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Robert L. Hall



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"YONDER COME DAY": RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS OF  
THE TRANSITION FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM IN  
FLORIDA<sup>1</sup>

by ROBERT L. HALL

**T**<sub>HE</sub> Confederate firing on Fort Sumter in 1861 was a watershed not only in the political and military history of the United States, but also a turning point in its social history. The heady wine of secessionism and the rupturing of lines of communication and calm moral discourse were experienced in some religious polities for more than a decade before the fateful military event. Southern Methodists and Baptists had parted company with their non-southern counterparts by 1845, when, as John Hope Franklin has written, "slavery had become as much a part of the religious orthodoxy of the South as the Creation in the Book of Genesis or Armageddon in the Book of Revelations. The work of promoting and defending slavery, when entrusted to the southern clergy, could not have been in safer hands."<sup>2</sup> On the eve of secession, bishops of the Episcopal and Catholic churches in Florida were urging secession and preaching fiery pro-slavery sermons. Bishop Frances Huger Rutledge of the Episcopal Church was so enthusiastic in his exhortations on behalf of southern independence that Edmund Ruffin, an eyewitness observer of the Florida secession convention, was impressed with Rutledge's "ardent and active patriotic sentiments."<sup>3</sup> Not only did he refuse to attend church services

Robert L. Hall is assistant professor, Department of History and African American Studies, University of Maryland Baltimore County, Catonsville, Maryland.

1. See the jacket liner notes, "In The Old Fashioned Way," *Yonder Come Day. Note Singing and Spirituals From South Georgia*, Front Porch Records 79-001, GA 179. produced and directed by Dennis Coelho.
2. John Hope Franklin, "The Great Confrontation: The South and the Problem of Change," *Journal of Southern History* 38 (February 1972) 10. For details on the Baptist schism, see William Greer Todd, "The Slavery Issue and the Organization of a Southern Baptist Convention," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1964).
3. Edmund Ruffin, quoted in Dorothy Dodd, "Edmund Ruffin's Account of the Florida Secession Convention, 1861," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 12 (October 1933), 69-70. Rutledge was the Episcopal bishop of Florida from

on the national day of humiliation and prayer proclaimed by President Buchanan, but Rutledge also pledged \$500 to help defray the new government's expenses if the ordinance of secession passed.<sup>4</sup>

There were nearly 400 black Catholics living and worshipping in St. Augustine on the eve of the Civil War. Three months before the firing on Fort Sumter, many of them were undoubtedly present when Augustin Verot, vicar apostolic of Florida, preached a sermon advancing the traditional Catholic theological position that slavery was not in itself evil and vigorously defending the property rights of those who owned slaves. Bishop Verot's sermon, "Slavery and Abolitionism," delivered in the parish church at St. Augustine on January 4, 1861, was soon printed and disseminated widely throughout the South, and it became a popular Confederate pro-slavery tract.<sup>5</sup> In other regards, however, Verot's biographer believed "he had a compassionate regard for the Negro slave."<sup>6</sup> Unquestionably, Bishop Verot did demonstrate a profound concern for the religious instruction of black Floridians during the years immediately after the Civil War.

During the Civil War, rumblings of black religious assertions began to be heard even more loudly than during the antebellum period. Shortages of both human power and financial resources rendered these black assertions nearly irresistible, and converted the war years into a period of incubation for local and

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1851-1866. See also, Joseph D. Cushman, Jr., *A Goodly Heritage: The Episcopal Church in Florida, 1821-1892* (Gainesville, 1965), 27, 42-43, 76.

4. Dorothy Dodd, "The Secession Movement in Florida, 1850-1861, Part II," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 12 (October 1933), 60.
5. A treatment of the anti-Union sentiments of both of the Florida churchmen mentioned in this paragraph is found in H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But... Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (Durham, 1972), 175-77. The title of Bishop Verot's sermon was *A Tract for the Times. Slavery and Abolitionism, Being the Substance of a Sermon Preached in the Church of St. Augustine, Florida, on the 4th Day of January, 1861, Day of Public Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer* (New Orleans, 1861). In 1864, J. W. Brinckerhoff, who had come to St. Augustine in February 1863 as a United States government superintendent of the colored people, observed that "a large portion of the colored people here are regular attendants and devoted adherents of the Roman Catholic Church." J. W. Brinckerhoff to George Whipple, November 23, 1864, American Missionary Association Papers, microfilm ed., reel 28, Robert Manning Strozier Library, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida.
6. Michael V. Cannon, *Rebel Bishop: The Life and Era of Augustin Verot* (Milwaukee, 1964), 33.

regional black religious leadership even before the missionary invasions from the north.

Although he made no specific mention of Florida, Bell I. Wiley devoted a chapter in his study, *Southern Negroes*, to the "Religious Life" of southern blacks during the Civil War. He suggested that the interest of white Southerners in the spiritual welfare of slaves may actually have intensified during the Civil War for a number of reasons. A primary factor must have been "the realization of the value of religious training in preserving submissiveness and loyalty amid the disturbing influences of the war."<sup>7</sup> Florida Methodists concurred with the judgement of the South Carolina Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, that slave missions had considerable value in "securing the quiet and peaceful subordination of these people."<sup>8</sup> In 1861, the Florida Conference reported that about forty-three per cent of its 15,453 members were black.<sup>9</sup> However, changes occurring in southern society were obvious statistically to Florida Methodists. In 1863, there was a net loss of 987 black members, and in 1865, a net loss of 560.<sup>10</sup>

Other factors cited by Wiley that may have contributed to expanded religious opportunities for southern blacks during the Civil War included the scarcity of white ministers, the shrinking incomes of churches, and the physical deterioration of church properties. Florida's Protestant Episcopal Church, for example, suffered several setbacks during the Civil War. Among them was the loss of four of its thirteen pre-war churches. The buildings of three of the parishes were burned and a fourth was sold for debt." The lack of white ministers also may have created a

