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WILLIAM ALEXANDER BLOUNT: DEFENDER OF THE OLD SOUTH AND ADVOCATE OF A NEW SOUTH

by THOMAS MUIR, JR.

William Alexander Blount, as a child, had experienced the frustrations of poverty and disorder resulting from the Civil War. While steeped in many of the values and traditions of the Old South, Blount was one of the new generation of southern leaders who, after the end of Reconstruction in 1877, strove to modernize the South through industrialization and closer cooperation with northern capitalists. His keen intellect and sharp legal mind served him well as a corporate lawyer for the Louisville and Nashville Railroad in Florida. Blount's legal career in Pensacola spanned the Bourbon period, roughly from 1877 to 1900, when conservative Democrats controlled Florida's politics into the early twentieth-century Progressive era. His actions, at times, reflected conservative Bourbon principles and, in other instances, liberal Populist-Progressive ideas and goals. In either role, Blount epitomized the leadership of the New South. Scholars of southern history have devoted considerable attention to describing the men of the New South, sometimes questioning even if the term New South is historically accurate. More studies of prominent, well-respected professionals like Blount possibly can shed additional light on the ongoing controversial subject of whether or not there was continuity or discontinuity in prewar and postwar leadership in the South. Were the leaders of the New South former planters and large landholders, as W. J. Cash and others contend, or were they southern urban merchants and professionals, as C. Vann Woodward and others suggest?¹

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1. Robert Dean Pope, "Of the Man at the Center: Biographies of Southern Politicians from the Age of Segregation," in J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, eds., *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C.*

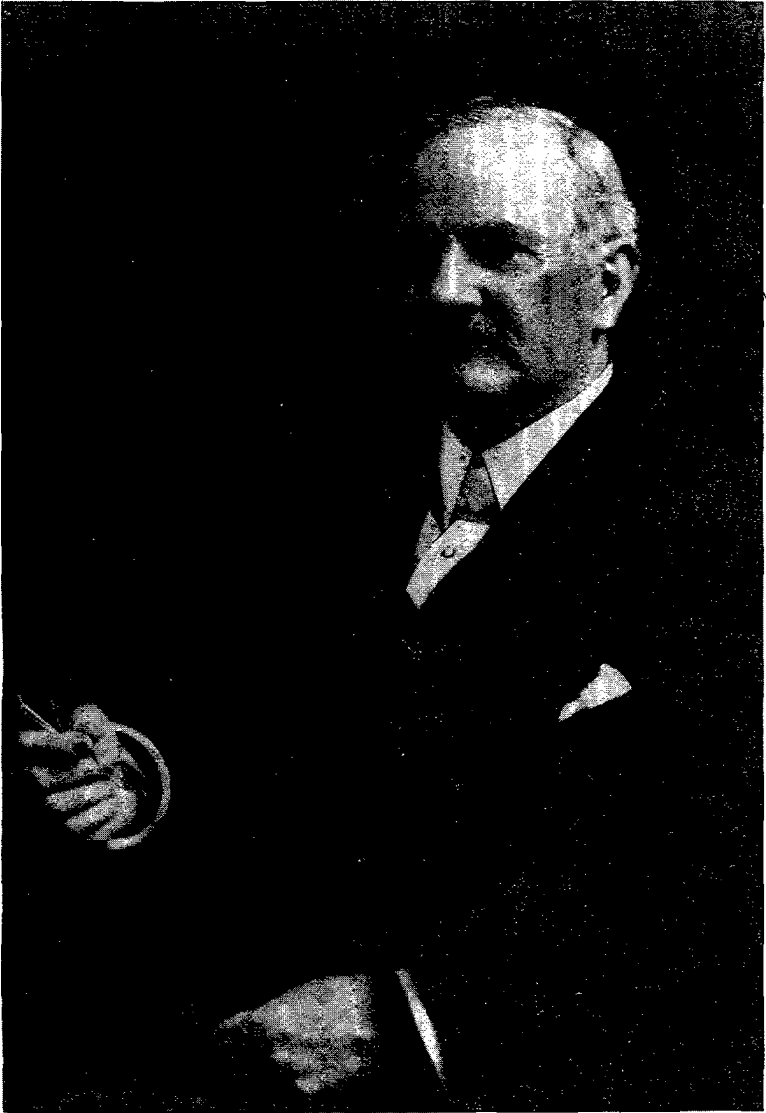
Blount took great pride in his distinguished ancestry. His father Alexander Clement Blount, a prominent attorney in New Bern, North Carolina, had married Julia E. Washington in September 1843. Eight years later, in 1851, Alexander moved his wife, their first child, and their slaves to Alabama where the availability of cheap land enabled him to become a plantation owner and turpentine operator. William Alexander Blount, the second of their seven children, was born on October 25, 1851, at the family's log house in Clarke County, Alabama.²

Life on a frontier plantation proved inhospitable to Alexander and Julia; she especially missed the social life of New Bern. Consequently, the Blounts left the plantation to caretakers and moved to Pensacola on January 8, 1858. Alexander resumed the practice of law there, busied himself in community affairs, and was an especially active member of the Episcopal church.³

Meanwhile, secession sentiment was engulfing Florida and the rest of the South during these years. One observer, an officer in the United States Navy, "found the people at Pensacola in a state of great excitement." Town meetings in support of secession, he wrote, "were being held every evening, where most violent speeches were made to fire the southern heart; men, women and children seemed to have gone mad."⁴ During the 1860 legislature, Blount, representing Escambia County, opposed calling a convention to take Florida out of the Union. However, on the third vote, November 22, he went with the majority. When Florida voted to secede on January 10, 1861, he gave his support to the southern cause. Alexander and his oldest

Vann Woodward (New York, 1982), 93; C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge, 1951), 19-22; W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York, 1941; reprint ed., New York, 1969), 209-10.

