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"WHERE ARE NOW THE HOPES I CHERISHED?" THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ROBERT MEACHAM

by CANTER BROWN, JR.

“**A**LTOGETHER this convention is the stormiest we have ever attended, and from its dissensions we judge the [Republican] party is badly split. If the Democrats and Conservatives of Florida don't take such advantage of it as will insure them success, then we say they deserve 'to be bound hand and foot,' and ever be under the heel and ground to powder by their former slaves. Such a mess of 'rag, tag, and bobtail' buncomb and bombast, ignorance and corruption we have never seen. It is a disgrace to the civilization of the age.”¹

Such words, written by an indignant resident of Jacksonville in April 1872, call to mind the concept to which many Floridians still cling of Reconstruction politics and the actions of black leaders during that period. That the foundations of that perspective are grounded more firmly in myth than in reality seldom is considered. Rarely heard are such voices as that of reporter Solon Robinson who, in January 1868, described the eighteen black members of the Florida Constitutional Convention in these words: “[I]n spite of all the whips and prisons, there were a few slaves who learned to read and write, as now is evidenced in this Convention. I do not see that one of the 18— and I believe 15 or 16 of them were formerly slaves— is destitute of this desirable accomplishment. Independent of that, their genial demeanor and address shows them possessed of all the attributes of gentlemen— ‘niggers,’ the Rebels call them— but eloquent speakers.”²

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1. *Savannah Daily Republican*, April 12, 1872.
2. *New York Daily Tribune*, February 5, 1868.

[1]

Among the men of whom Robinson wrote was an individual who exercised a continuing and positive influence on local and state politics throughout the Reconstruction era and for years thereafter. He helped organize the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Florida; he failed to be elected to the United States Congress and to the presidency of the Florida Senate by only the slightest of margins; he chaired important legislative committees and rightly could claim to be one of the founders of Florida's public education system; and through it all, he was known as a decent man who believed in spending much of his energies in building schools and churches. He was a man to be reckoned with, and his name was Robert Meacham.

"I was born in Gadsden County, Florida," Meacham recalled in 1871. Unsure of the exact date, he believed he entered the world in the spring of 1835. When asked if he had been slave or free, he was at a loss on how to respond. "I do not know how to answer that exactly," he said, "for my father was my master and always told me that I was free."³ Fortunately for Meacham, his father, a physician, cared for his son.⁴ "I drove a carriage once," he remembered, "and superintended around my old boss— my father. Until I was eighteen years old, I never did anything more than to stay about him and ride in the buggy with him."⁵

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- 3 . Meacham was described late in life as having "light hair," "white skin," and "regular features." "Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire Into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States," House Report No. 22, pt. 13, 42d Cong., 2d sess., 101, 105, 108; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 14, 1896.
 - 4 . The identification of Meacham's father is an interesting but unanswered question. It is tempting to look for the answer to Gadsden County planter Banks Meacham who was a physician, was involved in education as a trustee of Quincy's male and female academies, owned slaves of the same age and sex as Robert, and was the only slaveowner named Meacham present in Gadsden County at the time of Robert's birth. Banks Meacham appears to have died in January 1865 and, as such, could still have left Robert (as Robert later testified) as a slave to his wife's sister. The elder Meacham was one of Florida's leading Whigs, an influential leader of the statehood movement, and a delegate to Florida's 1838 Constitutional Convention. If he were Robert's father, it is interesting to note that his slave son carried on the family tradition of political involvement and, in doing so, was instrumental in bringing Florida back into the Union through his participation in 1868 in a second constitutional convention. Quincy *Sentinel*, November 13, 1840; Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, July 30, 1844; Manuscript returns of the Sixth U. S. Census, 1840, Gadsden County, schedule II (slaves); J. Randall Stanley, *History of Gadsden County* (Quincy, 1948), 36-39.
 - 5 . "Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee," 107.

Meacham's father prized education and was determined to provide it for his son, a circumstance that led to community friction in Quincy. "[My father] gave me money and started to send me to school once," he related. "I went to school for a day or two," he continued, "and the third day after I commenced—there were a great many white children going to the school; it was a white school entirely—some of the parents of the children sent word to the teacher that if he was going to teach a nigger they would keep their children at home, and so I had to quit." Despite the setback, Robert learned to read and write and, it may be assumed in light of his concerns as an adult, learned also the importance of the availability of education for all.⁶

Young Meacham's life changed dramatically in the early years of the 1850s. Although the exact circumstances are unclear, about 1852-1853 he was moved to Tallahassee and ordered to fulfill the role of a house servant for an affluent Leon County family, perhaps relations of his father. In that household, he met Stella who, apparently, was a fellow servant of the family. By 1858, the couple had had their first child, Margaret. Six years later a son, Robert, Jr., was born. At some point between his move to Tallahassee and the end of the Civil War, Robert's father died. As a result, Robert was left in the care, and likely as the property, of his father's wife's sister.⁷

Family tradition suggests that Meacham accomplished more than his household and family responsibilities during his Tallahassee years. "During his earlier life," one account reads, "he carried [his] education to the other slaves secretly and by night, using the dim glare of a candle for light." It also is suggested, although not substantiated, that by the end of the Civil War "he had purchased his freedom and that of his mother with money he had saved out of the gratuities given him by his master."⁸

6. *Ibid.*, 105.

7. Barred by law from marrying prior to the end of the Civil War, Robert and Stella Meacham solemnized their marriage at Tallahassee on July 23, 1866. *Ibid.*, 105; Manuscript returns of the Ninth U. S. Census, 1870, Jefferson County, schedule I (population); "Register of Marriage Licenses (Colored), 1865-1868," 236, in Leon County, Marriage Records, Book X, microfilm, Florida State Archives.

8. Violet B. Muse, "From Slavery to State Senate," in "Negro History in Florida" (WPA Federal Writers Project, typescript), P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville.

More certainly, by the war's end he was engaged in preaching to his fellow Tallahassee bondsmen.⁹ When in the summer of 1865 Deacon William G. Seward organized an African Methodist Episcopal (A. M. E.) Church at Tallahassee, Meacham was the 116-member congregation's lay pastor.¹⁰ In that capacity on February 20, 1866, he laid the cornerstone for the town's first A. M. E. church building.¹¹

As the construction of the Tallahassee A. M. E. Church proceeded, Deacon Seward was replaced as church organizer in Florida by the Reverend Charles H. Pearce. Upon Pearce's arrival at Tallahassee on March 1, 1866, he found the local church "not properly organized," a situation he soon remedied.¹² Within a matter of weeks Pearce had recommended to the South Carolina Conference, the church's governing body, that Meacham be admitted to the conference for ordination. In so doing, Pearce reserved for himself the pastorate at Tallahassee and arranged for Meacham to be appointed to the church at Monticello.¹³

Immediately upon receipt of notification of his admission on trial to the A. M. E. conference, Meacham moved to Monticello and set about raising funds for the construction of a sanctuary. By late 1866, the church was completed, save for the windows, and the county's first freedmen's school was being conducted within its walls.¹⁴ Meacham also was busy at the altar of his new church. Acting in response to postwar state law that mandated black couples formally must marry, he had conducted by the end of January 1867 about 300 marriage ceremonies in Jefferson County.¹⁵

Church duties were only a small part of Meacham's activities in Jefferson County. He assumed an activist role in counseling

9. Charles Sumner Long, *History of A. M. E. Church in Florida* (Philadelphia, 1939), 68; Jacksonville *Florida Union*, March 28, 1868.

