

1980

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### Recommended Citation

Beatty, Bess (1980) "John Willis Menard: A Progressive Black in Post-Civil War Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*: Vol. 59 : No. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol59/iss2/3>

JOHN WILLIS MENARD:  
A PROGRESSIVE BLACK IN  
POST-CIVIL WAR FLORIDA

by BESS BEATTY \*

**J**OHN WILLIS MENARD was thirty-three years old when he arrived in Florida in 1871. Born in Kaskaskia, Illinois, he had attended Iberia College in Ohio and had been employed by the federal government during the Civil War. His service on a committee which surveyed areas in Central America as possible sites for settlement of emancipated slaves had made him even more aware of the needs of the black freedman. He was the first black to be elected to the United States House of Representatives, although he was never seated. He also for a time was editor of the New Orleans *Standard*. Menard possessed the talent, education, and experience to become a major force on the Florida political scene during Reconstruction and the tumultuous years that followed.

Menard and his wife Elizabeth, their son Willis, and two daughters, Mary and Alice, settled in Jacksonville. There Menard purchased two lots in the city. He worked first as a post office clerk and then was appointed deputy collector of internal revenue for the Florida district. He also edited the Jacksonville *Sun*.<sup>1</sup>

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1. John Willis Menard, *Lays in Summer Lands* (Washington, 1879); Edith Menard, "John Willis Menard," *Negro History Bulletin*, XXVIII (December 1964), 53-54; Thomas V. Gibbs, "John Willis Menard, The First Colored Congressman Elect," *A.M.E. Church Review*, III (April 1887), 426-32; Joan R. Sherman, *Invisible Poets: Afro-Americans of the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana, 1974), 97-102; Frank Leslie's *Illustrated Newspaper*, XXV (December 26, 1868), 227; John Willis Menard to Mr. Secretary (William Windon?), June 15, 1889, Personnel Applications, Office of the Secretary, 1830-1910, General Records of the Treasury Department, Record Group 56, National Archives Building; *U. S. Register of Offices and Agents* (Washington, September, 1873), 380; Warranty Deeds, no. 763 (July 11, 1871), no. 767 (July 28, 1871), Title and Trust Company of Florida, Jacksonville, Florida.

Spanning slavery, Civil War, Reconstruction, and the emergence of the Jim Crow era, Menard's career is typical of the noted group of blacks who played an influential role both in the black community and in the general society in the post-Civil War period. Earlier histories of Reconstruction have given short shrift to these black leaders, usually pronouncing them corrupt, servile, and incompetent. As late as 1947 one southern historian concluded that "much of their performance was either grotesque or puerile."<sup>2</sup> During the past few years this stereotype has been altered considerably by recently published general studies and individual biographies of black Southerners. But, because most of these revisions have dealt only with the most prominent blacks, understanding of grass-roots black leadership is still elusive. The sketchy material available on John Willis Menard's Florida career sheds some light on the activities of such men, the kind of leadership they offered, the difficulties they faced, the peculiarities of their roles as compared to that of comparable white leaders, and the extent and nature of their power and influence.

His career is also typical of those grass-roots leaders in the paucity of the records pertaining to it. With few of his personal papers and none of his newspapers extant, it is difficult to go beyond the public-and therefore partial-personality and discover the person who was John Willis Menard. There was some newspaper notice following his historical speech in Congress as a potential member from Louisiana in 1868. The *Worcester Spy* described him as "a man of good stature and stout body, young and pleasant-looking in the face, the features of which, though heavy, are mobile and vivacious, while the color is a dark brown. His manner is pleasant and gentlemanly, while his voice is refined and well modulated. He appears and is a gentleman of education and fair abilities." He was also described as having "a very high reputation as a scholar," "an intelligent face," as being "calm, self-possessed," "an able representative man" and as "representing not only his race, but the liberty of the American people."<sup>3</sup> But the private person is best revealed in his poetry published in a single volume as *Lays in Summer Lands* (1879).

2. E. Merton Coulter, *The South During Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (Baton Rouge, 1947), 145.

3. Menard, *Lays in Summer Lands*, 6-14.

A romantic, he wrote poems to the woman who became his wife, to his children, his parents, and to other members of his family. A few of his poems dealt with racial matters, and they show how he waxed now optimistic and now despondent as events seemed to dictate.<sup>4</sup> Other than this, one must be satisfied with the surviving records of Menard's public career.

Menard became involved in Republican politics soon after his arrival in Jacksonville in 1871. In the fall of 1873 a legislative vacancy was created in Duval County by the resignation of John R. Scott, a black man who had held the seat since 1868. At the Duval Republican convention in November 1873, Menard, who was serving as chairman of the convention's committee of resolutions, was nominated to run for the Florida House. The Jacksonville *Union* noted that while it was not a ticket that would elicit the support of property owners and the general business community, "both white and colored might have fared much worse than they have." Successful in the election, Menard took his assembly seat in January. He was present most of the two months that the legislature met in Tallahassee, and he participated in debate. As a freshman, however, he did not assume a leadership position.<sup>5</sup>

Considering his political experience in Louisiana, it could be expected that Menard would seek national office. In 1874 he became embroiled in a contest with Josiah T. Walls, leading black politician and the incumbent, and John W. Scott for the second district congressional seat. There was little chance that either Menard or Scott could oust Walls who had both black and white support. The Lake City *Herald* wondered since Menard's chances were so slim, whether he was not acting as a decoy for a white candidate. But apparently Menard was in the race as a serious candidate. In a letter to Congressman Walls he promised to employ all honorable means to secure the nomination for himself but to support Walls if unsuccessful. The three-way contest, however, soon became acrimonious. When Menard attempted to cause trouble between Scott and Walls, Scott responded by excoriating Menard and revealing discrediting allegations about his political career in Louisiana. The Tallahassee

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4. *Ibid.*, 26-84.

5. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, November 4, December 2, 16, 1874.

*Weekly Floridian* argued that if Scott's contentions were true, they "should consign him [Menard] to eternal oblivion among the colored people of Florida." Menard denied all charges, but according to the *Floridian* he was "decidedly worsted" in the exchange. Before the general election both Menard and Scott dropped out of the race, leaving Walls the Republican nominee, who was eventually defeated by his Democratic rival in a contested election.<sup>6</sup>

Running for Congress had cost Menard his seat in the Florida legislature, and perhaps as a result he felt he could now criticize his own party. He was also critical of the political activities and views of many blacks. In August 1875 he spoke before a black audience in Ocala, and the Democratic *Weekly Floridian* described his views as "most sensible." Menard blamed blacks for dwelling too much on their past status as slaves and not doing enough to improve their own condition in freedom. He called on them first to see that their children were thoroughly educated and taught the virtues of chastity and obedience to the laws. Then they could work with whites to rebuild the South.<sup>7</sup>

Menard's sentiments were probably motivated to a certain degree by his feeling that Republican control of Florida could not last much longer and that blacks would have to adjust to a new political situation. The *Weekly Floridian* was confident that Menard would lead a crusade against carpetbaggism in Florida. The paper reported a February 1876 debate in which he had "completely silenced" Leonard G. Dennis, white carpetbag leader from Gainesville, who was appealing to racial animosities.<sup>8</sup> In 1876, when Menard again sought the Republican nomination for the second congressional district, he tempered somewhat his criticism of the party. None of the black contenders were successful, however, in a convention condemned by the *Jacksonville Sun* as hinging on "bloody shirt" issues.<sup>9</sup>

6. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, June 23, July 7, 14, August 4, 1874. An examination of the *Times-Picayune* and the *Morning Star and Catholic Messenger*, two "white" New Orleans papers, make no reference or allegations about Menard's political career in Louisiana. In an article in the *Louisianian*, May 4, 1871, is the statement that Menard, "the very apostle of peace" was casting stones everywhere. The paper did not elaborate on that comment.

7. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, August 17, 1875.

8. *Ibid.*, February 22, 1876.

9. *Ibid.*, August 8, 1876.

Menard next announced his candidacy as an Independent and denounced the Republican party more vehemently than ever. Blacks, he asserted, had been openly "outraged" by Republican representatives who kept suggesting the threat of re-enslavement by Democrats and thus were able to maintain political control. "If the intelligent and thinking colored men in the South have any aspiration and hopes in the future," he stated, "they will resist this outrage and fraud, and fight for equal representation and common justice." Menard had the endorsement of several black leaders, including one M. A. Sturk, who praised him as "a full man, one of ripe judgment, of good education, and who is the equal of any carpetbagger in the state." The Republican Jacksonville *Union*, however, condemned him as "a daring fraud, a miserable pretense and an unconscious traitor to his party and people."<sup>10</sup>

Menard's Independent candidacy led him to support Walls, his former rival, in an effort to wrest control from the regular Republicans in Alachua County. Both men had endorsed Simon B. Conover, who had been nominated for governor at a Republican "bolters" convention, over Marcellus Stearns, the regular party nominee. Menard served on the Conover campaign committee, but before the campaign was over Conover withdrew and endorsed Stearns.<sup>11</sup>

In 1876 the Democratic party was in an excellent position to "redeem" Florida, and perhaps also to capture the national presidency. Despite his quarrel with Florida Republicans, Menard was a delegate to the Republican national convention and supported the Rutherford B. Hayes-William Wheeler ticket. He noted in a letter to Hayes: "Inasmuch as troops and repressive laws have failed to establish permanent peace between the two races, we must seek elsewhere . . . for a remedy."<sup>12</sup>

The outcome of both state and national elections were initially uncertain. A successful challenge finally restored the Democrats to power in Florida, and on January 7, 1877, George

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10. *Ibid.*, October 10, 24, 1876.

11. Peter D. Klingman, *Josiah Walls: Florida's Black Congressman of Reconstruction* (Gainesville, 1976), 109-12.

12. Vincent P. DeSantis, *Republicans Face the Southern Question: The New Departure Years, 1877-1897* (New York, 1959), 26; *Proceedings of the Republican National Convention* (Concord, New Hampshire, 1876), appendix, 5.