2. W. A. Blount's family had served the country since the colonial period as public officials. See "Biography of William Alexander Blount." Blount Family Papers, box 1, Special Collections Department, University of West Florida, Pensacola, 1 (hereafter cited as BFP); W. A. Blount to Jas. P. Taliaferro, August 3, 1910, BFP, box 5.
3. Julia J. Yonge, *Christ Church Parish Pensacola, 1827-1927* (Pensacola, 1927) 58; Carrie Washington to Cora Blount, June 29, 1924, BFP, box 1.
4. Henry Erben, "Surrender of the Navy Yard at Pensacola, Florida, January 12, 1861," *Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, New York Commandery, Personal Recollections of the War of the Rebellion*, series 2 (New York, 1897), 215-16 quoted in George F. Pearce, *The U.S. Navy in Pensacola: From Sailing Ships to Naval Aviation (1825-1930)* (Pensacola, 1980), 66.



William Alexander Blount. Photograph courtesy of the Pensacola Historical Society.

son Frederick both served in the Confederate Army. With their departure from Pensacola, Julia and the children— William, Ale-

xander Clement, Jr., James, Annie, Helen, and Carrie— went back to Alabama to help run the family plantation.⁵

William's early education consisted mostly of instruction by his mother. When the war ended, the Blounts, like most other Southerners, were faced with economic adversity. Believing that economic opportunities were greater in practicing law than operating a plantation, the Blount family returned to Pensacola. There William was tutored for one year and spent another year in self-study to prepare himself for college. In 1869, he entered the University of Georgia to work for a bachelor of arts degree.⁶

Upon graduation, William took a position briefly as a teacher in a small country school in Roberts, Florida. This brief stint at teaching convinced William that law would be a more attractive profession for him to follow. He had shown some interest in law while in college, and he had read law in his spare time. His father, who always turned to law when the family's fortunes declined, encouraged William to continue his education. While still teaching at Roberts, he applied for and received an adjunct professorship at the University of Georgia. His duties were to tutor students in English and mathematics. As an adjunct, William could pay for part of his education and also enroll in the university's school of law. He was graduated with a degree in law in 1873.⁷

William entered the practice of law in the office of Charles W. Jones in Pensacola. When Jones, who had practiced in Florida since 1857, left the firm in 1875, Blount continued alone. Blount always felt "a great obligation" to Jones for the kindness shown him.⁸ The 1870s were difficult years to begin a professional career in Pensacola. Still experiencing the effects of the Civil War, Pensacola's economy was extremely sluggish.

5. Herbert U. Feibelman, "William Alexander Blount, 'Florida's Greatest Lawyer,' Native of Alabama," *The Alabama Lawyer* 17 (April 1956), 157; Julien C. Yonge, "Pensacola in the War for Southern Independence," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 37 (January-April 1959), 361.

6. W. A. Blount, *Platform and Statement of the life of William A. Blount Candidate for the United States Senate* (Pensacola, 1910), 9.

7. *Ibid.*; Feibelman, " 'Florida's Greatest Lawyer,'" 157.

8. John B. Jones, "Biography of Charles W. Jones," n.d., Jones Family Papers, box 1, Special Collections Department, University of West Florida; William Watson Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York 1913; facsimile ed., Gainesville, 1964), 645; W. A. Blount to John B. Jones, October 13, 1897, Jones Family Papers, box 2. C. W. Jones was the first Democrat from Florida to be elected to the United States Senate during Reconstruction.

The reason for its slow development, Blount concluded, was the "fewness of people and fewness of dollars."⁹ As a consequence, income from his law practice was meager, and Blount began speculating in real estate.¹⁰

Blount, on March 24, 1877, was appointed by Governor George Drew to the Escambia County Board of Public Instruction. While the stipend was only nominal, Blount considered the appointment a civic duty and accepted it with pleasure. Blount and the other two appointees, J. Dennis Wolfe and Philip K. Yonge, were sworn in by Judge J. C. Whitney. Blount served for one term.¹¹

On June 19, 1878, Blount married Cora Nellie Moreno, and they moved into the house he had recently built on East Wright Street in the more affluent section of Pensacola.¹² The higher elevation of the terrain provided a more healthy environment than that found in the lower-lying sections near the bay. The Blount home sat on a sizeable parcel of land and resembled a small farm. It was surrounded by a well-kept lawn, a privacy hedge, and a picket fence. Blount's barnyard housed ducks, chickens, and horses. Pigeons and gopher turtles were kept for food. The other buildings included a hot house, where flowers and vegetables were grown, and a storage shed for coal and wood. Servant quarters located to the rear of the main house were for their several black employees.

