labor contracts. There were never enough agents. In early 1868, Carse wrote, "I have more to do than I have ever had to do in any place I have ever been, . . . I have been in my office until 10 PM each night last week. . . . I am now writing with my office full of freedmen waiting for me to make settlements of their accounts for the past year."<sup>4</sup> He scarcely exaggerated. Because of a crop failure that year, the Bureau issued emergency rations until the new crop was made. The agents were almost overwhelmed. In June, for example, Carse personally issued to destitute freedmen

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3. Special Order 515, December 9, 1867; George B. Carse to Allan H. Jackson, September 27, 1867, U.S. Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, Record Group 105, National Archives. Hereinafter cited as FB.

4. Carse to Jackson, February 3, 1868, *ibid.*

84,800 pounds of fat pork, 61,562 pounds of bacon, and 159,983 pounds of meal.<sup>5</sup>

Contrary to the bad publicity subsequently received by the Bureau agents, even the conservative Tallahassee *Floridian* acknowledged that Carse was fair and impartial in supervising contracts between freedmen and their employees.<sup>6</sup> Reporting that most freedmen worked well, Carse complained that he had had trouble with a few who thought they could “rely on the government to support them.” He also chastised those who neglected their crops to attend political rallies.<sup>7</sup> Just before he left the Bureau assignment, Carse reported that he did not think there was a place in the United States “more friendly as between labor and employer than in my subdistrict.”<sup>8</sup>

As in the case of many Freedmen’s Bureau agents and other northern men who came South after the war, Carse involved himself in Republican party politics as soon as it became known that Negroes were to be enfranchised. It was his duty as a Bureau agent to instruct the new voters on their rights and obligations. And it was only a short step from the role of instructor to that of political candidate in a party which had so few qualified leaders. But, unlike many of his colleagues, Carse did not resign his position with the Bureau and campaign for elective office. Instead, he took leave and accepted an appointive position. Having been transferred from his wartime unit to the 45th Infantry (Veterans Reserve Corps) in June 1867, he served as a captain of that unit assigned to the Freedmen’s Bureau in Florida until November 1868. He was then granted a six-months leave to become adjutant general of the state of Florida. During the two years he served in that office under Republican Governor Harrison Reed, the Freedmen’s Bureau was abolished and Carse never returned to duty with it.

It was an extremely deft and talented politician who could participate in Florida politics during the Reconstruction years without becoming embroiled in the acrimonious and contradictory factionalism that characterized the period. As a vigorous and

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5. Carse to F. F. Flint, June 1, 1868; Carse to Jackson, July 1, 1868; *ibid.*

6. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, February 22, 1871.

7. Carse to Jackson, August 15, April 13, 1868, FB.

8. Carse to Jackson, June 1, 1868, *ibid.*

loyal supporter of the controversial and frequently beleaguered Governor Reed, Captain Carse fell victim to the chief executive's political enemies but only after he had left a distinct impression on them.

Harrison Reed of Wisconsin, who had come to Florida as a United States official in 1863, and Thomas W. Osborn, former head of the Freedmen's Bureau in the state, were leaders of a group of moderate Republicans who literally took the 1868 constitutional convention away from a contending group of Radicals. After writing a constitution which satisfied themselves as well as the United States Congress, the moderates campaigned for ratification of the constitution and election of Reed as governor and William H. Gleason, also of Wisconsin, as lieutenant governor. After a successful campaign, the government was organized and Osborn was elected by the legislature to the United States Senate.<sup>9</sup> By late 1868, Reed and Osborn had become leaders of factions of their party contending for control of Florida government. When Reed antagonized some of the Republican legislators at a special session in November 1868, the lower house impeached him and the senate prepared to hear the case. According to the constitution the impeachment suspended the governor from office until the senate decided the question. The Osborn faction planned to remove Reed from office without having to try the case. Lieutenant Governor Gleason, as president of the senate, was in collusion with Osborn on the scheme. Assuming that the impeachment made him acting governor, Gleason managed adjournment resolutions through both houses and the legislators went home, thinking that Reed was out of office.<sup>10</sup>