7. Bell Irvin Wiley, *Southern Negroes, 1861-1865* (New Haven, 1938), 98. See also, W. Harrison Daniel, "Southern Protestantism and the Negro, 1860-1865," *North Carolina Historical Review* 41 (July 1964), 338-59.
8. *Charleston Mercury*, November 8, 1861.
9. William E. Brooks, *History Highlights of Florida Methodism* (Fort Lauderdale, 1965), 30.
10. Charles T. Thrift, Jr., *The Trail of the Florida Circuit Rider* (Lakeland, 1944), 160.
11. Jerrell H. Shofner, *Nor is it Over Yet: Florida in the Era of Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (Gainesville, 1974), 145. An example of the loss of white preachers comes from Old Pisgah Methodist Church in Leon County. In his mimeographed study which carries the story up to 1976, the current pastor of Pisgah indicated that the Civil War called "many of the preachers and most of the male members who were of military age into the Confederate Army," Norman Edward Booth, *A History of 'Old Pisgah' Highlights and Happenings, 1830-1976* (1976), 13. Mimeographed copy in the Florida Collection, Robert Manning Strozier Library, Florida State University.

leadership vacuum which left room for black preachers, class leaders, and would-be preachers to address black religious gatherings and, occasionally, racially-mixed meetings.<sup>12</sup> Helen Moore Edwards recalled that during the Civil War her father, Kidder Meade Moore, let the slaves on his Pine Tucky plantation in Jefferson County “preach in our school house. They put seats outside and “we would often go and listen to them,” she wrote. Edwards also recalled that Joe Curry, “a negro refugee,” did the preaching.<sup>13</sup>

The wartime–Union occupation of the Jacksonville area enabled such black evangelists as Ivey Barnes to travel about. Sometime during the early 1860s a small band of black Protestants in St. Augustine held meetings in the home of Deacon John Newnan. Barnes frequently journeyed from Jacksonville to St. Augustine to exhort the faithful gathered at Newnan’s home, but attracted little attention. Later, Hammie Williams organized a Baptist Sunday School consisting of ten children, seven of whom were Catholic. The Sunday School continued to grow, and on March 13, 1864, the First Baptist Church in St. Augustine was organized. The church called Reverend Barnes as its first pastor. Eventually, a lot on the corner of St. Francis and St. Benedict streets was purchased, and a wooden shack was erected as a house of worship.<sup>14</sup>

12. Some whites had attended some of the sermons preached by such black ministers as James Page before the Civil War, but during the war, in the absence of white preachers who had gone off to minister to the troops, many more whites had occasion to attend services conducted by black preachers.
13. Helen Moore Edwards, *Memoirs of Helen M. Edwards of Pine Tucky Plantation, Jefferson County, Florida* (1926), 5. This is an eight-page printed booklet, a copy of which is in Special Collections, Robert Manning Strozier Library, Florida State University. Edwards was born on January 27, 1851, in Newport, Florida, and spent much of her childhood on “Pine Tucky” plantation located near Waukeelah in Jefferson County. She was fourteen years old when the slaves were freed.
14. WPA Files, Federal Writers Project, Negro Churches, 1936, carbon copy of typewritten document compiled by workers of the FWP, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville. The fieldworker, Wilson W. Rice, secured some of the information about the First Baptist Church through interviews with Mrs. Hammie Williams Jourdan, one of the founders of the church. The interview was conducted in her home on 68 Onida Street, St. Augustine, Florida. The general wartime atmosphere in St. Augustine is treated in Omega G. East, “St. Augustine During the Civil War,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 31 (October 1952), 75-91.

St. Mary's Primitive Baptist Church in Tallahassee may have been founded as early as June 1861, by the Reverend Henry Griffin, a minister from Virginia. During the war a site for the church building, located on Call Street between McComb and Boulevard (renamed Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard in 1980), was purchased from a white man for \$250 and a small frame building was erected.<sup>15</sup> During the Civil War when white Baptists in Key West shifted or drifted to other churches, their building was taken over by black Baptists who continued to hold services there until as late as the fall of 1879.<sup>16</sup>

When, on June 10, 1865, Reverend William G. Steward organized Florida's first African Methodist Episcopal Church under an authorized pastor in Midway, a settlement east of Jacksonville, he was besieged by numerous requests from black Floridians to start churches in their locales. Henry Call of Cottondale, who organized a black congregation with the approval and presence of white overseers during the war, is said to have walked over 240 miles from Marianna to Jacksonville to persuade Reverend Steward to return with him to incorporate officially a two-year old congregation into the A.M.E. Church.<sup>17</sup>

Not all black Floridians, of course, were able to attend local congregations led by black preachers. Throughout the Civil War the vast majority of the slave population was probably involved in the cycle of becoming members in, and occasionally being excommunicated from, racially-mixed congregations affiliated with southern white-controlled denominations. Slaves in Madison County, for example, continued to join the Concord Missionary Baptist Church much as they had before the outbreak of the war. Nineteen slave members were received into the church during 1862. In July, Jephtha (the property of James Wilson), Dick, Mack, and Dorcas (Parramore estate) were received into

15. WPA Files, Federal Writers Project, *Negro Churches*, 1936. Alfred Farrell was the fieldworker who prepared the account of St. Mary's Primitive Baptist Church in Tallahassee. Farrell is listed as the interviewer for several of the WPA Slave Narratives consulted in the preparation of this study.
16. Jefferson B. Browne, *Key West, The Old and the New* (1912; facsimile ed., Gainesville, 1973), 44.
17. Charles Summer Long, *History of the A.M.E. Church in Florida* (Philadelphia, 1939), 52. Long, the historian of the A.M.E. Church in Florida, was the son of Thomas W. Long, an A.M.E. minister who served three terms in the Florida Senate. Henry Call is said to have found a church handbill on a battlefield while searching for his master. There were four members in the church when he organized it.

membership. In June, Charles, Vina, Catherine, Lucy, Luke, Sam, Jack, and Claracy all “came in by experience.”<sup>18</sup> In October 1862, the following Parramore estate slaves became members of Concord Missionary Baptist Church: Lydia, Emaline, Rachael, Henrietta, Amy, and Sarah, and Sarah, owned by Brother Lloyd. On the third Sunday in January 1865, twenty-four more slaves became members of this church. In September 1865, only months after the close of the Civil War and fully five years before a mass exodus from the church, Prince, one of the twenty-four blacks who had joined earlier that year, was charged with theft, found guilty, and excommunicated from the church for his transgression.<sup>18</sup>