One of the servants, Sydney Wynn, was the son of a slave once owned by the Blounts. Every morning he milked the cows, worked in the garden, and in the winter months built the fires. He served the meals dressed in a white coat. After lunch, he performed the ritual of brushing his employer's coat and bidding him goodbye as he departed for work. Sydney thought of himself as a lifelong friend of the family as well as a personal servant.

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9. W. A. Blount, "The Railroads of Florida," *Florida Bankers Association Proceedings* (St. Augustine, 1917), 33.
 10. Elizabeth D. Vickers and Virginia Parks, "The Golden Dream: Life in Pensacola in the 1870s," *Pensacola Historical Society Quarterly* 7 (Spring 1974), 3; Occie Clubbs, "Pensacola in Retrospect, 1870-1890," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 37 (January-April 1957), 377; William T. Cash, *The Story of Florida*, 4 vols. (New York, 1938) II, 667; Miriam Blount Craig to Thomas Muir, December 12, 1981, letter in possession of author.
 11. E. L. Maclay, *Public School Reminiscences* (Pensacola, 1887), 3; Feibelman, "Florida's Greatest Lawyer," 157.
 12. Craig to Muir, December 12, 1981; Regina Moreno Kirshof Mandrell, *Our Family, Facts and Fancies: The Moreno and Related Families* (Pensacola, 1988), 291.

Upon the retirement of his father and the death of Frederick, William, by 1880, had become the family leader. His father's longtime connection with the railroads probably influenced Blount's choice of clientele. One of William's early clients was Daniel F. Sullivan who began work as an Irish immigrant and who, together with his brother, became a major force in the banking, lumber, and railroad industries of west Florida. In 1877, Daniel Sullivan purchased the Pensacola and Louisville Railroad, and three years later, on February 27, 1880, he sold control of it to the Louisville and Nashville Railroad Company (L&N).

Subsequent to this agreement, the Pensacola and Atlantic Railroad Company (P&A), with the L&N as its major stockholder, was formed to purchase Sullivan's Pensacola and Louisville Railroad. The P&A received a charter of incorporation on March 21, 1881, from the Florida legislature, permitting Pensacola and west Florida to connect with the railroad systems west of Tallahassee. Sullivan was named, along with William Dudley Chipley and Milton H. Smith, as incorporators of the line, and William Blount became the company's attorney. The P&A went to work immediately to fulfill the obligations of its charter with an official ground breaking which took place in a ceremony at Pensacola on August 22, 1881.¹³

The P&A was completed in May 1883, making travel from Pensacola to Jacksonville possible without changing cars. Although the railroad was finished; problems plagued the company because of the land grant it had received from the state. The Internal Improvement Fund continued to cause political problems in Florida as it had since the Civil War. The new railroad also prompted extensive litigation involving contracts, construction costs, unauthorized use of company land, negligence suits, and rate disagreements. These litigations provided a good opportunity for a capable, young corporate lawyer like William Blount to become recognized.¹⁴

13. The road was originally named the Alabama and Florida. In 1877, upon purchasing the railroad, Sullivan renamed it the Pensacola Railroad. Dudley Sady Johnson, "The Railroads of Florida, 1865-1900" (Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1965), 118; George Warren Pettengill, *The Story of Florida Railroads, 1834-1903* (Boston, 1952), 115; *The Matter of the Alabama and Florida Railroad Company Declared Bankrupt, U. S. Circuit Court, Fifth Judicial Circuit of the Northern District of Florida* (Washington City, 1869), 8; "Blount" entries in James A. Servies, *A Bibliography of West Florida*, revised ed., 3 vols. (Pensacola, 1978), I, 292.

14. Thomas Muir, Jr., "William A. Blount, Railroad Advocate," in Virginia Parks, ed., *Iron Horse in the Pinelands* (Pensacola, 1982), 73-78.

Blount welcomed the additional legal work and income as P&A's attorney. However, he still had time to follow other business pursuits and to participate in civic organizations. Blount was a member of a management committee with Stephen R. Mallory, Jr., and J. S. Leonard which published the *Pensacola Advance Gazette* from 1882 until late in 1883 when a change was made in control of the paper.¹⁵ He held the office of Noble Grande in the Pensacola lodge of the International Order of Odd Fellows, and he was also a member of the Osceola Club, an exclusive men's club started in 1883. In return for legal expenses, Blount often received company shares from businesses that he represented. In return for work performing title searches, liens, and collections, he became an officer of the Building and Loan Association.¹⁶

In 1884, Blount's brother Alexander Clement, Jr., joined the law firm. The extra help in the office permitted Blount to pursue additional legal and governmental activities. He became involved in his first public service at the state level in 1885. In the spring of that year, county conventions were held throughout Florida to select delegates to the upcoming constitutional convention which would write a new state constitution. Blount was one of the four delegates elected to represent Escambia County.¹⁷

The call for a state constitutional convention came at the height of Bourbon, or conservative Democratic, dominance in Florida politics. The Bourbons were kindly disposed toward corporate interests, especially railroads. Of the 108 delegates, eighty-two, including Blount, were conservative Democrats; the remainder were liberal Democrats who were beginning to develop some support in Florida.¹⁸ The liberals charged corporate attorneys who were delegates with representing the special interests of the railroads. The *Pensacola Commercial* also held this view. An article in the paper alleged that corporations were influencing certain delegates.¹⁹ It was disclosed that Blount carried a railroad pass which allowed him to travel at L&N expense, and liberal Democrats considered a railroad pass a form of bribery. Blount's right to a seat at the convention was challenged,

15. *Pensacolian*, December 15, 1883.