10. Long, *History of the A. M. E. Church in Florida*, 73.

11. Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, February 20, 1866; Robert L. Hall, "The Gospel According to Radicalism: African Methodism Comes to Tallahassee after the Civil War," *Apalachee* (1971-1979), 71.

12. Long, *History of the A. M. E. Church in Florida*, 59.

13. *Ibid.*, 60, 63.

14. "Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee," 101; Jerrell H. Shofner, *History of Jefferson County* (Tallahassee, 1976) 296-97.

15. *Savannah Daily Republican*, February 8, 1867.

freedmen on their relationships with local planters, urging them to work toward obtaining their own homes and farms and advising them to enter into labor contracts with whites only as a last resort. When questioned as to his controversial position on labor contracts, Meacham replied, "I have been told by gentlemen, and I suppose that you or any of us would call them so, that there is a thorough understanding among them in the way of seeing that the colored people shall never have much; they are united one with another to see that that is done."¹⁶

Although Meacham's popularity and influence were on the rise within Jefferson County's black community in late 1866 and early 1867, that circumstance brought the minister no real power in the county because Florida law still prohibited freedmen from voting.¹⁷ Meacham's efforts, nonetheless, posed a threat to the local establishment to the extent that a white minister in February 1867 visited the A. M. E. church during Meacham's absence and suggested to the congregation that they go elsewhere for their religious observances. When Meacham protested the visit in a note to the white minister, he received in reply a letter signed, "Death is your doom— beware— ." "Meacham— Sir— ," the threatening missive read, "Your conduct has become unbearable in this place— and will not be longer tolerated." "[O]ne warning is all we give," it continued, "and you have but a few days to leave in beware you black sun of a bitch— beware."¹⁸ The death threat appears to have had no impact on Meacham or his activities, however, and in the month following his arrival, the political world of Jefferson County and the state of Florida was turned upside down by the Congressional enactment of the legislation that, among other provisions, enfranchised most male blacks twenty-one years of age or older and ushered in the era of "military reconstruction."¹⁹

Prompted to action by the passage of the Reconstruction Acts, Ossian B. Hart, a leader of Florida's wartime loyalists, and

16. "Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee," 106.

17. Jefferson County's population in 1867 was 7,089; 4,546 persons (approximately 64 percent) were black. Jacksonville *Florida Union*, August 6, 1868; Jerrell H. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet: Florida in the Era of Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (Gainesville, 1977), 42.

18. Joe M. Richardson, *The Negro in the Reconstruction of Florida, 1865-1877* (Tallahassee, 1965), 164-65.

19. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 157-60.

Calvin L. Robinson, the state's national Republican executive committee member, began organizing the state for the Republican party.²⁰ Within a few weeks they had enlisted Meacham in their cause, and on April 30, 1867, a rally of 2,000 freedmen was held at Monticello. Receiving their invocation from the Reverend Meacham, the participants then adopted resolutions pledging their "co-operation with the Republican party of the United States." An "Observer" labeled the rally "a great success, and one that the freedmen and the Union men everywhere may well be proud of."²¹

As chairman of the state Republican committee, Hart called a grand convention of Republicans to be held at Tallahassee early in July.²² Meacham attended as a delegate from Jefferson County. There he was selected as a vice-president of the assembly and appointed a member of the state's Republican executive committee.²³ Meanwhile, Hart had been appointed Florida superintendent of voter registration and, in turn, named Meacham to Jefferson County's new three-man board of voter registration.²⁴

The summer and early fall of 1867 proved a busy time for Meacham; he assisted in registering some 2,300 voters (1,747 were blacks), a total which represented slightly less than 10 percent of all the registered voters in the state.²⁵ At the same time, he moved away from support of those moderate elements of the Republican party represented by Hart and Freedmen's Bureau personnel such as Thomas W. Osborn, Marcellus L. Stearns, and William J. Purman. Instead, Meacham embraced the intensely emotional and politically aggressive leadership of the

20. *Savannah Daily Republican*, April 22, 1867.

21. *Ibid.*, May 4, 1867.

22. *Gainesville New Era*, June 1, 1867.

23. The previous month, Meacham had received a different kind of honor, being admitted into "full connection" at the first annual meeting of the Florida A. M. E. conference. During the period, he and Stella also had their third child, a daughter, whom they named Stella. *Savannah Daily Republican*, July 18, 1867; Jacksonville *Florida Union*, July 20, 1867, March 28, 1868; Long, *History of the A. M. E. Church in Florida*, 64; Ninth U. S. Census, Jefferson County, schedule I.

24. The other two members of Jefferson County's board of registrars were John W. Powell and E. J. Murphy. John W. Powell to Ossian B. Hart, July 10, 1867, record group 156, ser. 626, Florida State Archives.

25. Tampa *Florida Peninsular*, October 26, 1867.

"Radicals." Led by men such as Daniel Richards, Liberty Billings, and William U. Saunders, the Radicals appeared at the time to enjoy the backing of the national Republican party. Their political agenda bespoke a far greater egalitarianism than that of the moderates, and they preached widespread social and political changes. Had Meacham's inclinations in favor of the Radicals not already led him toward their camp, the early Radical alliance with his church mentor and presiding elder, Charles H. Pearce, surely sealed the bargain.²⁶

It was thus on behalf of his Radical allies that in mid 1867 Meacham set about establishing "Union League" chapters as a basis for the political organization of freedmen in Jefferson County.²⁷ In recognition of his work, he was placed on the Republican ticket for election as a delegate to the Florida Constitutional Convention scheduled for January 20, 1868, in Tallahassee. During the November 1867 election period, most white Jefferson County voters shunned the polls, resulting in the unopposed selection of Meacham and his ticket-mates with a total of 1,536 votes each.²⁸

The Florida Constitutional Convention met as planned on January 20, 1868, and its members at once were locked into a struggle for control between the Radicals, whose adherents came to be called the "mule team," and the more moderate elements of the Republican party. The opening victories went to the Radicals, leading to the naming of Charles H. Pearce as the convention's temporary chairman and, then, of Daniel Richards as its president. Meacham's influence was recognized by his appointment to the powerful committee on permanent organization and standing rules, as well as to the committees on relief, education, and engrossment.²⁹ As a member of the relief

26. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 168-69, 177-79; Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, February 11, 1868.

27. "Report of the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections, with the Testimony and Documentary Evidence, on the Election in the State of Florida in 1876," Senate Report No. 611, 44th Cong., 2d sess., pt. 2, 338.

28. Other members of the Jefferson County ticket were John W. Powell, A. G. Bass, and Anthony Mills. Election Returns, Seventh Election District, Recapitulation (1867), record group 156, ser. 21, Florida State Archives.

29. William Watson Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York, 1913; facsimile ed., Gainesville, 1964), 500-01; Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 178-81; *Journal of the Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the State of Florida, begun and held at the Capitol, at Tallahassee on Monday, January 20th, 1868* (Tallahassee, 1868), 1, 9, 12-13.

committee, he was a prime mover of one of the convention's first official acts, a suspension of the collection of all taxes.³⁰ Although one historian claimed the act was passed "[obviously] in the interest of the negro," given the disastrous state of Florida's economy the move no doubt was welcomed by everyone.³¹ Meacham also was active in support of public education and the opening of a state prison.³² As a reward for his work, in February he was selected on the "Mule Team ticket" as a delegate to the national Republican convention to be held in Chicago.³³

During the turbulent weeks that followed the opening of the convention, the Republican moderates worked toward, and eventually succeeded in, seizing control of the assembly. New committees were appointed February 19, and Meacham, on the losing side, was left only with a seat on the committee on education.³⁴ Despite this change of fortune he worked for the approval of an education article that, upon the Constitution's final approval, mandated for the first time a uniform system of free public education for the state.³⁵

The adjournment of the constitutional convention signaled the beginning of the campaign for its approval, as well as for the election of new members of the state legislature. While not neglecting his duties as minister, Meacham worked for the constitution's acceptance even though, as a "mule team" member, he had signed the document under protest.³⁶ In so doing, he stressed that the charter had been tailored for the state as a whole. "It is true," he declared, "that our Constitution was made for the people, not for a few individuals; for the whole State, not for several counties: to be the charter of a Government, not for

30. Jacksonville *Florida Union*, January 25, 1868.

31. Davis, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida*, 501.

32. Jacksonville *Florida Union*, February 15, 1868.

33. *St. Augustine Examiner*, February 22, 1868.