In those instances where slaveholders did not build chapels on their own land, slaves from several farms might travel by foot or wagon to country churches where slaves and masters from several farms would worship together. These gatherings, sometimes followed by “dinner on the grounds,” especially during revival season after the crops had been laid by, provided more than spiritual enlightenment. There was also the chance to meet friends and kinfolks who lived on other farms and, not to be overlooked, the opportunity to meet members of the opposite sex and to court. Many a match was made as a result of such a meeting at a Sabbath outing. The parents of Emma Porter, who lived on separate farms in Wakulla County, met and courted at church during the Civil War. Their daughter was born before the end of the war, and in the 1960s she was remembered by the *Magnolia Monthly* as “The Last Slave in Wakulla County.”<sup>20</sup>

During the Civil War, Florida’s Episcopal churches continued to minister to some slaves. In 1863, Reverend William J. Ellis, rector of St. John’s Church, Tallahassee, reported three baptisms of “colored” infants (three of forty-seven or 6.3 per cent of all the infant baptisms reported for that year from the parish). Half of the eighteen people confirmed in 1863 were black.<sup>21</sup> On July 18, 1863, Reverend Owen P. Thackara of Christ

18. Edwin B. Browning, Sr., *History of Concord Baptist Church, 1841-1976* (Madison, FL, 1976), 33.

19. *Ibid.*, 34-35.

20. “The Last Slave in Wakulla County,” appeared in the *Magnolia Monthly* (April 1964) and is reprinted in Elizabeth F. Smith, *Wakulla County Pioneers, 1827-1967* (Crawfordville, FL, 1968), I, 37.

21. “Report from St. John’s Church Tallahassee, Wm. J. Ellis, Rector, 1863,”

Church, Monticello, recorded the baptism of fifty-seven "colored" infants. All eleven of the adults baptized at Christ Church that year were black. Thirty-nine of the eighty-five members listed for Christ Church in 1863 (or about forty-six per cent) were black Episcopalians. Reverend Thackara reported that "the Sunday services were divided between Monticello and Aucilla. Part of each Sunday is devoted to the servants. The children, both white and colored, are catechized every Sunday before service."<sup>22</sup> The slaves on the plantations owned by John Bradley, William Bailey, Dr. John Eppes, and Dr. Bythewood were, according to Thackara, regularly instructed once a month. "The slaves on these plantations," wrote Thackara, "seem interested in the services, and having been taught the prayers, the creed, the chants, and some of the selections of the psalms, join heartily in the responses." Successful religious instruction resulted in the slaves memorizing the creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the responses in the baptismal service.<sup>23</sup> Four of the twenty-three infants baptized by Episcopalian missionaries at Lake City in 1863 (or 17.4 per cent) were black. Christ Church, Pensacola, also reached a few blacks, mostly infants.<sup>24</sup>

In his report to the 1867 convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Florida, Reverend Osgood E. Herrick, rector of St. Paul's Church, Key West, enumerated the transactions that had occurred since his previous report of April 1861. Twelve of the 201 individuals baptized between 1861 and 1867, or about six per cent, were listed as "colored." Twenty-two of the ninety-seven marriages performed during the same period, about 22.7 per cent, involved black couples.<sup>25</sup>

The year 1865 was one of uncertainty and emotional peaks and valleys for both blacks and whites throughout the South. A telling capsule of these emotions comes from the April 29, 1865, letter of an agent of the American Missionary Association in Florida: "But this week, our hearts too were made to rejoice at

in *Diocese of Florida Journal of the Proceedings of the Convention held in Tallahassee, May 8, 1867 in St. John's Church with the sermon preached by the Rev. J. J. Scott, in memory of the late Bishop Rutledge, including proceedings in 1863 and 1866* (Tallahassee, 1867), 12.

22. *Ibid.*, 12.

23. *Ibid.*, 13.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*, 53.



glorious intelligence [the news of Lee's surrender] and the Freedmen of this place seemed to feel doubly sure of their freedom which their old task-masters, especially mistresses, seemed to feel for the first time that there were signs of . . . [word illegible] and that all was lost! And they wept and groaned saying we shall never have our niggers back again. But when the news of the President's death came two or three days after, they took heart again— taunting the colored people about their dark prospect of being free and some of our people began to talk of going north to escape enslavement again, for as Massa Lincoln was gone they feared their hope was gone too. But their confidence settled back again into the strong arm of their God, which they said was above all and they would trust Him to carry their cause through."<sup>26</sup>

For those whites who still held on to the dream of antebellum plantation life, the changes wrought by the Civil War were not only momentous but traumatic. "Little did the happy people of Tallahassee and old Leon County dream of the store of trouble and vicissitudes awaiting for them," wrote Captain F. A. Hendry. "These big-hearted wealthy citizens of that day with their hundreds of slaves and broad fields" would see their former slaves participating as freedmen in the processes of government.<sup>27</sup>

One of the most impressive facts of Reconstruction was the strong desire of black people to have churches and preachers of their own. In most instances, independent black churches were successfully established and maintained. Dr. Joe A. Richardson considered the establishment of these independent churches for and by the freed people to be one of the most significant results of Reconstruction.<sup>28</sup> Beside changing personal names, changing church affiliation was one of the major symbolic actions taken by free persons to signify their new status.<sup>29</sup>

26. Harriet B. Greely to Whipple, April 29, 1865, American Missionary Association Papers, microfilm ed., reel 28, Robert Manning Strozier Library, Florida State University.

27. Captain F. A. Hendry, "Tallahassee Before the War," letter to the editor of *The True Democrat*, October 5, 1908, reprinted in *Florida Historical Quarterly* 1 (January 1909), 16-18.