F. Drew was inaugurated governor. Possibly as a reward for his criticism of the Republican ticket, Governor Drew named Menard a justice of the peace in Duval County.<sup>13</sup>

In March a complicated and largely clandestine compromise, which included a Republican promise to withdraw all remaining federal troops, enabled Hayes to win all of the disputed southern electoral votes and to be elected president. Blacks were generally elated that Hayes was now in the White House, but they were concerned about the removal of troops. Menard was one of the black Floridians granted an audience with the president to ascertain his views on questions of concern to black people. When Hayes promised that blacks would be protected and politically rewarded, the Florida delegation pledged their support of his policy of reconciliation.<sup>14</sup>

Several months later a group of black ministers wrote Menard of the anxiety of black Floridians concerning the president's southern policy and asked his opinion of the situation. Conceding that a cursory examination of Hayes's policy might cause concern, Menard insisted that a deeper assessment "must satisfy every candid mind the least informed on southern affairs that there was no other sensible and patriotic course for the President to take." He described President Grant's earlier use of troops to control white violence as "unnatural, weak, and inimical to the interests of the taxpayers." Blacks, Menard said, should now accept circumstances "just as they are" and work to end old antagonisms rather than continually condemning the prejudices of the whites. He denounced black emigration from the South as totally unfeasible for a poor and illiterate people and suggested abandoning one-partyism as a major step toward self-reliance. But he warned that if the South did not live up to pledges to treat blacks fairly, northern forces would return.<sup>15</sup>

Menard hoped that the Republican victory would rebound to his own benefit and that he would be appointed to the Liberian or a South American ministry. Toward that end he and a

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13. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, October 24, 1876, January 22, 1877.

14. *Ibid.*, March 20, 1877; Bess Beatty, "A Revolution Goes Backward: The Black Response to the Hayes Years" (unpublished ms. in the possession of the author).

15. Menard to "General" (David M. Key), August 8, 1877, Key to Rutherford B. Hayes, August 11, 1877, Rutherford B. Hayes Papers, Hayes Library, Fremont, Ohio.

group of friends lobbied in Washington into the fall of 1877, presenting letters of recommendation on his behalf from some of Florida's most prominent politicians, including Democratic Senator Charles Jones, Governor George Drew, Republican Senator Simon Conover, and former Governor Harrison Reed. He wrote Postmaster General David Key, apparently his closest contact with the president, "I can but hope that the day is not far off when either yourself or the President will be able to do something for me." He finally received an appointment as a watchman in the post office department, but he continued to agitate for a more lucrative position. Disappointed at being denied a diplomatic appointment, he indignantly wrote a treasury department official, "This is child's play, and to say the least very *small* and shabby business for a great Executive Department." But several days later he apologized for "the injustice I did you." He finally obtained a one-month appointment in the Second Auditor's office, followed by a post as inspector of customs in Key West, Florida, at a salary of three dollars a day.<sup>16</sup>

L. W. Livingston, a physician and sometimes correspondent for Menard's newspaper, wrote, eight years after Menard had moved to Key West, that despite some prejudice, it was one of the freest towns for blacks in the South. Menard first arrived alone, and boarded in a black section of the city. He was later joined by his wife and bought property in the town. He again edited a paper, the *Florida News*, but because no issues are extant, it is impossible to assess accurately his particular interests in Key West and that area of Florida. He registered to vote but apparently did not become actively involved in local political affairs. In his editorials he endorsed efforts to make Key West a resort beach community, but generally he seemed to be more interested in state and national political events.<sup>17</sup>

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16. *Ibid.*; Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, October 16, November 13, 1877; Menard to "Dear Sir," September 30, October 8, 1879, Personnel Applications, Register of Customs Officers, Small Ports, Office of the Secretary, 1830-1910, Treasury Department, RG 56, Account 219, 177; Misc. Treasury Accounts, Office of the First Auditor of the Treasury Department, Records of the U. S. General Accounting Office, RG 217, NA.
17. New York *Globe*, August 18, 1883; United States Census Office *10th Census*, 1880, population schedules, Florida (Washington, 1937?), Monroe County, reel 7; Monroe County, *Florida Deed Records*, Book L (July 10, 1883), 333, Monroe County Court House; Monroe County Registration

By 1880 the Republican party in Florida was seriously divided. Although black leaders were increasingly critical of white domination of both elective and appointive positions, most were in the Republican party and considered Democrats more repressive. At a May 1880 Republican rally, Menard condemned the Democrats for discriminating against blacks and claimed that whenever they won in the North "some Bourbon Democrat in the South would go gunning for a nigger." But like other Florida black leaders, he was directing his venom also at the Republican party for taking blacks too much for granted. Despite his dependence on federal patronage, in a letter to the *New York Times*, Menard demanded an end to black dependence on the northern Republicans. He suggested that, because most blacks were laborers, they should consider switching to the National Greenback Labor party. By 1882 he was a leader in a growing statewide effort to form a new party independent of both Democrats and Republicans.<sup>18</sup>

Black disenchantment with the Republican party was only one of the waves of discontent that coalesced to spawn the Independent movement. Independence in Florida was initiated by Democrats dissatisfied with Bourbon rule. The first indication that blacks were in the movement occurred at a May 1882 meeting of Leon and Jefferson county blacks at Miccosuki. When Daniel L. McKinnon announced his candidacy as an Independent in opposition to E. F. Skinner, a Republican, for the first congressional district seat, he was assured of the support of many of these black Independents. By mid-1882 Menard was so committed to the Independent movement and to McKinnon's campaign that the Florida *Union* claimed that his Florida *News* was the journal of Independence.<sup>19</sup>

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List fragment (October 9, 1883), Monroe County Public Library, Key West, Florida.