34. To deny the Radicals a quorum and to enable themselves to organize better, the moderates at one point during the convention withdrew to Monticello. It was upon their return to Tallahassee that the moderates launched the assault that ultimately placed them in control of the convention. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 182-83; *Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention*, 39-40.

35. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 186.

36. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, March 3, 1868.

the white man, nor for the black man, *but for the people*.³⁷ At the same time he stood for election to the state senate from Jefferson County. When the votes were counted in May, he had won his senate seat in a landslide, and the constitution also had been approved.³⁸

Florida's first Reconstruction legislature met at the Capitol June 8, 1868. Meacham was appointed to four committees: public printing, claims, legislative expenditures, and privileges and elections. Because they did not involve themselves with raising or spending substantial sums of money or in controlling the flow of legislation, his committees could not be considered of first-rank importance; nor was Meacham designated the chair of any of them.³⁹ Still, as an official who represented upwards of 2,000 black voters, he commanded the attention of Republican and Conservative leaders alike. The Republican Jacksonville *Florida Union* soon noted of him, "Mr. Meacham [is] a representative man of his race in the Senate, and an intelligent and honest representative of his district."⁴⁰ The conservative Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian* begrudgingly admitted, "[Meacham is] an honest and respected colored preacher," although it felt called upon to add, "who would do right if he was let alone and had sense enough."⁴¹

For Republican Governor Harrison Reed, Senator Meacham became a man to court. Under the new Florida constitution, the governor had sole authority for appointing most local officials, and by early August it was Meacham to whom Reed had turned for the naming of Jefferson County's officers.⁴² The governor took his courting a step further on August 19 when he ap-

37. Meacham remained active as an A. M. E. minister. He was elected secretary of the Florida Annual Conference March 4, 1868, and chairman of its committees on temperance and state of the country. He also was a delegate to the church's General Conference. Jacksonville *Florida Union*, March 28, 1868; Long, *History of the A. M. E. Church in Florida*, 66-68.

38. Meacham bested white Conservative B. Walter Taylor, 1,614 votes to 532. "Return of election of 4th, 5th, & 6th May, 1868," Election Returns, Jefferson County, record group 156, ser. 21, Florida State Archives.

39. *Florida Senate Journal* (1868), 9, 32-33.

40. Jacksonville *Florida Union*, December 5, 1868.

41. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, November 3, 1868.

42. Meacham to Harrison Reed, August 6, 15, 1868, record group 101, ser. 577, Florida State Archives.

pointed the senator to the potentially lucrative position of Jefferson County's clerk of the circuit court.⁴³

The governor's favor helped solidify Meacham's position as a, if not the, "boss" of an increasingly turbulent Jefferson County.⁴⁴ The impact of Reconstruction and the presidential contest between Republican Ulysses S. Grant and Democrat Horatio Seymour had brought racial tensions in the county to a fever pitch. When Meacham arrived at the clerk's office to claim his new position, for instance, former clerk Samuel Pasco was furious and angrily entered into the clerk's journal: "[H]e [Pasco] this day surrendered all the records, seals and other property that has been in his custody . . . to the said Robert Meacham, but he does the same under protest reserving and claiming all his rights as Clerk as aforesaid. And he protests the authority under which the said Robert Meacham is acting is unlawful and a usurpation."⁴⁵ Reports that bands of white Regulators had been formed circulated through the county and, at one point, some local whites threatened the lives of Republicans whom they had "marked."⁴⁶ Meacham again was not dissuaded from his course, however, and reported to Governor Reed, "We are trying to get things to work out here and will we think in a short time." He added, "There has been no violence done in the county as yet. Great deal of talk but we dont mind the talk."⁴⁷

The political tensions in Jefferson County mirrored those in other areas of the state. Partially in response to that situation, and partially as a cost-saving measure, the legislature decided to cancel the presidential poll entirely. Instead, at a special session early in November 1868, it met to decide the contest. With Republicans controlling both chambers of the body, the outcome never was in doubt, and Florida's three presidential electors were directed to vote for Grant. One of the three men honored by being selected to act in that capacity was Meacham.⁴⁸

43. Volume "No. 10, Book A," record group 156, ser. 259, Florida State Archives.

44. Davis, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida*, 666.

45. Shofner, *History of Jefferson County*, 314-315

46. *Ibid.*, 315.

47. Meacham to Reed, August 15, 1868, record group 101, ser. 577, Florida State Archives.

48. The other two electors in 1868 were James D. Green and J. W. Butler. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 203-04; Jacksonville *Florida Union*, November 7, 1868.

The selection of Meacham as a presidential elector illustrated the ascendance of his star in legislative circles, but at the time, his right to a senate seat had been called into question. As was the case with many black leaders, Meacham's relations with Governor Reed had soured as he saw Reed appoint Conservatives to prominent state and local offices and watched in dismay as the governor vetoed a proposed law granting equal access for blacks on railroads and in hotels.⁴⁹ As the possibility arose of Reed's impeachment by a Radical-influenced legislature, the governor initiated a preemptive strike by declaring vacant on October 28, 1868, the seats of some fifteen legislators, including Meacham.⁵⁰

Reed justified his action in declaring legislative seats vacant by pointing out that the incumbents had been appointed to other civil positions (in Meacham's case, clerk of the circuit court) and that such dual officeholding was prohibited by the state constitution. To fill the posts, he called an election for December 29.⁵¹ Apparently, Meacham made clear his intent to seek re-election to his seat at any early date, for the *Florida Union* soon noted, "The Clerkship is a profitable office, more so than the Senatorship, and so far as Mr. Meacham's personal interests are concerned, it is for his advantage to keep it." The Republican organ added, though, "We should like to see him renominated and re-elected."⁵² The *Union's* wish came true. On election day, Meacham bested white Conservative William D. Bellinger by 1,351 votes to 452. Not wishing to place his seat again in jeopardy, however, he resigned his clerkship early in January. A few days later, Reed appointed in the senator's stead Meacham's white deputy, R. C. Loveridge.⁵³

The turmoil surrounding the vacancy controversy does not seem to have affected negatively Meacham's personal finances which, as of November 1867, were sufficient to permit him to

49. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 195-203; *New York Times*, August 18, 1868.

50. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, November 3, 1868.