Reed had no intention of surrendering the governorship however, and asked the state supreme court for an opinion as to whether the unusual maneuvering in the legislature had actually removed him from office. Awaiting the opinion of the court, Reed refused to leave his office in the capitol. Captain Carse and the Leon County sheriff established a twenty-four hour guard to prevent Gleason from taking possession of the governor's suite. Unable to gain access, Gleason, accompanied by Secretary of

9. See Jerrell H. Shofner, "The Constitution of 1868," *Florida Historical Quarterly* XLI (April 1963), 356-74.

10. *Florida Senate Journal*, Extra Session (1868), 23-25.

State George J. Alden in possession of the state seal, set up a contending governor's office in the City Hotel across the street from the capitol.

Floridians heard with shock and considerable embarrassment the news that they had two contesting governors.<sup>11</sup> They were also somewhat surprised by the exuberance with which Captain Carse executed his duty of protecting the governor against his opponent. Gleason walked into the governor's office intent on redeeming some personal papers from the safe. When Carse found him there he thrust a loaded revolver in Gleason's face and ordered him out. The pretending governor retreated without his documents.<sup>12</sup> Carse subsequently found that Secretary of State Alden had also removed some documents, including Carse's own oath of office, from the capitol building. Angered by this discovery, the adjutant general went in immediate search for Alden. Finding him playing billiards in the City Hotel's game room, he seized Alden and demanded the return of the papers. When the secretary of state seemed evasive Carse again drew his pistol to demonstrate his earnestness. Several witnesses, including Chief Justice Edwin M. Randall of the state supreme court, interceded and quieted the furious adjutant general. The altercation ended with a peaceful conversation in which Alden explained himself to Carse's satisfaction.

Senator Osborn and his supporters tried to rid themselves of the persistent adjutant general. Congressman Charles M. Hamilton wrote the United States Adjutant General that Carse had assaulted the lieutenant governor, that he had been serving as a state official while on leave from the army, and that he should be recalled to military duty at once.<sup>13</sup> Without waiting for an answer to that request, Alden swore a warrant against Carse charging assault with intent to commit murder. The adjutant general was indicted, and a true bill was found at the spring 1869 term of the circuit court.

Because the case would have to be tried before Circuit Judge

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11. St. Augustine *Examiner*, November 28, 1868; Tampa *True Southerner*, December 3, 1868; A.B. Grumwell to Jackson, November 30, 1868, FB.
  12. Jacksonville *Florida Union*, December 3, 1868; Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, December 1, 15, 1868; Tallahassee *Sentinel*, December 10, 1868.
  13. C. M. Hamilton to Adjutant General's Office, January 3, 1869, Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 94, National Archives.

Pleasant W. White, a well-known Conservative-Democrat who was known to be hostile toward the Republican faction represented by Alden and Gleason, Captain Carse's accusers were not anxious to pursue the case against him. It was continued for two terms of the court and brought to trial in 1870. With Anderson J. Peeler and Theodore W. Brevard, two of the most astute Conservative-Democratic lawyers in the state, defending him, Carse was found "not guilty" by a jury whose foreman was James Kirksey, another native Floridian whose family was prominent in Jefferson County.<sup>14</sup>

Governor Reed won his struggle with Gleason over the governorship. The supreme court agreed with his reasoning that he had not been properly removed from office. With the question settled, Reed moved against his enemies. First removing Secretary of State George J. Alden and replacing him with Jonathan Gibbs, Florida's first black cabinet officer, he then had Lieutenant Governor Gleason ousted from office on the technical ground that he had not met the constitutional residence requirement for the office.<sup>15</sup> Everyone agreed that the diligent support of his adjutant general, on leave from the United States Army, was a principal factor in Reed's victory over his opponents. Reed wrote Carse's father praising the captain for his valiant service. A large number of state legislators signed a testimonial to his credit.<sup>16</sup>