18. Edward C. Williamson, *Florida Politics in the Gilded Age, 1877-1893* (Gainesville, 1976), 61-62; *New York Times*, December 9, 1878. Menard later claimed to have attended the 1880 Republican convention and to have voted for James G. Blaine, but he is not listed as a delegate in *The Proceedings of the Republican National Convention* (Chicago, 1880).
19. Williamson, *Florida Politics*, 84-85; Edward C. Williamson, "Independence: A Challenge to the Florida Democracy of 1884," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXVII (October 1948), 131-56; Jacksonville *Florida Union*, August 18, 1882; Savannah *Weekly Echo*, August 26, 1883.

President Chester A. Arthur and William E. Chandler, secretary of the navy and Arthur's chief advisor on southern policy, supported Independents in some southern states, rationalizing that this was the most realistic means of defeating Bourbon Democracy. Menard urged Chandler to follow this course in Florida, predicting that it would result in the "redemption" of the state from the Bourbons by 1884. He assured Chandler, "I have taken a prominent part in the politics of this state for the last ten years and know something of the feelings of my people here." The Arthur administration, however, continued to endorse the regular Republicans in Florida and supported Skinner.<sup>20</sup>

Although McKinnon ran a poor third in the first district, the Independents did well in some areas in Florida. After the election Menard again embraced Independence and wrote Chandler that he regretted the national party had been brought into the campaign. He concluded that despite the loss, the Independents had made a respectable showing. He predicted that continued retrenchment from Democracy would enable the Republican party to win national elections in Florida in 1884, but he warned the Republicans to change their strategy and demand that federal office holders cooperate with black leaders. With considerable exaggeration Menard claimed that all leading Florida blacks were supporting Independence, but that only former Governor Stearns and Malachi Martin among the white Republicans were with them. If Chandler, who he hoped would be placed in charge of southern strategy in 1884, would work with the Independents, Menard believed that two or three southern states could be carried by the Republican party.<sup>21</sup>

For several weeks in the spring of 1883 Menard visited Washington, and his ideas were given considerable attention in the national black press. In early June he was honored by the New York *Globe* with a front-page picture and sketch of his life. In response to subsequent charges that black Floridians offered only incompetent leadership, the *Globe* protested and described Menard as first among the capable black leaders of the state who

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20. Menard to William E. Chandler, September 13, October 10, 1882, Chandler Papers, Library of Congress; DeSantis, *Republicans Face the Southern Question*, 166.

21. Menard to Chandler, November 27, 1882, Chandler Papers.

were challenging carpetbag hegemony.<sup>22</sup>

In February 1884 Josiah Walls organized a convention of Florida black leaders in Gainesville. Menard had settled his difference with his former political rival, and was now one of his major supporters. The call for a convention, signed by many influential black leaders, was issued in the *Florida News*, and the paper was subsequently recognized officially as “the organ and medium of the independent sentiment of the colored people of the state.” Menard was temporary chairman of the convention and delivered an opening address devoted largely to criticizing the Republican party and advocating Independence. He was also named to the state executive committee, established to work for implementation of the resolutions demanding full political and civil equality.<sup>23</sup>

Because of considerable contradictory information, M. M. Lewey, secretary of the conference, wrote the New York *Freeman* a lengthy description of the proceedings. It was, he said, “conceived, planned and brought into being by the brain and energy of Gen. J. T. Walls . . . supported by Hon. J. Willis Menard, editor of the *Florida News*, absolutely upon the principle of Independentism-Independent of Bourbon-Democracy and supercilious Republicans whether White or Black of this State.” Lewey rebuked the white Florida press for concluding that the conference was a failure. He claimed these attacks indicated Bourbon fear of black organization on behalf of constitutional rights. When the *Times-Union* claimed the movement was prompted by Menard’s ambition, however, Lewey indirectly agreed when he wrote, “They say that Mr. Menard has secured a berth in the Custom House ‘and so will end.’ What will end? The height of Mr. Menard’s ambition? If so, we may have occasion to say amen.” But the patronage that Menard or anyone else received, Lewey assured, would not mean the end to Independence.<sup>24</sup>

In 1884 blacks again combined forces with dissatisfied white Democrats and Republicans to campaign for Independence in

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22. Washington *Bee*, April 7, 1883; New York *Globe*, May 26, June 2, 1883, April 5, July 26, August 9, 1884.

23. *The Proceedings of the State Convention of the Colored Men of Florida* (Washington, 1884); Klingman, *Josiah Walls*, 128-29.

24. New York *Freeman*, March 15, 1884.

the fall elections. Conflict among the different groups, however, as well as their failure to attract the support of the national Republicans, seriously hampered efforts to overthrow the Bourbons.<sup>25</sup> An Independent convention held in Live Oak in June 1884 nominated Frank Pope, a dissident Democrat, to run for governor. Blacks attended the convention but played relatively minor roles. Menard was prominent among blacks campaigning for Pope and the other Independent candidates. He particularly fought Democratic efforts to lure blacks into their ranks, scornfully asserting the “studied and polished hypocrisy which the Bourbon leaders have displayed toward the colored people since the war is. . . remarkable only for its transparency.”<sup>26</sup>

Pope was narrowly defeated, but the election of Grover Cleveland as the first Democratic president since the Civil War made Florida more securely Democratic than ever. Although alliance with disgruntled Democrats in the state was now less likely, Menard was still determined to make Independence work, hopefully on the national level.