16. *Pensacola Semi-Weekly Commercial*, October 27, 1882.

17. *Pensacolian*, May 2, 1885.

18. Edward C. Williamson, *Florida Politics in the Gilded Age, 1877-1893* (Gainesville, 1976), 135.

19. *Pensacola Commercial*, July 8, 1885.

but with Bourbon support, he retained his position. The controversy, however, resulted in a constitutional provision that prohibited the issuance of railroad passes to elected representatives or salaried officers of the state. Blount supported this provision.²⁰

Blount also voted in favor of the controversial issue that would permit foreigners and aliens to purchase land in Florida. The railroads wanted to sell their acreage and encouraged foreign immigration for this purpose. The liberals viewed this measure as an attempt to establish the English landlord and tenant system. They declared that English lords had their imitators at the convention and that former slaveholding aristocrats were not yet extinct.²¹ Most of the liberal Democrats were strong nativists and opposed immigration.²²

Blount's voting record on other sections of the constitution provides evidence that he did not always support the views of big business. He favored an article prohibiting the state's credit or tax revenues— or revenues from any county, city, borough, or township— from being used to benefit individual corporations. The article also prohibited those governing bodies from becoming a joint owner or stockholder in a corporation, something of which many of them had been guilty. For instance, at one time the city of Pensacola had controlled the stock of the Alabama and Florida Railroad Company which later went into bankruptcy. Blount also voted for a provision that would allow the legislature to tax industries and to pass laws to correct discriminatory rates by common carriers. The latter resulted in the establishment of a railroad commission to regulate railroad freight and passenger rates.²³

Following the convention, Blount returned to his Pensacola law practice. Liberal Democrats in the legislature stepped up their efforts to regulate the railroads in the public interest. In 1886, they attempted unsuccessfully to prevent an attorney employed by a corporation from serving as a public official.²⁴ On June 7, 1887, the legislature established a Railroad Commission over the opposition of conservative Democrats. The commission

20. *Journal of the Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the State of Florida*, June 9, 1885 (Tallahassee, 1885), 53, 500; *Pensacola Commercial*, June 20, 1885; W. A. Blount, *Platform*, 11.

21. *Pensacola Commercial*, July 11, 1885; *Pensacolian*, June 4, 1885.

22. C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge, 1960; reprint ed., New York, 1969), 108.

23. W. A. Blount, *Platform*, 11.

24. *Pensacola Commercial*, June 12, 1886.

set a passenger rate of three cents per mile on all railroads in Florida.

The P&A refused to comply with the new regulation. The road, covering a distance of 161 miles, could be travelled in seven to nine hours at a cost of \$7.25, or a rate of 4 11/16 cents per mile. A lesser rate, officials of the P&A claimed, would cause the company to lose money.²⁵ With Blount as their legal council, the P&A contested the three cents per mile regulation. While Blount recognized the legality of the Railroad Commission and its power to make rate schedules, he argued that this right was not "conclusive"; only the court could render a final decision on matters concerning private property rights. This power, he believed, should not be vested in a three-member commission because it was a violation of the due process clause in the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. Blount argued that to deprive the P&A of the "beneficial use" of its property by ordering the road to operate under an unfair low rate was taking property without due process of law.²⁶

On appeal, the Florida Supreme Court issued a ruling after the Railroad Commission's rate-setting order was declared legal by a lower court. The Railroad Commission's constitutionality was confirmed by the Florida Supreme Court, but the commission's power to regulate transportation came under close scrutiny. Chief Justice Raney cited the precedents of the "Granger Cases" involving the question of regulation in several mid-western states. The consensus in these cases stated that if a rate did not allow the railroad to cover operating expenses, it would ultimately result in the company becoming worthless thus depriving it of the beneficial use of its property which would be a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. Justice Raney also noted that the P&A provided the only rail service in west Florida. The judgments against the P&A by the lower courts were reversed, therefore, and the Florida Supreme Court granted an injunction against enforcement of the Railroad Commission's rate.²⁷ This victory gained Blount a statewide reputation, and his legal expertise was in greater demand.

Blount preferred the role of the courtroom lawyer, and was quick to espouse his high regard for the dignity and ethics of his profession. In one incident, at the United States Circuit

25. *Pensacola and Atlantic Railroad v. State*, 5 *Southern Reporter* (1889), 842 (hereafter cited as *P&A v. State*).

26. *Pensacolian*, July 28, 1888.

27. *P&A v. State*, 845.