For nearly two years after the impeachment controversy, Carse served in Governor Reed's cabinet and assisted him in the almost impossible task of law enforcement in a state whose native white population was determined to overturn the Republican party by intimidating Negro voters and their white allies. Unfortunately for the Florida Republicans, the bitter intra-party factionalism continued. Threatened by a Conservative-Democratic opposition intent on destroying their party by any necessary means, the Republicans unwisely exhausted their energies fighting among themselves. Having failed to remove Governor Reed from office Osborn and his allies continued to collude against the chief executive. After a special legislative session in 1870 which enacted

14. *State v. George B. Carse*, Spring Term, 1869, Circuit Court Records, Leon County.

15. Harrison Reed to Jonathan C. Gibbs, January 7, 1869, Records of the Secretary of State of Florida.

16. *New Jersey Manual of the Legislature* (1874), 72.

laws granting state financial assistance to a large railroad company, Reed's Republican enemies tried to discredit the governor by charging him and some of his supporters with bribery.

Carse was accused, along with several others, of offering money to legislators to vote for certain legislation. While most of the indictments referred to railroad legislation, Carse was accused of offering money to Senators Harry Cruse and Simon Katzenberg to vote for a bill dealing with a proposed agricultural college. Little is known about Cruse, but Katzenberg was a native white Republican whose allegations were hurled indiscriminantly during the period.<sup>17</sup> The only other witness was Frederick Hill, a Negro senator from Gadsden County who was closely allied with the Osborn faction of the party.

Of the mass of charges growing out of the special session, only one resulted in conviction. Senator Charles H. Pearce of Leon County, a Negro leader of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, was convicted and expelled from the senate. Most observers thought his conviction was due more to his loyal support of Governor Reed than to the question of guilt or innocence. None of the other cases were ever tried. Some were continued for several terms of the court, but all were ultimately quashed. Their outcome did not matter to Captain Carse. Exasperated at the bribery charges levelled at him, Carse was further disgusted when a true bill was found on both indictments at the fall term of the circuit court. Having had enough of Florida Republican politics, he resigned his office and left for New Jersey in late December 1870.<sup>18</sup>

Carse, apparently remembered in his home town of Camden, New Jersey, was shortly elected to the state legislature where he served three successive terms. Meanwhile he became an editor of the Camden *New Republic* and a respected citizen of the town he had left in 1861 to join the United States army.<sup>19</sup>

The Florida Republicans continued their in-fighting and the Conservative-Democrats ultimately destroyed their organization and the black electorate on which they depended for election victories. The legend about "black Reconstruction" and the

17. *State v. George B. Carse*, November 18, 1870, and *State v. George B. Carse*, December 7, 1870, Circuit Court Records, Leon County.

18. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, February 22, 1871.

19. *New Jersey Manual of the Legislature* (1874), 72.



“carpetbaggers” who descended on the state after 1865 grew until it was rarely questioned. In retrospect white Floridians regarded men such as George B. Carse as anathema and their departure from the state as good riddance. Before accepting such a generalization as true, however, the contemporary evaluation of Carse by the Tallahassee *Floridian* should be taken into account.

The *Floridian* was edited by one of the most important Conservative-Democratic leaders in the state, and he lost no opportunity to discredit the Republicans whom he regarded as unwelcome intruders. Yet he had mostly praise for Captain Carse. Noting his departure from Florida, the editor wrote that “Governor Reed has lost a most devoted friend, one to whose untiring energy and unceasing activity his escape from impeachment is in a very considerable measure due.” Admitting that Carse was “a most determined partisan,” the editor added that “when he had it in his power, as agent of the Freedmen’s Bureau, to deal harshly with us, he did not abuse his privileges. On the contrary, his conduct was generally commended as just and fair. We have never heard his integrity impeached.”<sup>20</sup> Such praise was not handed loosely to Republicans from northern states by Conservative-Democratic Floridians in the 1870s.

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20. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, February 22, 1871.