In April 1883 Menard had claimed that blacks all over the country favored independence from the Republican party as their only hope for political equality. Although he exaggerated the extent of support, it was true that there was increasing national discussion of the Independent movement. Many black leaders agreed with Menard’s assessment that it was time for a war, not only against Bourbonism but also “that species of Republicanism which used the colored voters as its only stock in trade.”<sup>27</sup>

Of particular concern to Menard, as he gave more attention to national Independence, was the potential efficacy of the Louisville Colored Convention to be held in the fall of 1883. Because he was concerned that the convention would be dominated by the Arthur administration which had opposed Independence in Florida, Menard denounced it. If Congress, presidents, courts, and armed forces were unable to enforce civil rights, he asked, how could a black convention do it “by brilliant resolves and windy speeches.” At a Washington rally

25. Williamson, *Florida Politics*, 98-100.

26. *Ibid.*, 104, 118, 123.

27. *New York Globe*, April 21, September 29, 1883.

held to protest the convention, Menard erroneously claimed that it was meeting despite the opposition of black leaders from the South and thus "will prove to be the play of Hamlet with the character of Hamlet left out."<sup>28</sup>

Despite the considerable talk of Independence in 1883 and early 1884, Menard and most other prominent black leaders remained loyal to the national Republican presidential ticket. Menard asked Chandler for advice, promising to be "guided by your wisdom." He attended the convention in Chicago and urged black unity to force the selection of a favorable candidate who would work to restore rights lost under the Democratic administration. When some blacks demanded representation on the ticket, however, Menard condemned them as "fit subject[s] for a lunatic asylum." He regarded such a thing as impossible at the time.<sup>29</sup>

In June James G. Blaine was nominated by the Republicans in Chicago, and although he was not popular with many blacks, most of them endorsed him. John Logan, who had greater black support, was nominated for the vice-presidency to balance the two major contending factions of the Republican party. Menard was confident that this strategy would work, that, "as the ticket represents the Half-Breeds and Stalwarts, it is strong and will sweep the country, burying Tilden or any other old Bourbon fossil which the Democrats may set up."<sup>30</sup>

When Cleveland was elected, at first there was pessimism among blacks that their position would seriously degenerate. Some even feared a return to slavery. But after several months of Cleveland as president, many blacks concluded that a Democratic administration was no worse than a Republican one, and some even praised it. At first Menard did not agree and scorned newspapers, particularly the *Freeman*, which spoke favorably of Cleveland. Thomas Fortune, the *Freeman's* editor, retaliated by claiming that Menard was a "knuckle-close Republican."<sup>31</sup>

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28. *Washington Bee*, May 12, 19, 1883; *New York Globe*, May 19, 26, 1883.

29. Menard to Chandler, October 10, 1882, March 14, 1883, Chandler Papers; *New York Globe*, May 26, 1883; *Washington Bee*, February 16, 1884.

30. *New York Globe*, June 21, 1884.

31. *New York Freeman*, October 31, December 12, 19, 1885; *Washington Bee*, December 12, 1885. T. Thomas Fortune was the leading black journalist of the late-nineteenth century and a political pragmatist who

Menard supported the Republican party in 1884, despite the Arthur administration's request for his resignation from his position as inspector of customs due to his alleged activities on behalf of Cuban revolutionaries. Menard admitted attending a Cuban meeting in Key West, but insisted that it was only as a subordinate of the collector of customs. He denied ever supporting earlier filibustering expeditions to the island. His poetry reveals, however, that he had been a staunch friend of Cuban independence for at least several years. Despite his denials and the support of Horatio Bisbee, white Republican leader in Jacksonville, Menard was removed from his position, and he returned to Jacksonville.<sup>32</sup>

James Weldon Johnson, prominent black author and Jacksonville native, later recalled that the city was considered a good one for blacks in the 1880s. He remembered Menard, who he thought resembled Alexander Dumas, as a prominent member of Jacksonville's black society in those years. The entire Menard family lived in the city. Daughter Alice married Thomas Gibbs, the son of Jonathan Gibbs, former secretary of state of Florida. When Menard's son Willis married, the Jacksonville *Times-Union* described the event as "the most noteworthy wedding that ever took place here among the colored people."<sup>33</sup>

Menard re-established his newspaper and opened a print shop on East Bay Street with Willis T. Menard and Thomas V. Gibbs as co-proprietors. In January 1886 the paper was enlarged and the name changed to the *Southern Leader*, reflecting Menard's goal of making it a voice of the entire South. The *Freeman's* editor offered congratulations, and wrote that "Editors Menard and Gibbs have brains and pluck, and if there is any pre-eminent success possible in their line they expect to find it." The

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at different times supported the Republicans, Democrats, Prohibitionists, and varying forms of independence. See Emma Lou Thornbrough, *T. Thomas Fortune: Militant Journalist* (Chicago, 1972).

32. F. N. Wicker to Charles J. Folger, January 30, 1884, Menard to Folger, May 17, 1884, Ramón Alvarez to Folger, May 17, 1884, Ethelbert Hubbs to Folger, June 25, 1884, F. L. to Folger, n.d., Customs House Nominations, Florida, Key West, 1877-1885, Treasury Department, RG 56, NA; "Stanza on Cuba" and "Free Cuba" were both published in *Lays in Summer Lands*.
33. James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way* (New York, 1933), 58. Johnson referred to Menard as "J. H." Menard; *Washington Bee*, September 11, 1885; Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, December 23, 1886.