Court in Pensacola, Blount took the district attorney to task for his remarks criticizing the "sharp practice" indulged in by local lawyers. Blount declared: "in this section of the state every lawyer presumed another to be a gentlemen. They might sometimes refer to another's want of intelligence, or the puerility of his arguments, but they never charge him with ungentlely acts."²⁸

In another more serious incident before a local court, Blount became involved in a heated argument with the opposing attorneys. A dispute had arisen between the Terminal Railroad Company and the Pensacola and Perdido Railroad. Both companies contested the ownership of a section of land near the city and the right to build on the property. When both sides employed armed guards to enforce their alleged property rights, Pensacola seemed on the verge of a railroad war. Blount had been a director of the Pensacola and Perdido, a small road running from Pensacola to Millview, Florida, since 1882. When the companies finally brought the case to court, harsh language erupted between the attorneys which resulted in a courtroom brawl. The local paper reported that "soon the courtroom became a pugilistic stage upon which several prominent persons played leading roles." The contestants suffered noticeable damage, "among the catalogue being black-eyes, bit fingers, bruised heads, broken finger bones, and torn clothing." Blount carried a lump on his hand the rest of his life from the fracas. The combatants were Blount and C. B. Parkhill against J. C. Avery and Hunt Chipley. All parties shook hands and apologized at the next session of court. The attorneys' code of ethics required that loyalty to the bar should overcome any bitter dispute encountered in the courtroom.²⁹ An example of this is seen when George McWhorter, one of Blount's antagonists in the Railroad Commission cases, died in 1891. Blount handled his legal estate and served as a pallbearer at his funeral.³⁰

In 1891, the legislature voted the Florida Railroad Commission out of existence. For all practical purposes, the commission had ceased to operate with the loss of McWhorter, and a Populist dominated legislature chose to discontinue the commission rather than accept the appointment by the governor of a railroad sympathizer to the vacant seat. However, in 1897 John C. Stockton, a liberal representative from Duval County in the

28. Pensacola *Daily News*, April 1, 1891.

29. Craig to Muir, December 12, 1881; Pensacola *Daily News*, June 19, 1892.

30. Pensacola *Daily News*, May 26, 1891.

Florida House of Representatives, spearheaded legislation establishing a new and stronger Railroad Commission through the legislature. Blount again would find himself having to explain to the public the L&N's position on the rate issue.³¹

At the beginning of the new century, Blount could look back upon over twenty years of service to the city of Pensacola. He was elected president of the Chamber of Commerce, an organization in which he had long been active, and he served from 1900 to 1904. Under his direction the Chamber gave financial support to revitalize an old community event, Mardi Gras. Blount remembered the first celebration of Mardi Gras in Pensacola in 1874. The tradition was reborn in 1900 with the reorganization of the Knights of Priscus Association. All members of the Blount family were active participants in the celebration.³²

Blount announced in 1902 that he would seek a seat in the Florida Senate on the Democratic party ticket. One observer predicted that Blount "will go into the State Senate and add to that body a force . . . which must in the very nature of things eventually exert a profound and far reaching influence." During a campaign rally at the Pensacola Cosmopolitan Club, the *Daily News* reported, "Blount told his audience he was not a politician, was seeking office for the first time in his life and [had] never asked a single man to vote for him."³³

Since no candidate challenged Blount, he did not need to campaign extensively or announce a platform. When the legislature convened on April 10, 1903, Blount was sworn in by Chief Justice E. C. Maxwell. He was appointed to the Judiciary, Organized Labor, Commerce and Navigation, Railroads, and Claims standing committees. A first order of business for the 1903 Florida legislature was to form a committee to arrange a visit by the governor, cabinet members, and the legislators to Pensacola to meet the officers and men of the ships that belonged to the North Atlantic Fleet then visiting the Pensacola Navy Yard.³⁴

After their trip to Pensacola, Blount and the other state officials and legislators returned to Tallahassee "ready for busi-

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31. Kathryn T. Abbey, "Florida Versus the Principles of Populism, 1896-1911," *Journal of Southern History* 4 (November 1938), 467-73.
 32. Pensacola *Daily News*, January 31, 1902; Barbara L. Fisher, "A History of Pensacola's Mardi Gras from 1900 to 1930," *Pensacola Historical Society Quarterly* 7 (October 1972).
 33. Pensacola *Daily News*, June 18, 1902.
 34. Florida *Senate Journal* (1903), 283. These were ships which would later make up the "Great White Fleet."

ness.”³⁵ Blount sponsored one of the early bills which called for state support for public high schools and grade schools; he wanted to be sure that the best educational facilities would be “within reach of every child in Florida, rich or poor.”³⁶ The bill would extend the annual school term to eight months; Florida’s school year had been only 104 days. The bill passed.³⁷

During the 1905 session, Blount continued to support education. He helped sponsor the Buckman Act which merged all of the small, state-supported seminaries and colleges into three institutions—the University of the State of Florida (for male students), Florida Female College, and Colored Normal School. The Act created a Board of Control to oversee the state university system. It was signed into law by Governor Napoleon B. Broward on June 5, 1905.³⁸ While in the legislature, Blount made it clear to the public that he would oppose any measure that sought special privileges for corporations although, as he put it, “in many instances those interested in the passage of the bills were my personal friends and greatly desired their passage.”³⁹