28. Joe M. Richardson, *The Negro in the Reconstruction of Florida, 1865-1877* (Tallahassee, 1965).

29. One example of the changing of names with the advent of freedom is provided in the oral tradition of the McKinney family. During slavery times the family was owned by a man named Smith near Madison, Florida.

The assertion of religious freedom and the establishment of independent churches by blacks, while not marking a change in religious doctrine or ritual, significantly altered black-white social relations. Francis Butler Simkins claimed that "in withdrawing from the white churches he [the Negro] surrendered an element of social intimacy with the white man which he had experienced under slavery."<sup>30</sup> Antebellum Florida laws forbade blacks to hear any preaching that was not delivered either in white churches or under white supervision. After the Civil War, the Florida legislature, as yet unreconstructed, enacted a series of laws which reversed antebellum policies, if not attitudes toward blacks. A law enacted on January 15, 1866, made it a misdemeanor for any Negro, mulatto, or other person of color to "intrude himself" into any religious assembly of whites or any other assembly of whites. The same act also prevented whites from "intruding" into black churches and assemblies. In effect, the law prescribed racial separation during religious worship.<sup>31</sup> The passage of such a law suggests that once slavery had ended the willingness of whites to tolerate antebellum levels of "social intimacy" with blacks had disappeared. Although black Floridians had some pronounced leanings toward separate worship, their decision to "surrender" an element of social intimacy with whites by "withdrawal" from the white-controlled denominations was not entirely unilateral or voluntary. What blacks and whites were experiencing during the liminal years immediately following the Civil War was a kind of re-creation of the conditions facing black members of northern congregations in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Northern blacks, too, had worshipped in the same buildings as the whites, but in specially designated parts of the building. The separate local black congregations which formed the nuclei of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church began, at least partially, in protest against such racial

Since the family considered Smith to be "mean," when freedom came they took the name of McKinney, a "kind" white man in the area. Interview with Richard Ishmael McKinney by Robert L. Hall, Tallahassee, Florida, July 18, 1981.

30. Francis Butler Simkins, "Tolerating the South's Past," in Patrick Gerster and Nicholas Cords, eds. *Myth and Southern History* (Chicago, 1974), 172.
31. "An Act Prescribing Additional Penalties...," *Acts of Florida Legislatures* 14th Session, January 15, 1866, 23-27.

restrictions as being required to wait until all the white members were served before taking the sacrament.<sup>32</sup>

Not until months, and sometimes even years after the end of the Civil War, did black Floridians begin their massive exodus from white-controlled southern denominations. In the meantime, a disturbing level of white violence and lawlessness was being unleashed against black Floridians, a circumstance which must surely have strengthened whatever resolve blacks may already have had to avoid whites if possible. Although a significant number of white Christians, often of the upper classes, contributed materially to the development of black churches during Reconstruction, black churches were not immune to the violent rampages of white mobs. On May 8, 1866, the *New York Times* commented on the large number of attacks on the black schools, churches, and other black institutions occurring in Florida.<sup>33</sup> This atmosphere of political flux, legal change, and largely white-initiated racial violence forms the backdrop for understanding the changes in religion that occurred during this period.

A fitting starting point for understanding what freedom might have meant to black Floridians is May 20, 1865, the day which twentieth-century blacks living in north Florida still commemorate as Emancipation Day. It was on that day that Union General Edward McCook gathered the freed people in Tallahassee and read them the Emancipation Proclamation which Abraham Lincoln had issued on January 1, 1863.<sup>34</sup> The areas

32. For the history of the A.M.E. Church, see Carol V. R. George, *Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Emergence of Independent Black Churches, 1760-1840* (New York, 1973) and, for the A.M.E. Zion Church, see William Jacob Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church: Reality of the Black Church* (Charlotte, NC, 1974).
33. *New York Times*, May 8, 1866. This lawlessness was not to cease with the events of 1866 reported in the *New York Times*, but persisted at least through 1871 and well beyond. The specialist on this episode in Florida history is Ralph L. Peek. See his article, "Lawlessness in Florida, 1868-1871," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 40 (October 1961), 164-85, and "Lawlessness and the Restoration of Order in Florida, 1868-1871," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Florida, 1964).
34. Dispatched with eight companies by Major General James H. Wilson from Macon, Georgia, it was McCook who accepted the surrender of 8,000 Confederates in Florida. For a general treatment of emancipation celebrations by a folklorist, see William H. Wiggins, Jr., "Lift Every Voice: A Study of Afro-American Emancipation Celebrations," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 9 (1974), 180-91.

where the slaves were called together to be told that they were free became almost sacred landmarks and remain so down to the present day. John Byrd's father, who had been a slave in Jefferson County, repeatedly took his son on walks through the fields to show him the big oak tree where they went to "get their freedom."<sup>35</sup> Oral tradition has provided information, and more importantly, a perspective on the bewildering transition from legal slavery to nominal freedom. An anonymous black employee at Florida State University in Tallahassee, whose maternal grandparents and great grandparents were slaves in Leon County, gave the following account of what her mother had told her about her slave great grandmother: "Well, I remember my mother talking about her grandmother. She was in slavery. And how they would have to work, and how the, I guess the old master didn't allow them to associate with one another. They had to work all day long, and then go home and cook for the master and she said after a short while, I guess when freedom was declared, well they [the slaveowners] didn't want to believe it, and they still wanted to make them work. Then they came along, and just made them turn them a loose. Then they turned them a loose and they [the slaves] didn't have anything to go upon. Just had to go out and make life by themselves. Didn't have no money, no skills, or nothing of the sort. And they just had to go out and start work all over again to try and make a living for themselves."<sup>36</sup>

Journalist Whitelaw Reid, accompanying Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase and his party on a southern tour, arrived in

35. Charlyn Rainville has helped John Byrd produce a remarkable account of Byrd's life. She first met Byrd on April 12, 1975, having been introduced by William D. Miller, then a resident of Jefferson County and a professor of History and American Studies at the Florida State University. The story of Byrd's life resulted in a loosely edited narrative which is essentially the verbatim transcript of extended tape recorded conversations conducted on April 14, 15, 23, 29, 1975, May 8, 1975, and December 11, 1975. This document may be found in Charlyn Rainville, "The Story of a Son of a Slave," (Master's thesis, Florida State University, 1976). Although the thesis is Rainville's, the title is Byrd's. At the time of the first interview by Rainville, Byrd had been working on his own written narrative for at least two years. Byrd told Rainville, "I want to show you the tree where my father was freed at. I'll show you the big oak tree where they went to get their freedom."
36. Anonymous interview conducted by Sharon Ann Johnson, a student at Florida State University. A typed transcript of the interview is in the author's files.