51. *Ibid.*

52. Jacksonville *Florida Union*, December 5, 1868.

53. "Return of election of December 29, 1868," Election Returns, Jefferson County, record group 156, ser. 21, and "Resignations, Book A," record group 150, ser. 260, Florida State Archives.

purchase a town lot adjacent to Monticello's A. M. E. church.⁵⁴ He erected on the lot a residence, and— at some time within the next few years though not later than 1874— he also purchased a “plantation” of 240 acres lying near Monticello.⁵⁵

The 1869 session of the Florida legislature, which convened January 5, was guaranteed to be a troubled one, the possible impeachment of the governor being among the most important topics on everyone's mind. The session commenced January 9 with the resignation of the senate's presiding officer, Lieutenant Governor William H. Gleason, who had been involved in an abortive attempt at impeachment of Governor Reed during and after the November 1868 special session.⁵⁶ As Gleason departed the senate chamber, he called Meacham to the president's chair and left him as the body's presiding officer.⁵⁷ From the ninth to the eleventh, Meacham served in that capacity as the senate struggled to organize itself.⁵⁸ By January 25, 1869, he had emerged as the chairman of the senate committee on education, which had in its custody Senate Bill 14, designed to implement that provision of the 1868 Florida Constitution guaranteeing a uniform system of free public schools for the state.⁵⁹ On that

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54. Meacham purchased his town lot from former Governor David S. Walker for \$175. The property was described as “Werick's Eastern Addition, Lot #20, lying between Bloomer Street on the North and York Street on the South.” The residence was surrounded by a fence with a gate some fifteen feet from the front door and a sidewalk running in front of the gate. The house was raised four feet off the ground and was fronted by square columns six inches square. The front door opened upon a central “hall,” and off the hall near the door was a “front room” used as a sitting room. In 1872, the house and lot were valued at \$500. One historian has suggested that Meacham's affluence arose from “the ancient practice of selling offices,” a circumstance he labeled “[a]kin to bribery.” There is no direct evidence to support those allegations. Jefferson County, Deed Records, Book K, 416-17, microfilm, Florida State Archives; “Report of the Senate Committee,” 335-36; Jefferson County, Tax Book, 1872, microfilm, Florida State Archives; Davis, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida*, 66.
55. Jefferson County, Deed Records, Book N, 338, and Book P, 106-08, 422-33, microfilm, Florida State Archives.
56. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 204-06.
57. Washington *Daily National Intelligencer*, January 11, 1869; *Savannah Daily Republican*, January 12, 1869.
58. Florida *Senate Journal* (1869), 16-18.
59. Senate Bill 14, entitled “An Act to establish a Uniform System of Common Schools and a University,” was introduced by Senator Henry A. Crane of Monroe and Manatee counties. Crane was a south Florida pioneer, teacher, ambrotype artist, and newspaper editor who had served in both the Union

date, Meacham reported the bill favorably to the senate and, on the following day, helped secure its passage by a vote of 12-5. One day later, the house concurred, and Florida's public education system was born.⁶⁰

Senator Meacham was active throughout the 1869 legislative session, becoming a power in the senate and a man of real influence in the state. When the question of impeachment finally was resolved in favor of Harrison Reed, the governor again sought to curry Meacham's favor. On February 11, Meacham asked him for a boon. "I hope you will appoint me Superintendent of Schools for this County," the senator wrote from Monticello, "if you can do so." "I will bear one part of the blame," he added, "if you will bear the other. I will risk the Senate if you will keep other things straight. It may be that we could manage in such a way no harm would be done— if you will do so I shall feel very thankful."⁶¹ Despite having attempted to oust Meacham from the senate for dual officeholding less than four months previously, Reed acceded to the request on February 27.⁶² Eight days earlier Meacham also had been appointed Monticello's postmaster.⁶³

As the senator's political power increased in the state, he began to experience some problems at home. A rival faction of black leaders, including Anthony Mills, Benjamin Dilworth, and Ben Thompson, assiduously opposed Meacham's role in Jefferson County politics and its Republican party organization. Although Meacham overcame their opposition to the appointment of R. C. Loveridge as clerk of the circuit court, he was faced with a dilemma. Would black voters in the county split between factions, and, if so, could that result in Meacham's defeat or even the election of a white Conservative? The potential problem was great enough that Meacham— and his opponents—

navy and army during the Civil War. *Florida Senate Journal* (1869), 31; *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*, June 20, 1888.

60. *Florida Senate Journal* (1869), 96, 100, 111; Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 151-52.
61. Meacham to Reed, February 11, 1869, record group 101, ser. 577, Florida State Archives.
62. Record of commissions of office, "No. 10, Book A," record group 156, ser. 259, Florida State Archives.
63. Records of Appointments of Postmasters, microcopy 841, roll 20, National Archives.

began in small ways to court white Conservatives, with results none too pleasing to either side of the black political equation. For the time being, Meacham remained in control, but a weakness had developed in his home base that would plague him in years to come.⁶⁴

Following the conclusion of the 1869 legislative session, Meacham spent most of his time in Jefferson County shoring up his support, attending to his congregation, and administering his duties as superintendent of schools and as postmaster. In June, however, he attended a special session of the legislature called by Governor Reed for the purpose, among other things, of ratifying the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. Meacham introduced the measure in the senate and served as chairman of the Committee on Constitutional Amendments that considered it favorably. The session began on the eighth, and the amendment was ratified within six days.⁶⁵ Late in the year he also journeyed to Quincy for the fourth session of the Florida A. M. E. church where he was named a "traveling elder" for the conference.⁶⁶

The decade of the 1870s dawned with the future looking bright for Meacham. At the legislature's session in 1870, he nominated and saw elected his candidate for presiding officer of the senate, was given the position of chairman of the legislative expenditures committee with its opportunities for patronage, and introduced and secured passage of a law granting blacks equal privileges in public conveyances. Additionally, the legislature granted him and Jefferson County a boon by enacting a law incorporating the Monticello and Georgia Railroad Company of which Meacham was named a director.⁶⁷ At one point during the session he—perhaps as a joke—attempted by floor amendment to have the Capitol moved to Monticello.⁶⁸ The session ended with Meacham poised for a try at higher office and vastly more power.

64. Shofner, *History of Jefferson County*, 316-17.

65. *Florida Senate Journal* (1869, Extra Session), 16-17, 20-22, 29-33.

66. Long, *History of the A. M. E. Church in Florida*, 70.

67. *Florida Senate Journal* (1870), 32-34, 76-77, 120, 162; *Laws of Florida* (1870), 75-79.

68. *Florida Senate Journal* (1870), 188.

Florida had but a single United States Congressman in 1870. The white incumbent, Charles Hamilton, was no ally of the state's black Republicans who chafed at the fact that the governor, both United States senators, and the congressman were white. Events suggest that early in that election year Meacham set his sights on Hamilton's seat. He resigned as postmaster, which allowed him more time to prepare a campaign, and in April and May traveled in many of the state's heavily black areas in the train of a charismatic orator, Mrs. F. E. W. Harper, who eloquently urged adoption of the Fifteenth Amendment, women's rights, and black voting power.⁶⁹

The Republican state nominating convention was scheduled for August 17 in Gainesville. At a series of private caucuses held there as the convention was getting under way, it was agreed by many leaders that the congressional seat should go to a black man, although some white Republicans, opponents of Governor Reed, were prepared to vote for anyone, white or black, other than Reed's friend Hamilton.⁷⁰ Meacham's campaign thus was off to a fine start, bolstered by the support of one of Reed's most powerful political opponents, United States Senator Thomas W. Osborn.⁷¹

Voting for a congressional nominee commenced at Gainesville about eight in the evening of the opening day. In a first, informal poll, Meacham led the seven candidates with twenty-nine votes, fifty being necessary for nomination. Immediately thereafter, formal balloting was begun. After a strong start, Meacham's support, by the fifth tally, had dropped to a low of eleven votes, but by the ninth ballot had increased again to thirty-seven. At that point, Meacham's opposition was arrayed as follows: Charles Hamilton, nineteen votes; Charles H. Pearce, twenty; Jonathan C. Gibbs, eight; Henry S. Harmon, ten; and Alachua County's black senator, Josiah Walls, four.⁷²

Quickly following the ninth ballot, Harmon withdrew, and Pearce threw his support to Walls, who was presiding over the

69. Records of Appointments of Postmasters, microcopy 841, roll 20, National Archives.

70. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, August 23, 1870.