During the 1905 session, Blount offered an amendment to a “Jim Crow” bill sponsored by John C. Avery, the representative from Escambia County. The bill called for the separation of white and black passengers on public street cars. Blount claimed that the bill, in its original form, would do harm financially to the operators of the street cars because they would have to provide separate cars for each race. Blount also happened to be an attorney for, and shareholder in, the Pensacola Electric Company which ran Pensacola’s street cars. Blount’s amendment called for separation of whites and blacks on the same street cars, a measure that would save companies the expense of providing separate cars. The bill proposed by Blount also called for an exception to this arrangement by permitting black nurses in charge of white invalids or children to sit with white passengers. The amended bill was approved by the legislature, but was held

35. Pensacola *Daily News*, April 21, 1903.

36. W. A. Mount, *Platform*, 13.

37. Florida *Senate Journal* (1903), 123; Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables, 1971), 305; Lucius Ellsworth, *Pensacola: Deep Water City* (Tulsa, 1982), 86.

38. The bill was first introduced by Representative H. H. Buckman from Duval County. Florida *House Journal* (1905), 795; *Laws of Florida* (Tallahassee, 1905), 37; *Pensacola News Journal*, April 9, 1905; Samuel Proctor, “The University of Florida: Its Early Years, 1853-1906” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Florida, 1958), 475-83.

39. W. A. Blount, *Platform*, 12.

unconstitutional by the Florida Supreme Court. The court ruled that it violated the Fourteenth Amendment by giving nurses privileges denied other blacks.⁴⁰

Blount announced in May 1905 that, due to private business obligations, he would not run for reelection to the Florida Senate. He had served only a single term from 1903 to 1905.⁴¹ Invited to speak at a rally for the Democratic party candidates in the 1905 municipal election primaries in Pensacola, Blount told the voters precisely where he stood on the racial issue because he was "desirous of letting the people of Pensacola know that there was no truth in the rumor that I was not willing to stand square and flat footed upon the platform representing the White Democratic Party." Blount referred in his speech to the days of Reconstruction when Pensacola had a black city council president and city marshal. Recalling his childhood, he mentioned a slave boy with whom he had explored for gopher turtles, and the faithful servant who was with his family for twenty-five years. Negroes, he believed, "filled the sphere for which they were intended." Blount believed that even if the population was predominantly black, "the white man must rule." Despite some of Blount's progressive ideas on government and improving the quality of life in the community, his opinion toward black Americans was evident. He firmly believed the black man should be kept out of politics and in a socially inferior position.⁴²

Blount's old nemesis, the railroad rate issue, began to demand attention again. Late in 1902, the Florida Railroad Commissioners notified the Louisville and Nashville Railroad to appear in Tallahassee on July 1, 1903, to present evidence why rates, as proposed by the commissioners, should not go into effect. The new rate would be three cents per passenger mile, a reduction of one cent for the L&N. Not satisfied with the L&N's protests, the Railroad Commission then revoked their

40. The city of Pensacola, with the support of the Chamber of Commerce, enacted similar legislation for the same purpose, *Andrew Patterson v. Isham Taylor*, 40 *Southern Reporter* 493 (1906); *Florida House Journal* (1905), 14; *Pensacola News Journal*, April 9, August 3, 1905. Since 1887, various measures had been passed by the Florida legislature to provide separate accommodations for blacks.

41. *Tallahassee True Democrat*, May 28, 1905. The *Tallahassee True Democrat* declared it was a "distinct loss to the interests of the state."

42. *Pensacola News Journal*, June 6, 1905; The available documentation on political offices held by blacks in Pensacola during Reconstruction is vague. *Pensacola Weekly Observer*, June 23, 1868; *West Florida Commercial*, April 30, 1968

order and changed the required compliance date for the railroad to May 1903. The commissioners desired to bring the case to court for a quick legal settlement; litigation was inevitable. Blount filed for an injunction against enforcement of the lower rate in the United States Circuit Court, and his appeal was granted. The judge ordered the L&N to post \$20,000 bond pending disposition of the case.⁴³

When the case went to court, Blount contended the L&N was entitled to earn a fair return on its property. A three cents rate, he argued, would cause the road to operate at a loss. Blount produced several witnesses with knowledge of the operating expenses and an elaborate statement on L&N losses in conducting business in west Florida. Blount told the court that if the road were forced to reduce its rates, an additional loss of \$21,000 annually would be incurred.⁴⁴

The Railroad Commission countered by undertaking an audit of the L&N's records since 1897. The commission's plan for a quick end to the litigation failed because the audit would take several years to complete. In 1909, with the audit well underway, the commission asked the legislature in its annual report for an additional \$5,000 to complete the lengthy investigation. Finally, late in 1909, the commission reported findings of its audit of L&N's accounts, and concluded that the three cents rate was reasonable.⁴⁵

Blount then proposed a compromise settlement to the Railroad Commission: the railroad would accept the three cents rate if the commission would assume part of the cost of the years of litigation. The commissioners agreed to the L&N's offer upon the advice of their attorney, L. C. Massey. Massey and Blount, who had first debated rate issues in west Florida courtrooms some twenty years earlier reached an agreement on April 24, 1911, and the L&N put the new rate into effect in May 1911.⁴⁶

In 1910, some members of the American Bar Association (A.B.A.) expressed interest in electing a Southerner like Blount as president of the organization. Blount had been a member since 1894. Blount wrote a colleague in Savannah, Georgia. "I had not considered myself as a possibility, because I am not

43. *Sixth Annual Report of the the Railroad Commission of the State of Florida* (Tallahassee, 1903), 12-17.