Jacksonville around May 20, 1865. The blacks of east Florida seemed to Reid "to have a vague idea that they were free; but little change in their relations to their old masters is perceptible. In the back country they remain, as usual, on little cracker plantations, and neither master nor negroes succeed in more than making a rude living."<sup>37</sup>

Douglas Dorsey, the slave of Colonel Lewis Matair, was about fourteen years old at emancipation. On that day he was instructed to tell the driver to summon the slaves. Once gathered, they were told by Colonel Matair's son that they were free and they were offered half of what they raised on the plantation if they remained. Although Dorsey remembered Colonel Matair as "kind," none accepted the offer. Dorsey's father, Charles, who had worked as a mechanic during slavery, found a job with Judge Carraway of Suwannee County for whom he worked one year. Charles Dorsey later homesteaded forty acres of land received from the government and farmed in Suwannee County until he died.<sup>38</sup>

Upon the recommendation of the three-man committee of former slaveholders, the 1866 Florida General Assembly enacted a scheme of legislation known as the "black codes." These laws remained in effect throughout the early months of 1867. In comparison with other former Confederate states, some of which passed mild black codes while others enacted none at all, Florida's policy was exceptional in its harshness and enduring effect upon patterns of race relations in the state.<sup>39</sup>

37. Whitelaw Reid, *After the War: A Southern Tour* (Cincinnati, 1866), 173.

38. George P. Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 22 vols (Westport, CT, 1972), XVII, 93-99, (hereinafter cited as Rawick, *Florida Narratives*).

39. Scholarly treatments of Florida's "black codes" are legion. In addition to the still-standard Theodore B. Wilson, *The Black Codes of the South* (Tuscaloosa, 1965), readers concentrating on Florida should consult Farley M. Gilliam, "The 'Black Codes' of Florida," *Apalachee* 6 (1963-1967), 111-20; Joe M. Richardson, "Florida Black Codes," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 47 (April 1969), 365-79; and Jerrell H. Shofner, "Custom, Law, and History: The Enduring Influence of Florida's 'Black Codes'," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 55 (January 1977), 277-98. The members of the three-man committee of ex-slaveholders appointed by Governor William Marvin were C. H. DuPont of Gadsden County and A. J. Peeler and Mariano D. Papy of Leon County. A. J. Peeler had been twice chief clerk of the House of Representatives and was secretary of the 1865 Constitutional Convention, Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, November 14, 1865. M. D. Papy was a law partner of J. P. Westcott with offices located in the Marine Bank Building, Tallahas-

Yet Farley Gilliam contended that, as severe as the Florida black codes were, their passage "was not motivated by the desire of white Floridians to re-enslave the Negro."<sup>40</sup>

Florida freedmen were not so confident that this was the case, for they flocked to the Lincoln Brotherhoods— secret societies whose avowed purpose was to prevent them from being returned to slavery. This determination was, in the words of freedman John Wallace, "sufficient to bring out the old and young, the halt and the blind."<sup>41</sup> The Lincoln Brotherhoods were organized by Thomas W. Osborn of the Freedmen's Bureau. In addition to the laudable activities of feeding destitute freed people and refugees, Osborn advocated black suffrage and kept the proposition before the freed people that their former masters wanted to return them to slavery.<sup>42</sup> The parent lodge of the Lincoln Brotherhoods in Tallahassee became so large it had to be removed from the private home where it was originally organized to a black Baptist church in a part of town seldom visited by whites. John Wallace's politically-jaundiced book makes the intriguing allegation that the meetings in the Baptist church were carefully guarded by sentinels armed with muskets who demanded a countersign before allowing admittance.<sup>43</sup>

Once universal manhood suffrage was extended to freedmen by constitutional amendment, black churches became embroiled in the struggle to encourage, inform, cajole, and capture the black vote. Black church buildings became political meeting halls as well as houses of worship. In addition to serving as meeting places for the Lincoln Brotherhoods, they also served

see *Sentinel*, October 1, 1868. The full text of the commission's report was printed in the December 26, 1865, issue of the Tallahassee Semi-Weekly Floridian.

40. Gilliam, "The 'Black-Codes' of Florida," 119.

41. John Wallace, *Carpet-Bag Rule in Florida* (1888; facsimile ed., Gainesville, 1964), 42. Wallace's book is generally considered to be politically biased. Rembert W. Patrick said that the book was "a Democratic campaign document, probably written by a white conservative [William D. Bloxham]," and consequently, "should be used with care," *The Reconstruction of the Nation* (New York, 1967), 164.

42. Joe M. Richardson, "The Freedmen's Bureau in Florida," *Apalachee* 6 (1967), 98. Vincent Harding described the Union Leagues, organizations similar in form and function to the Lincoln Brotherhoods as "politico-religious clubs." "The Challenge of the Children: Creating a New Vision of America," *Southern Exposure* 10 (January/February 1982), 75.