71. Peter D. Klingman, *Josiah Walls: Florida's Black Congressman of Reconstruction* (Gainesville, 1976), 34.

72. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, August 23, 1870.

voting. Another Republican leader then jumped to his feet and moved the nomination of Walls by acclamation. Pandemonium broke out in the hall as the tenth ballot was taken. The announced results boosted Walls's total to twenty-four votes while Meacham's count came to forty-eight. A correspondent of the *Weekly Floridian* reported, however, "I have been told by at least a half dozen Republicans that Meacham of Jefferson County got the nomination fairly on the ballot, but the wire-pullers were determined he should not have it and the vote was manipulated accordingly."⁷³

As the ballot was taken and the pandemonium ensued, Walls, as presiding officer, slammed his gavel down on the podium, knocking away all the candles set there for illumination and "scattering grease on everybody's clothes, and causing a general stampede of those men near the stand." His supporters alleged that in the confusion the Osborn faction attempted to change the vote totals in Meacham's favor. As that rumor swept the floor, another vote was demanded, and Walls secured the necessary majority and the nomination.⁷⁴ The unfriendly *Tallahassee Sentinel* reported, "[P]oor Meacham, as his friends deserted him one by one and went in favor of his opponent, looked the picture of misery and an object for compassion."⁷⁵

The nomination of Walls was made unanimous, and a defeated Meacham pledged his support for the candidate.⁷⁶ When Meacham returned home, he arranged for his own reappointment as Monticello's postmaster and set about organizing for the fall election." He campaigned for the Republican ticket in Jefferson and Gadsden counties, and it is likely that he did the same in other black areas.⁷⁸ Official returns of the election

73. Ibid.

74. Ibid.; Klingman, *Josiah Walls*, 34.

75. *Tallahassee Sentinel*, August 20, 1870.

76. *Tallahassee Weekly Floridian*, August 23, 1870.

77. Records of Appointments of Postmasters, microcopy 841, roll 20, National Archives.

78. Republican Malachi Martin later related a story that grew out of a Meacham campaign appearance in Gadsden County. "While Mr. Meacham was addressing a meeting in Quincy. I heard one gentleman say, 'Damn him; I wish he and all the other radicals were in hell, and I had the key.' I was near by him and asked him on which side of the door he wanted to be. He said he did not know but that he would be damned if he would not be willing to be inside if he could keep all the others in there." "Testimony Taken by the Joint Committee," 187.

showed Walls a narrow victor over Conservative-Democrat Silas L. Niblack of Columbia County.⁷⁹ Walls thereby gained a seat in the Congress while, as a part of the same election process, Meacham came close to losing his life.

The threat to Meacham's life came on election day at Monticello where all of Jefferson County's voting precincts were located. It began when a group of armed Georgians descended on the town from Thomasville and took up strategic positions on streets and rooftops. Later in the day, white Conservative William Capers Bird appeared at the courthouse precinct armed with a pistol and confronted Meacham who was standing with a hundred or more black men waiting in line to vote. "No damned nigger shall vote here," Bird yelled at the senator. Meacham ignored the taunt, and shortly Bird repeated it, adding: "There are three other polls you colored people can vote at. This is our poll; it belongs to the white people." Finally Meacham responded that all the polls were "for the citizens of the county," whereupon Bird called him "a liar" and "a damned son of a bitch." The two then confronted each other physically after which Bird drew his pistol from its holster.⁸⁰

After several tense minutes, the Meacham-Bird confrontation ended without harm to either, but from it spread a rumor that Meacham had been shot and killed. A crowd of angry freedmen then armed themselves and approached the courthouse intent on revenge. Some local white leaders among the armed Georgians present attempted peacefully to forestall the blacks' approach, but a shot was fired resulting in a fusillade of several dozen rounds. No one was injured, and the two factions were separated. As a result of the excitement, however, many black voters were denied the opportunity to cast their ballots.⁸¹ Of the incident, the Monticello *Advertiser* proclaimed: "The negroes of the county have shown a desire to fight. They have been led off from their true interests by the incendiary teachings of a few unprincipled scoundrels that loaf about the street corners." "But we have them spotted," the statement continued, "and if there

79. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 214-16.

80. "Testimony Taken by the Joint Committee," 103; Shofner, *History of Jefferson County*, 317-18.

81. "Testimony Taken by the Joint Committee," 103.

is any justice in the land, or power in our arms, those men shall meet their reward." In conclusion, the editor urged his fellow white neighbors, "Now, let every citizen of this county, who feels an interest in its prosperity, unite himself with one of the several organizations we have raised, and let him ever be on hand hereafter to maintain the dignity of his race."⁸²

As the Monticello *Advertiser* expounded its appeal to vigilantism, Meacham pursued his responsibilities. He attended and was active in the 1871 legislative session. During its course, he received a tangible reward for his efforts on behalf of the Republican ticket by being named to the desirable federal position of register of the General Land Office at Tallahassee.⁸³ To accept the appointment, he surrendered his postmastership but retained office as superintendent of schools for Jefferson County.⁸⁴ For the remainder of the year, he executed the various duties of his offices, taking particular pride in his role as school superintendent. He reported that during his first two years in office he had added twelve schools and some 610 pupils to the county system.⁸⁵ In his capacity as minister, he supervised on September 10 the dedication of Monticello's A. M. E. Church. As senator, he testified in November before congressional committees meeting at Jacksonville about events of the 1870 election campaign.⁸⁶

82. Monticello *Advertiser*, quoted in *Savannah Morning News*, November 14, 1870.

83. Meacham was named register upon recommendation of the state Republican executive committee and United States Senators Thomas W. Osborn and Abijah Gilbert. He replaced Charles H. Mundee who was ousted for campaigning for Conservatives in 1870. Horatio Jenkins to Osborn and Gilbert, January 16, 1871, Interior Department Appointment Papers, Florida, 1849-1907, microcopy 1119, roll 6, National Archives.

84. Records of Appointments of Postmasters, microcopy 841, roll 20, National Archives; Meacham to Reed, March 2, 1871, record group 101, ser. 259, Florida State Archives.

85. Florida *Senate Journal* (1870, Appendix), 77-78; Florida *Senate Journal* (1872, Appendix), 62-63.

86. Meacham's only apparent problem in 1871 stemmed from his role as register of the General Land Office. He discovered that his predecessor improperly had received payments for homestead entries, causing Meacham to void all entries made between December 1, 1870, and March 23, 1871. The action was controversial and angered many homesteaders who had entered their claims in good faith. *Savannah Morning News*, August 31, September 29, November 10, 1871; "Testimony Taken by the Joint Committee," 101-09.

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ROBERT MEACHAM 19

It was at this point in Meacham's career, in late 1871 and early 1872, that the personal quality that was to mark the remainder of his active political life began to become evident. That quality was tenacity, a sense of determination toward a goal he had set for himself, and that goal was election to the United States Congress. Just when Meacham focused upon the office as his ultimate goal is unknown, but his decision to run again in 1872 clearly set him upon the path that he was to follow for the remainder of the Reconstruction era. Perhaps partially the decision was fortuitous, brought about by the fact that, in 1872, Florida was awarded through reapportionment a second seat in the United States House of Representatives.⁸⁷ At the time, Meacham was poised for another attempt at higher office. His federal position conferred upon him prestige and increased political standing, and his position within the A. M. E. church helped him maintain widespread ties outside the Republican party organization.