44. *Twelfth Annual Report of the Railroad Commission of the State of Florida* (Tallahassee, 1909), 14.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Fifteenth Annual Report of the Railroad Commission of the State of Florida* (Tallahassee, 1912), 21.

nationally known." Although he had attended only three previous A.B.A. meetings, he said, "I would neither be human nor truthful were I to say that the selection of me for the position would not be exceedingly gratifying."⁴⁷ If he did not become president of the organization, Blount hoped for an appointment to one of the association's committees. He told another colleague in New York that he wanted to work with the committee on Uniform State Laws, "it being larger and perhaps the more important." He did not want the appointment, however, if it meant displacing another attorney with a more impressive record of service to the association.⁴⁸

Blount did not become president of the American Bar Association at the time, but he did receive the committee appointment that he sought. In 1911, he was elected president of the Florida Bar Association. In an address to the Florida Bar, he told them, "the association should be a very powerful factor in procuring good, and defeating bad, legislation."⁴⁹ Much of his one-year term was devoted to increasing membership which Blount felt was essential to the strength of the organization.

Later that year, 1911, Blount became involved in a legal controversy within the A.B.A. The organization's executive committee had admitted W. H. Lewis as a member of the A.B.A. without realizing that he was black. The committee's decision to rescind Lewis's membership created a heated debate among members of the association. Blount wrote the president of the A.B.A. supporting the committee's actions as "eminently proper, and well within its authority."⁵⁰ The A.B.A. president, S. S. Gregory, feared trouble would arise over the controversy in the next annual meeting scheduled to be held at Milwaukee in 1912. Blount agreed, stating, "it should be the part of conservative men to see that as little friction and antagonism are produced" as possible. He added, "I can appreciate the feelings of our New England friends . . . [who support Lewis], but the sentiment of the great majority" is opposed to admitting a Negro to the

47. W. A. Blount to P. W. Meldrin, August 8, 1910, Blount, Blount, and Carter Papers, box 22, Special Collections Department, University of West Florida (hereafter cited as BBC).

48. The American Bar Association National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws drafted and made recommendations to state legislatures for making laws uniform with other states. Blount to Edgard H. Farrar, September 27, 1910, BBC, box 22.

49. W. A. Blount, *Address to the Florida Bar*, June 6, 1912, BFP, box 4.

50. F. M. Simonton to Blount, March 5, 1912, BBC, box 22; Blount to S. S. Gregory, March 14, 1912, BBC, box 22.

organization.⁵¹ Blount's argument stressed that there was a difference between the eligibility and the desirability of Lewis's appointment. Lewis should not have attempted to join the A.B.A., according to Blount, because "every Negro knows the racial feeling existing in the larger portion of the United States against any degree whatever of social equality."⁵² Although A.B.A. members worked for progressive reforms, many did not believe that the reforms should be extended to black attorneys regardless of their education and experience. At the national meeting in 1912, however, the majority of the members passed a resolution stating that the executive committee had been wrong in its action, and Lewis was reinstated.⁵³

Judge David D. Shelby, Fifth United States Circuit Court of Appeals, died in 1914, and Blount's supporters and friends launched a campaign to have him appointed to the vacant seat. Blount's partner, Francis B. Carter, began a mail campaign asking individuals to write President Woodrow Wilson in support of Blount. In his own letter to the president, Carter stated that Blount "does not desire to be a personal applicant for the position but is willing to accept it if the president should see fit to appoint him." Carter then learned from the United States Attorney General in September 1914 that the White House had a rule that men over sixty years of age would not receive appointment to judicial positions. Blount was sixty-three and, thus, was not qualified.⁵⁴

The entry of the United States into World War I in 1917 had a disrupting effect on Blount's family and his business activities. The war years were busy and stressful for Blount and his family as they were for millions of other Americans. Blount's health was declining. He wrote a colleague in August 1919, "I have in the last two years undertaken, speaking frankly, more than I can do."⁵⁵ Blount feared that he might have to give up his American Bar Association position as president of the National Conference of Commissioners for Uniform State Laws. He had held it for three years and derived much pleasure from it.

In September 1918, Blount travelled to Baltimore to confer with doctors at the Johns Hopkins Hospital about a painful ulcer

51. Blount to S. S. Gregory, March 11, June 17, 1912, BBC, box 22.

52. Blount to Charles Rosen, September 7, 1912, BBC, box 22.

53. Blount to George Whitelock, September 10, 1912, BBC, box 22.

54. Francis Carter to Woodrow Wilson, August 28, 1914, BBC, box 23; T. W. Gregory to Carter, September 29, 1914, BBC, box 23; Blount to Bart A. Riley, October 1, 1914, BBC, box 23.