43. Wallace, *Carpet-Bag Rule in Florida*, 43.

as starting points for political meetings held throughout the state during the spring and summer of 1867. Such was the case in Gainesville on April 27, 1867, when rallygoers convened at a black church before parading to a nearby open field to hear political speeches from Captain James H. Durkee, the local Freedmen's Bureau agent, and Captain E. R. Ames, head of the local military force.<sup>44</sup> Many of the political gatherings occurred under the leadership of the black preachers.<sup>45</sup>

In 1867, the Republican National Committee named Daniel Richards, a United States district tax commissioner stationed at Fernandina, to spearhead a major party-organizing campaign in Florida. Richards enlisted William Saunders, a black former Union officer, and Liberty Billings, an ex-officer of a black regiment. The threesome of Billings, Saunders, and Richards was labeled the "Radical Mule Team" by opponents.<sup>46</sup> Richards once stated that Saunders had "done infinitely more for the Republican party in Florida than any other man," but as early as April 14, 1868, Richards' perception of Saunders was beginning to change. Writing from Tallahassee, Richards remarked to Congressman Elihu B. Washburne that the black people were becoming exasperated with Saunders and that the feeling was nearly universal that Saunders had "sold out" and "betrayed the best interest of his race." By April 20, 1868, Richards felt Saunders was trying to "bribe and buy up" Reverend Charles H. Pearce, one of the leaders of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Florida.<sup>47</sup> On the following day, Richards possessed a letter signed by Saunders intimating a threat to assassinate Reverend Pearce, Liberty Billings, and Richards himself.<sup>48</sup>

44. Gainesville *New Era*, May 4, 1867.

45. In many cases the black ministers were the black politicians. This was true for a variety of reasons. First, the number of black men engaged in the professions from which many white politicians came was severely limited. Secondly, most black ministers believed in the inseparability of political creed from religious duties and actions.

46. Daniel Richards to Elihu B. Washburne, November 19, 1867. Washburne Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. These letters were edited by George C. Osborn and reprinted in "Letters of a Carpetbagger in Florida, 1866-1869," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 36 (January 1958), 239-85.

47. Richards' positive assessment of Saunders is contained in Richards to Washburne, November 19, 1867. Growing black exasperation with Saunders is recounted in Richards to Washburne, April 14, 1868. The effort to bribe Pearce is mentioned in Richards to Washburne, April 20, 1868, Washburne Papers.

48. Richards to Washburne, April 21, 1868, Washburne Papers.

Richards and Billings may have lost faith in Saunders, but they did not lose faith in the Republican-organizing effort. On Tuesday, May 5, 1868, the *Floridian* reported a meeting conducted by Billings and other politicians at the African church in Tallahassee at four o'clock in the morning where, it was presumed, "the colored people were instructed how to vote today."<sup>49</sup>

Also facing the freedmen, their churches, and the public authorities was a complex problem more pressing and more intensely personal than voting rights—marital adjustment and the provision of adequate child support. "Progress" in general behavior, and especially marital relations and family responsibility, has frequently been attributed to the influence of the churches.<sup>50</sup> Although marital relations among slaves were probably not nearly as chaotic as was once generally thought, slave marriages did not have the sanction of law. Furthermore, slave children, being legally defined as property, were treated as "assets" and sustained by their owners without becoming burdens of the state. On January 11, 1866, the Florida legislature passed "An Act to Establish and Enforce the Marriage Relation Between Persons of Color." The act stated, in part, that "colored inhabitants claiming to be living together as husband and wife must, within nine months from the passage of this Act, be legally married by some person authorized to perform [the] ceremony."<sup>51</sup> Certificates of marriage were to be registered with the clerks of the circuit court in the various counties. Whether ex-slave couples viewed this law as a mere requirement of their

49. Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, May 5, 1868.

50. Richardson, *The Negro in the Reconstruction of Florida*, 31.

51. *Acts of Florida*, 14th Session, January 11, 1866, 31 sectional. Although slave family life in Florida has not yet been systematically studied, occasional glimpses of slave weddings and the disruption thereof can be seen in the primary sources, particularly in travelers' accounts. The following incident, described by the British traveler Francis Tuckett, occurred on the property of Achille Murat sometime during 1829 or 1830: "The evening I spent with Mr. Murat's friends and had an opportunity of witnessing for the first time the festivities of a bridal party among the coloured population. The different members of the family at whose house I stayed felt great interest in facilitating the wishes of the party. The wedding cake was exhibited ornamented with flowers. Friends assembled from a distance of 20 miles around but I am sorry to say the bridegroom was absent, prevented by his subjection to the caprice [sic] of an owner, and the bride consequently absented herself." Francis Tuckett, *A Journey in the United States in the Years 1829 and 1830*, ed. Hubert C. Fox [a great grandson] (Plymouth, England, 1979), 56-57.



legal condition or as a glorious opportunity to legalize stable matches made during slavery days, the circuit court clerks and persons authorized to perform marriage ceremonies did a brisk business.<sup>52</sup> Among the thousands of black couples who legalized their pre-existing marriage-like bonds was an elderly pair married at Beckett's plantation in Marion County around the middle of September, less than a month before the expiration of the grace period. The 106-year old man and the eighty-year old woman had been living together as man and wife for years without the benefit or the possibility of legal sanction.<sup>53</sup> Then, on December 14, 1866, the law regarding marriage was modified to provide that "persons of color" would be considered legally married if they were living together and had so proclaimed to the world and the children issuing from such relationships would be considered legitimate and legal heirs.<sup>54</sup>

Two additional matters which affected the times were the influx of large numbers of blacks to Florida from other southeastern states, and the marked and often religiously-inspired desire of the recently freed black Floridians for education. Despite Florida's harsh-sounding black codes, it was possible, as one writer has asserted, that "conditions in Florida were better in general for blacks than they were elsewhere in the South. Southern newspapers began to intone the facts of immigration like a grim litany: "The tide of immigration is unprecedented. . . A thousand freedmen have passed through this city during the past week on their way to Florida. . . . Nearly every day brings trains and wagons to Tallahassee from South Carolina'." The *New York Times* reported that 50,000 blacks had left South Carolina and that many of them had gone to Florida.<sup>55</sup> While there were surplus laborers in both Georgia and South Carolina, three major circumstances had the combined effect of attracting thousands of black workers from those and neighboring states to Florida. First, those planters who had cotton crops in 1865

52. Among the black "marital auxiliaries," as the historian William W. Davis put it, to gain a wide reputation during this period was the former Gadsden County house servant. Robert Meacham. Early in 1867, Meacham claimed to have married three hundred couples since freedom came. Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, February 5, 1867, cited in William W. Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (1913; facsimile ed., Gainesville, 1964), 495.