*Southern Leader* did become the leading black paper in Florida and circulated throughout the South. The *Washington Bee* proclaimed, "The *Southern Leader* is fast growing in the hearts of the people."<sup>34</sup>

Ironically, Menard was more supportive of Republicanism following his return to Jacksonville than he had been in the years that he held Republican patronage. In 1885 a constitutional convention met in Tallahassee to draft a new state constitution. Democratic control was so complete that some Republicans, including Joseph E. Lee, a prominent black Jacksonville leader, agreed to a fusion arrangement whereby they would withdraw from the convention in favor of Democrats who would represent their interests. Menard, probably challenging Lee's leadership in the black community, condemned the plan, claiming that it constituted desertion of the Republican party. The disagreement led to a heated exchange between the two men. Menard accused Lee of "selfishness, deception and dictation." Lee countered by claiming that Menard had fomented violence in Jacksonville several years before when he had persuaded black mill workers to strike.<sup>35</sup>

Although Menard was successful in retaining Republican representation from Duval County, including his son-in-law, Thomas V. Gibbs, he condemned the constitution as a Democratic document under which "the Republicans are bound down hand and foot." The constitution, ratified in November 1885, authorized a poll tax and gave appointive powers to the governor that undermined black numerical superiority in some counties. Edward Williamson, in his study of the convention and constitution, concluded that it "could well be considered a white supremacy document."<sup>36</sup>

By the fall of 1885 Menard was again excoriating the Republicans he had so recently defended, reflecting the frustration typical of black leaders in an era of mounting proscription. He

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34. John R. Richards, *Richards' Jacksonville Duplex City Directory* (Jacksonville, 1887), 33; *New York Freeman*, January 9, 1886; *Washington Bee*, July 24, 1886.

35. Williamson, *Florida Politics*, 131-32; *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*, May 1, 1885.

36. Williamson, *Florida Politics*, 129-43. Menard won this battle with Lee but throughout the remainder of the decade Lee was more influential in Duval County politics.

wrote, "The cold indifference shown to the material interests of the colored people by these carpetbaggers since Cleveland's election and their attempt to curry favor with the Bourbons will go far to prove, if any further evidence were needed, that their interest in the Negro only extended to the manipulation of his vote to promote their selfish ends." Menard predicted that the Republican party would not regain national power until new leadership came to the forefront.<sup>37</sup>

By 1886, with the Democrats firmly entrenched and Independence diminished in significance, Menard began to rationalize that a more tolerant age was dawning in Florida. In contrast to his recent criticism, he now claimed that liberal Democrats and blacks had cooperated in ratifying the new state constitution and that this was evidence that the two groups would continue to cooperate in the future. In March 1886 he wrote, "Despite the lingering traces of Southern chivalry and effete Bourbonism the fact that the South of 1861 is not the South of to-day is too self-evident for serious argument. Passion and intolerance swayed the South then and for years afterward, but now intolerance is being replaced by a widespread liberal spirit—a spirit which recognized the fact that sectional seclusion is antagonistic to that material development and healthy interstate commercial intercourse which have transformed the South from the bonds and blinders of the old feudal system to her present state of material wealth and progress." He wrote, concerning black Republican allegiance: "The colored people of Florida and the South are generally Republicans from principle and not for 'milk'," but he also concluded, in anticipation of Booker T. Washington's philosophy, that "the elevation of the race depends upon its self-development and not on the success of any political party." This prompted the *Times-Union* to praise the *Southern Leader* as "an able and independent weekly paper," and to commend Menard for his "public spirit and enterprise."<sup>38</sup>

Despite his optimism, Menard was obliged to comment on an ominous trend of the 1880s. Twice in 1886 the *Freeman* reported on the *Southern Leader's* crusade against lynching, a

37. New York *Freeman*, July 11, August 20, November 7, 1885.

38. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, October 11, November 12, 1886, March 20, 24, 1887; New York *Freeman*, March 7, September 11, 1886.

contradiction of Menard's claim of a more liberal South. When several blacks were lynched in Mississippi, Menard condemned the killings as "one of the most cold blooded and infamous crimes ever committed in any civilized community," and described it as "another black stain on the South."<sup>39</sup>

The national issue given the greatest coverage in the black press in 1886 and early 1887 was the appointment of, first, James Matthews, and then James Monroe Trotter, as recorder of deeds. The considerable Republican opposition to their appointments was further evidence to Menard that blacks must look elsewhere for political support. In January 1887 he wrote an article entitled "Cleveland and the Negro" and sent a copy to the president. He suggested that blacks had reached a point in their history when their motto should be "Save me from my friends." The Republican party, he assured Cleveland, was making a serious mistake by opposing Matthews because it now appeared that they had worked to free blacks, only to make them slaves of the Republican party. Menard claimed that blacks were now caught between two enemies and predicted that from this dilemma would come an organization composed of Cleveland Democrats and Republican Mugwumps which would "lead the cause of the negro as an absolute freeman and citizen." Matthews was twice defeated, but in February Cleveland appointed another black man, James Monroe Trotter, an Iberian College classmate of Menard, and he was confirmed by the United States Senate.<sup>40</sup>

In the spring of 1887 Thomas Fortune proposed formation of the Afro-American National League to unite the hundreds of black organizations fighting discrimination and oppression. Although Menard was a member of the National Colored Press Association, he was generally opposed to all-black organizations. He condemned the League on the grounds that it would only intensify racial problems in the South which he claimed were rapidly abating. He argued that Fortune's criticisms of southern government were "cheap and convenient and they relieve the editorial mind, but they do no good, neither do they solve our

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39. New York *Freeman*, April 3, July 24, 1886.