55. Blount to Henry Stockbridge, August 8, 1918, BBC, box 27.

from which he had been suffering for a lengthy period. At the time, however, the Spanish flu epidemic was raging across the United States, and surgeons advised delaying an operation because of possible contamination from the virus.

With the law firm running satisfactorily without him, Blount devoted more time and attention to his work with the American Bar Association. Blount's eloquence as a speaker made him a popular member of the association. He had long aspired to become its president and was frustrated when he had not achieved this goal. In 1919, Blount wrote a fellow attorney, "I have no idea as to what may have taken place in the Great Council last year which may have affected my selection as president of the A.B.A. I was present, I believe, at all the meetings of the council, except the last one, when I was sick."⁵⁶ He was not to be further disappointed; in 1920, Blount was elected by his colleagues to serve as president of the American Bar Association. He was the first Floridian to hold this prestigious office. Blount thanked the members of the organization for selecting him. The election victory, he said, was "an honor which . . . appears to me to be the highest unofficial professional goal to which an American lawyer can aspire."⁵⁷

In his first, and what would be his last, letter to the association, Blount outlined some of what he considered were the important functions and benefits of the organization. He urged his fellow members to help strengthen the profession's sense of ethical conduct. Only the most highly qualified attorneys should be admitted to the bar and the less desirable excluded. The association members also should deliver public addresses, formal and informal, to help liberalize thought and encourage patriotism. The greatest benefit of the association, Blount thought, was "the bringing together of most charming companions, overflowing with comradeship, earnestness and humor, gravity and good nature, and a blending of social qualities which endear one gentleman to another."⁵⁸

Blount's work with the association was cut short by the recurrence of his illness early in 1921. His doctor prescribed bed rest. While at his home, Sea Marge, Blount wrote to his doctor, "I have had very little pain since I saw you . . . there has been no occasion to produce pain, as I have been in bed most of the

56. Blount to Henry Upson Sims, August 16, 1919, BBC, box 23.

57. American Bar Association, *Annual Report*, 1920, BFP, box 5.

58. *Ibid.*

time."⁵⁹ Meanwhile, Blount continued his association and office work by dictating letters to his secretary.

In June 1921, Blount returned to Johns Hopkins Hospital for an operation on his stomach. He suffered a heart attack before the operation and died June 15 at the age of sixty-nine. The *Pensacola Journal* reported that it was "the end of a long period of ill health which Mr. Blount had borne with fortitude, continuing always at his work."⁶⁰

Blount's body arrived in Pensacola by train two days later. A procession of mourners followed the hearse to the gates of Sea Marge where his body was placed in his bedroom. His longtime servant, Sydney Wynn, put Blount's favorite flower, begonias, and tall candles in the room. As was customary, people in all walks of life came to pay their respects. On the day of the funeral, a ceremony was held in the living room of Sea Marge. Railroad operations halted on the L&N and the Florida East Coast Railway to pay respect to Blount. The flags in the city were flown at half-mast, and the United States Supreme Court adjourned in Blount's honor, a rare tribute to someone not a member of the court.

W. A. Blount, born and raised in the South, proudly acknowledged his southern heritage. During his career, Blount faithfully adhered to the Bourbon program of creating a New South, as was evident by his longstanding loyalty to the corporate interests of Florida.

Blount's corporate clients provided the opportunities to achieve progress in the South after the hard times of the 1860s and 1870s. To accomplish his goals, Blount often practiced a complicated mixture of Bourbon and Progressive politics. His distinguished family background and impressive business credentials, flamboyant oratorical ability, and persistence, made him a political and civic leader. As a spokesman of the New South, Blount did what he could to promote industry and to support education.

Due to his reputation as a corporate lawyer, Blount might be mislabelled a middle class urban professional and, therefore, he might fit the New South leadership model suggested by C. Vann Woodward. However, closer analysis of his family life and career suggest similarities to the leaders of the New South described in studies by W. J. Cash, John J. Beck, and Jay R. Man-

59. Blount to Dr. John Elliot, April 9, 1921, BFP, box 5.

60. *Pensacola Journal*, June 16, 1921.

dle. Blount, a descendent of a prewar plantation regime, sought to preserve his family's social and political status, and he was eminently successful in achieving this goal. Yet for Florida and his own community, Pensacola, he advocated change if it guaranteed progress. Blount was basically conservative in his political philosophy and social attitude. Change in the name of progress was good, but he did not want change to threaten his position in the community or his control over its affairs.⁶¹

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61. James R. McGovern, *The Emergence of a City in the Modern South: Pensacola 1900-1945* (DeLeon Springs, FL, 1976), 171; Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 19-22*; Cash, *Mind of the South*, 209-10; John J. Beck, "Building the New South: A Revolution from Above in a Piedmont Country," *Journal of Southern History* 53 (August 1987), 441-70; Jay R. Mandle, *The Roots of Black Poverty: The Southern Plantation Economy After the Civil War* (Durham, NC, 1978), 15-50; Thomas Muir, Jr., "William Alexander Blount, Defender of the Old South and Advocate of a New South" (master's thesis, University of West Florida, 1988), 65.