53. St. Augustine *Examiner*, September 29, 1866.

54. *Acts of Florida*, 14th Session, December 14, 1866, 22, Section 1.

55. Gloria Jahoda, *Florida: A Bicentennial History* (New York, 1976), 82.

reaped high profits which inspired them to expand greatly their cotton acreage the following year, thereby increasing the demand for labor. Second, blacks were attracted to Florida during the last half of the nineteenth century by the bustling timber and turpentine industry. Among them were many black South Carolinians recruited by labor agents. Mr. Buckner told sociologist Clyde Vernon Kiser that during the 1890s "he had about two hundred Negroes transported to Florida from Colleton and Beaufort Counties to work in the turpentine industry."<sup>56</sup> Finally, linked with the labor demand was the availability of public lands in Florida under the 1866 Homestead Act. According to Claude F. Oubre, "Florida contained more public lands than any of the other states included in the Southern Homestead Act, and was more accessible to the South Atlantic states. For these reasons, Florida became the scene of the most feverish activity on the part of freedmen in search of homestead land." By the end of 1866, the Freedmen's Bureau alone had furnished transportation from Charleston, South Carolina, to Florida for 602 people under the leadership of a freedman.<sup>57</sup> Sometime between 1867 and 1872, the novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe encountered an aging black man known as Old Cudjo who had been part of "a party of negroes from South Carolina and Georgia" who "had been induced to come into Florida to take up a tract of government land." Characteristically, one of the first acts of this group of former slaves was to build "a prayer booth, where they could hold their weekly prayer-meetings which often seem with the negroes to take place of all other recreations."<sup>58</sup>

Many freedmen who migrated to Florida joined churches there retaining vivid images of the character of the services they

56. Clyde Vernon Kiser, *Sea Island to City: A Study of Helena Islanders in Harlem and Other Urban Centers* (1932; reprint ed., New York, 1969), 103-4.
57. Claude F. Oubre, *Forty Acres and a Mule: The Freedmen's Bureau and Black Land Ownership* (Baton Rouge, 1978), 137, 143. During three voyages in 1866 the steamer *Dictator* brought about 2,000 blacks from Charleston to Florida, Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, January 29, 1867. See also, Barbara Richardson Cotton, "The Effects of Antebellum Conditions Upon Post-War Economic Adjustment of Blacks in Jacksonville," *Negro History Bulletin* 42 (July-August-September 1979), 68-73.
58. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Palmetto-Leaves* (1873; facsimile ed., Gainesville, 1968), 270-71. For a discussion of Mrs. Stowe's involvements with blacks in Florida see Marilyn J. Floyd and Harry A. Kersey, Jr., "Harriet Beecher Stowe and Negro Education in Florida," *Negro Educational Review* 28 (January 1977), 19-27.

had attended and the sermons they had heard as slaves. "Father" Charles Coates was born a slave in Richmond, Virginia, around 1828. Viola B. Muse's paraphrase of her interview with Coates adds yet another chorus to the dreary refrain aimed as much at social control as salvation: "One privilege given slaves on the plantation was appreciated by all and that was the opportunity to hear the word of God. The white people gathered in log and sometime frame churches and the slaves were permitted to sit about the church yard on wagons and on the ground and listen to the preaching. When slaves wanted to hold church they had to get special permission from the master, and at that time a slave hut was used. A white preacher was called in, and he would preach to them not to steal, lie or run away and 'be sure to git all dem weeds outen dat corn in de field and your master will think a heap of you'."<sup>59</sup>

Rebecca Hooks and her husband Solomon left the plantation of William Lowe in Jones County, Georgia, during Reconstruction, and share-cropped on various Georgia plantations before moving to Florida around 1887. One of her early memories was of a sermon in which she was urged to obey her master and to be thankful that she had been removed from darkest Africa.<sup>60</sup> Bill Austin, who settled in Jackson County, Florida, around 1882, experienced slavery as a child in Green and Hancock counties, Georgia. Austin recalled that his slavemaster, Thomas Smith, "On Sunday night would let us go wherever the preacher was holdin' meeting."<sup>61</sup> Thus, many of the individuals who swelled the ranks of Florida's black churches during the decades immediately after the Civil War had acquired their first religious experience as slaves in one of the nearby southeastern states.

59. Interview with Charles Coats by Viola B. Muse, December 3, 1936, in Rawick, *Florida Narratives*, 67-68. According to Escott, Viola B. Muse was a black interviewer, Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill, 1979), 191.
60. Interview with Rebecca Hooks by Pearl Randolph, January 14, 1937, in Rawick, *Florida Narratives*, 172-77. Mrs. Hooks was interviewed in her home in Lake City, Florida. According to Escott, Randolph was black, *Slavery Remembered*, 191.
61. Interview with Bill Austin by Martin Richardson, March 18, 1937, in Rawick, *Florida Narratives*, 23. Austin was living in Greenwood (Jackson County), Florida, when Richardson, a black interviewer, talked with him. Escott, *Slavery Remembered*, 191, identified Richardson as black. In the interview, Austin told Richardson that he had left Greene and Hancock counties "about 55 years ago," which would place his arrival in Jackson County, Florida, around 1882.