40. Jacksonville *Southern Leader*, January 22, 1887, clipping enclosed in letter from Menard to Grover Cleveland, January 22, 1887, Grover Cleveland Papers, Library of Congress, Series 2, roll 45; Washington *Bee*, January 8, 1887.

problems." Fortune conceded that the *Southern Leader* was edited with "discretion and ability," but he condemned Menard's ideas on the League as pure nonsense. "Perhaps when the editor of the *Southern Leader* gets his head smashed by some hot headed Southerner," Fortune suggested, "the organization of a League will not seem to be so dangerous a thing after all."<sup>41</sup>

Although Fortune received considerable encouragement from other black leaders, he was not able to establish the League formally until January 1891. The dire consequences that Menard predicted did not occur, but he was correct that blacks did not have the resources to sustain such a venture. The League did not survive long and never had the impact Fortune intended.<sup>42</sup>

In 1888 presidential politics again took precedence. When Blaine announced in February that he was not a candidate, many blacks expressed relief, but Menard described his action as "a cunning dodge" to keep his candidacy alive. Like many southern blacks he supported John Sherman for the Republican nomination. When Benjamin Harrison was nominated, Menard offered support and expressed confidence that the defeat of Blaine would restore the party to its former power.<sup>43</sup>

The Jacksonville *Cyclone*, a black Republican campaign paper, predicted that the Republicans could win in Florida if they would run a campaign in which they told the truth to "blindfolded" Democrats. Menard was less confident, pointing out that with new registration laws, the Democrats could easily disfranchise thousands of blacks, and he printed several exposes of "bull-dozing" in Florida during the campaign.<sup>44</sup>

Cleveland carried Florida in November, but Harrison narrowly won the election. By the fall of 1888, however, Jacksonville was preoccupied with a yellow fever epidemic. In October the crisis forced Menard to suspend publication of the *Southern Leader*, but he continued speaking out on national affairs. In January 1887 he had written President Cleveland of

41. New York *Freeman*, May 26, June 18, 25, July 16, August 27, September 24, 1887.

42. Bess Beatty, "The Political Response of Black Americans, 1876-1896" (Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1976), 226.

48. Washington *Bee*, February 25, March 17, 1888; New York *Age*, February 25, June 16, July 14, 1888; Chattanooga *Justice*, December 24, 1887; Stanley P. Hirshon, *Farewell to the Bloody Shirt: Northern Republicans & the Southern Negro, 1877-1893* (Bloomington, 1962), 156-60.

44. New York *Age*, May 12, June 16, July 28, August 4, 1888.

his concern that blacks were overly optimistic about the restoration of Republican rule. In a major shift from his earlier optimism, he now claimed that the South was fast approaching a political climax in which the supremacy of one race or the other must be decided. Concluding that enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments was unlikely, he now suggested migration to the West as the only solution for blacks-of benefit both to those who left and those who remained-to command a higher wage.<sup>45</sup>

Menard summarized many of his revised ideas in a pamphlet, *The Southern Problem*, published in 1889 and described by the editor of the Indianapolis *Freeman* as "a calm, despassionate [*sic*] consideration of the great question." Calvin Chase, editor of the *Bee*, described Menard as "a wise and judicious thinker," but the Boston *Republic* charged that he was "a poor thinker" and that "to get out of a place where Yellow Jack is a yearly visitor underlies his opinion."<sup>46</sup>

Despite the yellow fever epidemic, Fortune was confident that Menard would not "leave the scene of his journalistic trials and struggles." But the *Southern Leader* was not able to revive after it suspended publication. In the summer of 1889 Menard left Jacksonville to accept a position in the census office in Washington. He had by this time revised many of his earlier opinions. In November he wrote Fortune congratulating him on the League. His opposition two years earlier, he explained, was because of his belief that southern whites might be induced out of self-interest to treat blacks more fairly, but he now realized that race friction would occur and that the reactionary spirit of white Southerners would last several more generations. Possibly the League could "systematize and render more effective the work of public agitation."<sup>47</sup>

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45. *Ibid.*, October 13, December 1, 1888; Menard to Cleveland, January 22, 1887, Cleveland Papers. Blacks were seemingly less susceptible to yellow fever at the time, but not completely immune.

46. Indianapolis *Freeman*, February 9, 1889; New York *Age*, January 12, 1889; Washington *Bee*, February 29, 1889. A copy of this pamphlet has not been located.

47. New York *Age*, January 12, November 23, 1889; Detroit *Plaindealer*, September 26, 1889; Menard to Mr. Secretary (William Windon?), June 15, 1889, Personnel Applications, Office of the Secretary, 1830-1910, Treasury Department, RG 56, NA. Apparently Menard left because his business was seriously affected by the fever.