Meacham opened the 1872 campaign season aggressively. Building upon his strength and position in the state senate, he launched an early attack upon his opponents, particularly criticizing Secretary of State Jonathan C. Gibbs and Republican leader William J. Purman, both of whom he may have blamed for his 1870 defeat and who potentially were challengers for the 1872 congressional nomination.⁸⁸ He joined the recurring controversy over the impeachment of Governor Reed, solidifying his support among black voters who remained alienated from Reed as a result of the governor's continued approaches to Conservatives.⁸⁹ He reinforced his appeal as a friend of education by arranging to be named as a trustee of the Brown Theological Seminary, a state-chartered arm of the A. M. E. Church, and as a member of the trustees' executive committee of the recently authorized Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College.⁹⁰ In

87. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 278.

88. *Savannah Morning News*, January 19, 1872.

89. John Wallace, *Carpetbag Rule in Florida* (Jacksonville, 1888; facsimile ed., Gainesville, 1964), 180, 209.

90. *Laws of Florida* (1872), 68-69; *Florida Senate Journal* (1873, Appendix), 21; Nita Katharine Pyburn, *The History of the Development of a Single System of Education in Florida, 1822-1903* (Tallahassee, 1954), 149; *Tallahassee Weekly Floridian*, March 26, 1872.

April, he ventured to Jacksonville where he served as an officer of the Republican convention at which the state party gave its endorsement to the re-election of President Grant.⁹¹ The following month, he represented the Florida A. M. E. Church as a Middle Florida delegate to the church's General Conference at Nashville, Tennessee.⁹² He appears also to have resigned his position as superintendent of schools, perhaps to allow more time for campaigning. He did so, however, only after arranging to entrust the position to his ally R. C. Loveridge.⁹³

The Republican nominating convention met August 7, 1872, at Tallahassee. William J. Purman, as chairman of the state executive committee, of which Meacham also remained a member, gavelled the meeting to order in the Assembly Hall of the Capitol. That afternoon and evening were consumed with preliminaries, but the next morning the convention approved its permanent organization, selecting Meacham as its chairman. After balloting for the gubernatorial and the first congressional nominations, the assembly then turned its attention to the second, the new, congressional seat. In a crowded field, Meacham led the first ballot with thirty-five votes, eleven more than his nearest competitor, former Lieutenant Governor William H. Gleason. After the results of the ballot were announced, a Jacksonville representative stood and read a telegram, purportedly from the national Republican committee, threatening to withhold funds unless Gleason was nominated. During the resulting uproar, "several speeches were made in support of various candidates— Meacham appearing to be the favorite." William J. Purman then stood and refused to relinquish the floor. Purman's action effectively quashed the steamroller effect building in Meacham's favor and allowed time for Purman's operatives to work the crowd. As they did so, Purman pleaded for the nomination of a man from the western part of the state— which he was— to balance the ticket. On cue, other leaders then rose and endorsed Purman, actions that in turn kindled "a universal

91. *Tallahassee Sentinel*, April 13, 1872.

92. Meacham to Willis Drummond, April 7, 1872, Interior Department Appointment Papers, Florida, 1849-1907, microcopy 1119, roll 6, National Archives.

93. *Florida Senate Journal* (1873, Appendix).

sympathy" for him. "When the call of counties was concluded," an observer recorded, "it was found that Meacham had received a very good support, but only in compliment, for county after county changed to Purman until a motion to declare him unanimously nominated was unanimously carried."⁹⁴

A different man might have let consecutive setbacks such as those experienced by Meacham blunt his ambitions. The known facts of Meacham's life, however, suggest something quite the contrary. Once again that quality of tenacity seems to have come into play, for soon he had undertaken a series of steps which appear from the perspective of some 120 years to have been conceived to lead him directly to a third challenge for a congressional seat. Specifically, he soon was preparing for a rematch of his nominating contest with Purman.

Following the Tallahassee convention, Meacham returned home to Monticello where, on October 8, 1872, his county nominating convention endorsed his bid for re-election to the state senate, a goal he easily achieved the following month when Purman was elected to the Congress and Ossian B. Hart as governor.⁹⁵ In December 1872, Meacham hosted the A. M. E. annual conference at Monticello, and the following month he immersed himself in the 1873 legislative session as well as in the affairs of the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College. He received a respectful number of votes in the legislative selection of a successor to United States Senator Thomas W. Osborn and served as chairman of the senate's railroads and telegraphs committee.⁹⁶ On January 15, he was elected chairman of the executive committee of the agricultural college and oversaw that body's tentative—though later unexecuted—decision to locate the school at Gainesville.⁹⁷

94. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 278-79; Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, August 13, 1872; Tallahassee *Sentinel*, August 10, 1872.

95. Tallahassee *Sentinel*, October 12, 1872; Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 286.

96. Savannah *Morning News*, January 22, February 24, 1873; Florida *Senate Journal* (1873), 12.

97. The tentative decision to locate the agricultural college in Gainesville later was changed, and Eau Gallie was selected as its site. Although buildings were constructed there in 1876, it never opened for classes. The college began in 1883 in Lake City. In 1905, it was merged into the newly created University of Florida. The new campus was dedicated in Gainesville in 1906. Florida *Senate Journal* (1874, Appendix), 18; Savannah *Morning News*, January 23, 1873; Pyburn, *History of the Development of a Single System of Education in Florida*, 123, 149.

In February 1873, Meacham began rearranging his commitments. He prevailed upon Governor Hart to reappoint him Jefferson County's superintendent of schools, and, about the same time, he resigned as register of the General Land Office at Tallahassee, securing the appointment of his clerk, M. J. Taylor, as his successor.⁹⁸ Late in the month an attempt was launched by members of the legislature, United States Senator Simon B. Conover, Congressman Walls, and even Congressman Purman to secure for Meacham the office of surveyor general of Florida. The attempt was cut short, though, when out-going Senator Osborn surreptitiously obtained the post for Joshua W. Gilbert, son of Osborn's senatorial colleague, Abijah Gilbert.⁹⁹

Through the spring Meacham busied himself with his public duties.¹⁰⁰ He also participated in the organization of the Monticello and Georgia Railroad Company of which his Conservative antagonist Samuel Pasco was named president.¹⁰¹ As a trustee of the Brown Theological Seminary, he, most probably, traveled to Live Oak on May 16 when the cornerstone of that institution was laid.¹⁰² The record of Meacham's activities for the remainder of 1873 is spotty, suggesting that for the most part he remained at Monticello performing the functions of his many callings. Other than for his participation in the 1874 legislative session, when he oversaw not only the railroads and telegraphs committee but also the very sensitive work of the committee on privileges and elections, the record likewise remains cloudy. Subsequent events hint, however, that throughout the period he was hard at work preparing for another confrontation with Purman.¹⁰³

98. "Index to Commissions, 1871-1889," record group 156, ser. 259A, Florida State Archives; *Savannah Daily Republican*, March 6, 1873.

99. W. K. Long et al., to U. S. Grant, February 23, 1873, and S. B. Conover, J. T. Walls, and W. J. Purman to Grant, March 10, 1873, Interior Department Appointment Papers, Florida, 1840-1907, microcopy 1119, roll 2, National Archives.