The freed people's desire for literacy was motivated, in part, by their religious concerns. Once freedom came and the legal barriers to black literacy disappeared, blacks in Florida, like those elsewhere in the South, actively sought schooling. Although the motivations and outcomes flowing from the educational efforts of northern missionaries have been seriously questioned in some recent scholarship, the genuineness of black motivations and the vigor of black efforts to acquire the secret of letters is beyond question. Early in 1866, in the absence of funds for day schools, E. B. Duncan, assistant superintendent for public schools for freedmen, told the citizens of Florida, "We have gotten and are getting Sabbath Schools all over the State, for our colored Ministers and citizens respond readily to this work."<sup>62</sup> In addition to Tallahassee, Monticello, Houston, Lake City, and Chaires, Duncan reported that "the like work is going on in Gadsden County, besides in almost every place and plantation the blacks are instructed daily."<sup>63</sup> While the inability of the Freedmen's Bureau to set the law in motion to protect the rights of the former slaves is recognized, the introduction of a school system for blacks was, as Richardson indicated, "one of the truly significant accomplishments of Reconstruction."<sup>64</sup>

The impact of this accomplishment was not lost on the freed people. When interviewed by the Works Progress Administration in 1936, Patience Campbell, born a slave on the Jackson County farm of George Bullock around 1853, recalled entering one of the schools established by the Freedmen's Bureau when she was about twelve years old.<sup>65</sup> Some black ministers, like

62. E. B. Duncan, "An Appeal for Schools for Freedmen," Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, March 13, 1866. An outstanding example of how the conversion experience itself could trigger a desire to learn to read and write is the experience of Lott Carey. The pioneer black Baptist missionary to Africa could not read and write when he was converted through a sermon delivered by the Reverend John Courtney at Richmond's First Baptist Church in 1807. Carey wanted to be able to read the story of Nicodemus (third chapter of John) for himself. As Leroy Fitts put it, "It is significant that Carey's literary education began in his young adult life concomitant with his conversion experience. This is generally consistent with the educational experiences of Black slaves during slavery in America. The limited literary education of the few fortunate Black slaves was primarily biblical instruction. The Bible became the only textbook of Black slaves in America," Leroy Fitts, *Lott Carey: First Black Missionary to Africa* (Valley Forge, 1978), 14.

63. Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, March 13, 1866.

64. Richardson, *The Negro in the Reconstruction of Florida*, 111.

65. Interview with Patience Campbell by James W. Johnson, December 25, 1936, in Rawick, *Florida Narratives*, 58-60.

James Smith of Tallahassee, corresponded with officials of the American Missionary Association and pleaded for teachers and aid for education.<sup>66</sup> Freed blacks responded eagerly to the availability of Bibles and the chance to learn to read the Holy Book for themselves. This drive for literacy took place within a religious matrix which reached beyond the fact that church organizations were among the earliest agencies to teach reading. Simon Peter Richardson, an agent for the American Bible Society, stated that "the parent society gave me a wide margin to give or donate large quantities of books to both white and colored." In 1866, it appeared to Richardson that "all the negroes wanted a Bible. They seemed to feel that to own a Bible made them better."<sup>67</sup> Occasionally, the Bible was used as a physical object in the mysterious rituals of syncretic folk belief. But in the larger number of instances, as one white Episcopalian remarked in 1868, "The height of ambition with the colored children" was not only "to possess a Bible and prayerbook," but to "know how to read them."<sup>68</sup>

Many ex-slaves had heard sermons in the white churches or on plantation missions about the clarity of the Gospel, the authority of Scripture, and the desirability of direct access between the believer and the Lord's Word, and they wanted to get the Word straight from the Book for themselves. The Florida Narratives of the WPA contain numerous references to the ex-slaves' fondness for sitting on the porch and reading the Bible or having it read to them in their old age. Daytona Beach-born theologian Howard Thurman recalled that his grandmother raised him and had him read the Bible aloud to her repeatedly. When he came to one particular passage which reminded her of the sermons she had heard as a slave, and disliked for their pro-slavery emphasis, Thurman's grandmother stopped him short and admonished him never again to read that passage to

66. James Smith to Whipple, October 18, 1865, American Missionary Association Papers, microfilm ed., reel number 28, Robert Manning Strozier Library, Florida State University. Smith said: "We have 5 small schools but not one that can teach them the English Language properly. The Colored people is a trying to do what they can for themselves."
67. Simon Peter Richardson, *The Lights and Shadows of Itinerant Life: An Autobiography* (Nashville, 1900), 190-91.
68. *The Spirit of Missions* 33 (February 1868), 194-251, quoted in Richardson, *The Negro in the Reconstruction of Florida*, 87.

her.<sup>69</sup> Even today in Gadsden County, vigorous religious disputes continue to be a front porch and back doorstep pastime. In an ethnohistorical study of religious experience in Midway (Gadsden County), Bruce T. Grindal traced the evolution of black religious life from the 1850s to the present, emphasizing "the highly personal quality of religiosity, in which the authority of religious conviction lies in *feeling* and, at its most intimate level, exists independently of church affiliation or membership."<sup>70</sup> Thus, although much of the information in this study is derived from and reported in a denomination-by-denomination framework, the pervasiveness and intensely personal quality of the religious interpretation of experience in Florida's rural black communities— a religiosity which transcends the fact of church affiliation or attendance—should not be forgotten. Nonetheless, the activities and ritual events of formal churches in much of the rural South, both before and after slavery, whether racially segregated or together, "provided the context in which individual experience is translated into the symbolic meanings of communal religion."<sup>71</sup>

It is against this background of political crisis, legal change, social adjustment, population movement, and vivid memories of the slave experience that the story of the rise of independent black churches in Florida unfolded. Between 1865 and 1868, the southern churches were in as much a state of transition as were the affairs of the nation and of the economy. Emancipation provided blacks with the opportunity to worship publicly without the regular interference of whites. Despite the external pressures of white lawlessness and violence, most blacks viewed this change as a unique opportunity and vigorously-accelerated religious activity ensued. By the early 1870s, most of the galleries and special pews in which the blacks had worshipped as slaves

69. Howard Thurman, *Deep River: Reflections on the Religious Insight of Certain of the Negro Spirituals* (New York, 1945), 16-17. Thurman wrote: "When at length I asked the reason, she told me that during the days of slavery, the minister (white) on the plantation was always preaching from the Pauline letters- 'Slaves, be obedient to your masters,' etc. 'I vowed to myself,' she said, 'that if freedom ever came and I learned to read, I would never read that part of the Bible!'"

70. Bruce T. Grindal, "The Religious Interpretation of Experience in a Rural Black Community," in Robert L. Hall and Carol B. Stack, eds. *Holding on to the Land and the Lord: Kinship, Ritual, Land Tenure, and Social Policy in the Rural South* (Athens, 1982), 89.

71. *Ibid.*

less than a decade before stood empty as separate black churches proliferated.