In the summer of 1890 Menard and several other black leaders formed the Southern States Colored Republican Association "to disseminate wholesome political information among colored voters and to solidify young colored men of the nation to advance Republican principles." He also launched a monthly magazine, the *National American*, that the *Bee* described as "a nicely printed periodical and well edited." The *Age* was also complimentary, praising Menard as "eminently qualified" and calling for support and appreciation of the magazine. But in Washington, a city of numerous black leaders and journalists, Menard was not able to re-establish his earlier reputation. He was also in failing health, and on October 8, 1893, John Willis Menard died. The *Washington Post* remembered him as "a writer and a scholar [who] . . . exercised considerable influence among the people of his race." The Jacksonville *Times-Union* eulogized Menard as "a man of brains and education [who] . . . had some reputation as a newspaper man, poet and politician . . . a good friend and wise counsellor to his race."<sup>48</sup>

In 1879, in response to a job application question concerning his contributions to the Union during the war, Menard had responded, "I spent twelve years in trying to make Reconstruction a success." If the endurance of black political, economic, and social rights guaranteed in the Reconstruction era are his test, Menard was a failure. But as Peter Klingman correctly claimed in his study of Congressman Josiah Walls, black leaders cannot be studied by traditional tests of political success or failure exclusively; they must also be studied according to how they functioned in a racist society.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the overwhelming racial proscriptions of pre-Civil War America, opportunities had been available for the educational and professional development of a small black leadership. These men and women moved decisively during and after the war to take a place in the public arena. But because their society

48. Penelope L. Bulloch, "The Negro Periodical Press in the United States, 1838-1909" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1971), 231-32; *Washington Bee*, July 26, August 16, October 4, 1890, October 14, 1893; *New York Age*, October 18, 1890; *Indianapolis Freeman*, November 22, 1890; November 14, 1891; *Washington Post*, October 10, 1893; Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, October 11, 1893.

49. Statement of J. W. Menard, 2nd District Florida, November 1, 1879, Personnel Applications, Office of the Secretary, 1830-1910, Treasury Department, RG 56, NA; Klingman, *Josiah Walls*, viii.

was a profoundly racist one, their position was tenuous; it was dependent on Republican rule in the South and support in the North. Despite some lip-service to the idea of racial equality by carpetbag politicians during the early years of Reconstruction, it was largely left to blacks themselves to make their place in free society and to stem the tide of disfranchisement and debasement. Their efforts centered on their relationship to political parties, particularly the Republican party. Menard was typical in his inconsistency—alternately praising and condemning Republicans. He most vehemently denounced the scalawags and carpetbaggers, those white local and state party leaders with whom blacks had for a time vied for power, but who had increasingly established “lily-white” Republicanism. Because of their growing dependence on federal patronage, Menard and other southern black leaders maintained a more conciliatory attitude toward national Republican leadership. Some counseled support of Democrats as a means to destroy this dependence, but southern Bourbons gave them little opportunity to do so. Various other arrangements—including support of third parties, fusion, all-black organizations, and political abstinence—were both advocated and condemned. Although they generally agreed on racial ends, black leaders often disagreed on the means to those ends. There was considerable friction and animosity as they competed for the limited power and patronage that would enable their opinion to dominate.

For Menard the soundest alternative was the ill-defined cause of Independence. It was an unworkable solution, but Menard was typical of many black leaders in the post-Civil War period who vainly searched for a viable political course for making black political freedom a reality. Impotence to stem the tide of disfranchisement was largely responsible for the constant flux and inconsistency of Menard and many other political leaders. Vincent DeSantis has described their reaction: “Depressed by Republican politics since the end of Reconstruction, torn between loyalty for and resentment against the party of emancipation, and severely restricted in their privileges of voting, southern Negroes presented a picture of helplessness and confusion.”<sup>50</sup> It was easy for Menard, who had defended his right to a seat in the

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50. DeSantis, *Republicans Face the Southern Question*, 69.

United States House of Representatives only three years after his race's emancipation, to conclude that there was nothing to hold black people back, that they would have only themselves to blame for failure. By 1877 it was clear that the limited freedom of Reconstruction was over, but for several more years Menard insisted that conditions would get better. That he was not entirely convinced that this was true did not mitigate the enthusiasm with which he used his considerable editorial abilities to advance the cause to which he had committed his life.

If by his own test—the success of Reconstruction—John Willis Menard had failed, by conventional tests he had not been highly successful either. He was not a sage of journalism, he held no high political office, and his poetry was mediocre. But he was, as the *Times-Union* praised him, “a good friend and wise counsellor [*sic*] to his race.” If Menard and other black leaders of this period became increasingly powerless in the public arena, they had an intangible impact of great significance. Their legacy to black Americans was to infuse them with a determination to be citizens equal to all others. E. Merton Coulter has also concluded, in his study of southern Reconstruction, that “The Negro's high hopes were left to fade away; how much better for him, had they never been raised.”<sup>51</sup> The high hopes of black Americans had suffered cruelly in the decades following Reconstruction, but the legacy of men and women of that time to those of the twentieth century was to keep those hopes alive. Black people in the 1960s and 1970s could trace the genesis of their victories to demands that were first heard decades before.

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51. Coulter, *South During Reconstruction*, 69.