100. *Florida Senate Journal* (1874, Appendix), 19.

101. The Monticello and Georgia Railroad fell victim to the national economic depression that began in the late summer and early fall of 1873. *Savannah Morning News*, May 13, 1873; Shofner, *History of Jefferson County*, 358.

102. Long, *History of the A. M. E. Church in Florida*, 84.

103. *Florida Senate Journal* (1874), 38-40.

The stage for the Meacham-Purman rematch again was Tallahassee, and the drama opened on the morning of August 11, 1874. Purman had been working for months to secure friendly county delegations for the nominating convention, and, according to a contemporary, Marcellus Stearns, who had succeeded to the governorship upon the untimely death of O. B. Hart, had been doing the same for Meacham.¹⁰⁴ Purman no doubt felt he had the edge: not only was he the incumbent with the influence and patronage his office provided, but he also had been able to dictate the rules under which delegates were to be certified to and admitted by the nominating convention.¹⁰⁵ As a result of those early efforts on behalf of both candidates, a number of counties sent contesting delegations to the convention.

Theoretically, the question of seating contesting delegations should have been decided under the rules Purman had dictated to the Republican state executive committee of which both he and Meacham were members.¹⁰⁶ In Tallahassee, though, Purman refused to be constrained by those rules and filibustered the district executive committee until it was agreed that the convention initially would be organized by delegates only from those counties having uncontested delegations. The compromise allowed the admission and certification of forty-eight delegates, twenty-eight of whom had been instructed by their county conventions to vote for Meacham and twenty of whom were pledged to Purman. When balloting for a chairman ensued, however, six of the delegates pledged to Meacham—four of whom were from Jefferson County and members, presumably, of the faction that long had opposed Meacham politically—voted for Purman who, subsequently, was elected. "Nothing but the most unscrupulous bribery and corruption," reported the strongly pro-Meacham *Tallahassee Sentinel*, "could have brought about this result. As was said by one of the speakers on Wednesday [August 12], more custom-houses and post-offices were given away in half an hour in the Assembly Hall on Tuesday, than there are in the United States."¹⁰⁷

104. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 293-94; Wallace, *Carpetbag Rule in Florida*, 298-99.

105. Jacksonville *Tri-Weekly Florida Union*, July 7, 1874.

106. *Ibid.*

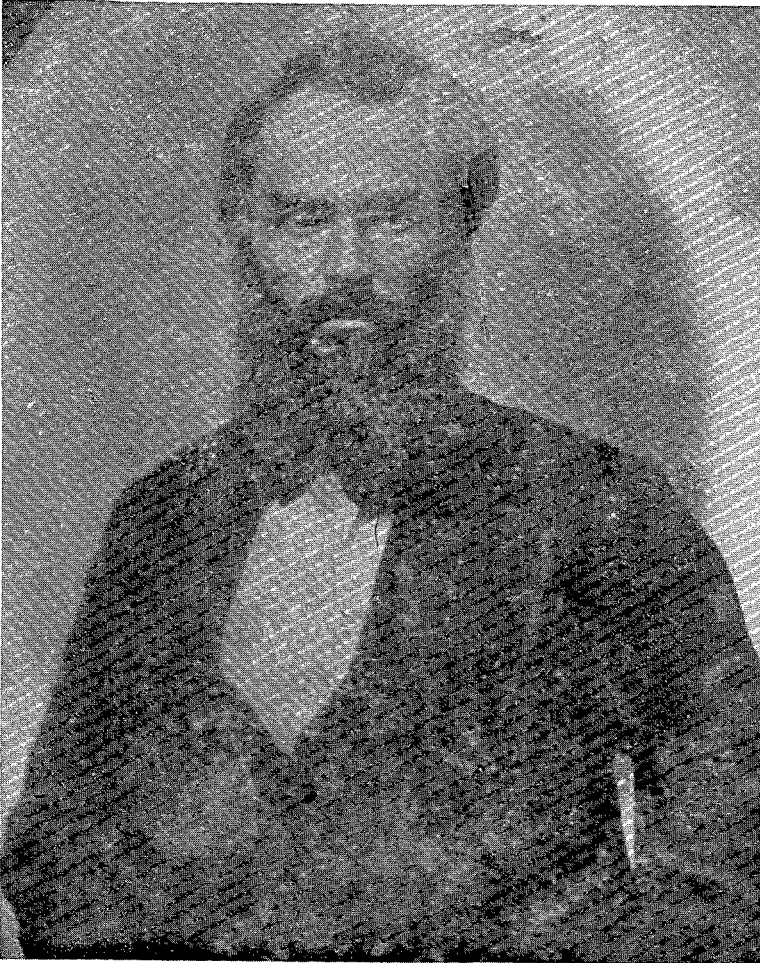
107. *Tallahassee Sentinel*, August 29, 1874.

Purman's election as chairman placed him in control of the organization of the nominating convention. He then proceeded to appoint a committee on credentials composed primarily of his allies. Thereafter, about three in the afternoon, he adjourned the convention until six to await their report.¹⁰⁸ Meacham and his supporters were outraged at the turn of events and determined on action of their own. At four o'clock, they convened in the Capitol and proceeded to reorganize the convention, including among their number four members of Purman's credentials committee. Malachi Martin, Gadsden County's white senator and warden of the state penitentiary, was elected chairman, and a new committee on credentials was appointed.¹⁰⁹

The *Sentinel* reported what then occurred when Congressman Purman learned of the new turn of events. "Six o'clock had arrived before Mr. Purman and his friends discovered the action that had been taken, and the moment they found it out they rushed to the door of the hall, accompanied by about one hundred of their supporters, who were armed with clubs and bludgeons. A few deputy police had been placed in charge of the door, and those having tickets of admission obtained an entrance; but this did not satisfy the Major or his retainers. At a signal given by him in the hall, the door was burst open, and one wing of it broken into pieces by the mob outside. This was not all. They commenced an indiscriminate assault upon every person in the lobby who was opposed to Purman. The tables and desks, which were piled in the lobby, were broken to furnish material of war, and for a short time the uproar and confusion was terrible. A few came out of the affray with broken heads, but none sustained any serious injury. The police succeeded in keeping the mob at bay, and frustrated the designs of the leaders. Colonel Martin occupied the chair at the time the assault was made, and having arose to put a motion, Major Purman came behind him and slipped into the chair. He was asked quietly by the Colonel to vacate the seat; but he would not. He

108. *Ibid.*; Jacksonville *Tri-Weekly Florida Union*, August 18, 1874; Savannah *Morning News*, August 12, 1874.

109. Savannah *Morning News*, August 12, 1874; Jacksonville *Tri-Weekly Florida Union*, August 18, 1874; Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 294.



Robert Meacham. *Photograph courtesy of Luther Alexander and Rowena Brady, Tampa.*

was then told that force would be used to obtain possession of the seat. He still refused, however, to yield possession, and Colonel Martin took him by the covering of the inferior expanses of his vertebral column and landed him sprawling on the floor.¹¹⁰

110. *Tallahassee Sentinel*, August 29, 1874.

Although the paper was highly partisan in favor of Meacham, the *Sentinel's* description agrees in most particulars with other surviving accounts.¹¹¹ Following the “riot,” Governor Stearns ordered the state’s adjutant general to clear the hall. Purman and his adherents regrouped outside on the Capitol square and agreed to meet the following morning at the post office. The Meacham delegates set their next meeting for ten the same morning, their site still the now-disordered Assembly Hall.¹¹²

On Wednesday, August 12, the leaders of the Meacham convention attempted to bring about a reconciliation with the Purman forces. A committee, including Meacham, was appointed to approach Purman, but it was forced to report “that they were insulted by the bolters, and would not be heard.” The Meacham convention then proceeded to nominate their man, as did the Purman convention.¹¹³

As nominee Meacham departed Tallahassee to begin his campaign, Purman remained behind to ensure his control of the regular party apparatus. He convened on August 13 a meeting of a bare majority of the members of the state Republican executive committee who resided in the First Congressional District—the congressman himself making the majority—and secured their official endorsement of his nomination.¹¹⁴ Purman’s early forays on the campaign trail were not quite so successful, however. He scheduled his first rally at Monticello, “but owing to the inclemency of public opinion in that section the performance did not take place.” Days later he spoke in Gadsden County, but the occasion ended “with long, loud cheering for Robert Meacham for Congress.”¹¹⁵ At Waukeenah on August 27, Meacham attended one of the rallies. “The meeting was quiet,” it was reported, “until Meacham began to speak, when some of Purman’s crowd began to interrupt. But the people took sides with Meacham.”¹¹⁶

111. Jacksonville *Tri-Weekly Florida Union*, August 18, 1874; Wallace, *Carpetbag Rule in Florida*, 298-99.

112. Jacksonville *Tri-Weekly Florida Union*, August 18, 1874.

113. *Tallahassee Sentinel*, August 29, 1874.

114. Jacksonville *New South*, August 19, 1874.

115. *Tallahassee Sentinel*, August 22, 1874.

116. *Ibid.*, August 29, 1874.



Believed to be Stella Meacham. *Collection of Luther Alexander; photograph courtesy of Luther Alexander and Rowena Brady.*

Democrats were gleeful at the Republican split. "Everybody seems confident," related one leading Conservative, "that we will be able to elect [John A.] Henderson particularly if Purman & Meacham both stay up."¹¹⁷ The accuracy of that statement did

117. Henry A. L'Engle to Edward L'Engle, August 21, 1874, folder 76, L'Engle Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

not elude Purman, and he quickly initiated efforts to remove Meacham from the race. On one front, he put direct pressure into play by arranging for his supporters to hold a rump nominating convention in Jefferson County at which George W. Witherspoon, a rival to Meacham as an A. M. E. minister in the county, was nominated to run for state senator even though Meacham's term had two years to run.¹¹⁸ At Tallahassee, Purman reconciled with Governor Stearns, and together they arranged for the call of a new congressional nominating convention to meet at the Capitol on September 15.¹¹⁹ Stearns prevailed upon Meacham to withdraw from the race, and, at the second assembly, the politician, "actuated by motives which cannot be misunderstood by those who know me, and desiring to work only in the interest of peace, Republicanism, and the welfare of the people," did so. George W. Witherspoon then nominated Purman, and the deed was done. Purman, according to the *Tallahassee Sentinel*, "confessed that he owed to Meacham that nomination."¹²⁰

In early October 1874, Meacham traveled to Atlanta as a delegate to a "Southern Loyalists Convention," but by the twenty-first he was back in Monticello where he appeared at a rally on Congressman Purman's behalf. In the closing days of the campaign, he accompanied Purman to Tallahassee, Quincy, and Marianna.¹²¹ Election day polling, though marred in the state "by fraud and intimidation," resulted in a Purman win by

118. Jacksonville *New South*, September 23, 1874.

119. Black state senator John Wallace alleged that Stearns agreed to abandon Meacham's candidacy out of fear that Purman "would expose in the Legislature the rottenness of his administration." More likely, the deal involved the governor's ambition for election to the United States Senate at the legislative session commencing in January 1875. If so, it is noted that Meacham came within two votes of election as president pro tempore of the state senate, and, had he received that post and Stearns been promoted to the United States Senate, Meacham would have become governor of Florida. The outcome of the 1874 election, as it turned out, ruined any chances either man might have had, but the possibility certainly gave Meacham a reason to withdraw from the congressional contest. Wallace, *Carpetbag Rule in Florida*, 300-01; Jacksonville *New South*, December 5, 19, 1874; Florida *Senate Journal* (1875), 7.

120. *Tallahassee Sentinel*, September 19, 1874.

121. *Ibid.*, September 19, 22, 1874.

some 600 votes.¹²² Purman journeyed to Washington, and, once again, Meacham returned home to Monticello.

During the 1875 Florida legislative session, Meacham again sought but, because of Republican losses at the 1874 election, narrowly was denied the position of president pro tempore of the state senate. He was, as ever, active in the affairs of the body and served as chairman of its committee on state affairs.¹²³ Late in February he was reappointed by Governor Stearns to a two-year term as Jefferson County superintendent of schools, but his successes in that office had turned to struggle as the outfall of the economic depression known as the Panic of 1873 reduced revenues available for the support of education and encouraged parents to keep their children working on the farm rather than attending school. Within two years, the number of Jefferson County schools was reduced from thirty-eight to twenty-five and the number of pupils from 1,414 to 1,130.¹²⁴ For the remainder of the year and through the buildup to the election of 1876, Meacham remained a key player in state politics though behind the scene more so than on center stage. He continued to exercise the responsibilities of his public offices, as a trustee of Brown Theological Seminary, and as an A. M. E. minister. In 1876, he stood for re-election to the state senate and was an easy winner.¹²⁵

The story of the 1876 election in Florida— with its fraud and corruption, the “redemption” of the state by the Democrats, and the ultimate election of Republican Rutherford B. Hayes as president of the United States— has been told numerous times.¹²⁶ Meacham’s role in it was limited in great part to the politics of Jefferson County, but, as earlier had been the case, an election almost cost him his life.

122. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 295.

123. Florida *Senate Journal* (1875), 7, 65-67.

124. “Index to Commissions, 1871-1889,” record group 156, ser. 259A, Florida State Archives; Florida *Senate Journal* (1874, Appendix), 44; Florida *Senate Journal* (1877, Appendix), 112-13.

125. “Report of the Senate Committee,” 335.

126. See, particularly, Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 314-27.

On October 26, the Democrats (who at the time called themselves “the Reformers”) held a grand rally at Monticello featuring a number of Conservative luminaries including Georgian Benjamin H. Hill. Meacham was in the crowd at the rally. When Hill began regaling “the happy condition of the colored people in Georgia,” he could not restrain himself from publicly challenging the assertion. Hill seems to have ignored Meacham’s remarks, and, for the time, there the matter stood.¹²⁷ That evening, between eight and nine o’clock, Meacham was at home with his family, four friends, and the female teacher who boarded at the house. As he was bidding one of the guests goodbye, two white men appeared at his front gate and asked, “Does Senator Meacham live here?” The guest pointed out the senator and told the men, “There he is, do you want to see him?” Hearing the exchange, Meacham walked out on the porch and began to descend the steps. One of the strangers thereupon demanded, “Is that Senator Meacham?” The senator replied, “Yes, sir.” As Meacham later told the story: “Just after I got the word out of my mouth, ‘bow’ ‘bow’ two pistols were fired at me. I had pulled my door behind me and was walking down the steps . . . then the pistols were fired. One shot went into the panel and the next shot— I have a column to my porch about six inches square, not a solid piece of wood, but planked— the next one went into that. . . . I suppose by this time I was down on the ground; about the time the last pistol was fired.” Meacham, who was wearing a pistol himself, pulled out the gun as the men bolted down the street. He fired once over his fence, but to no avail. The men never were apprehended.¹²⁸

127. *Savannah Morning News*, November 3, 1876.

128. Democrats, anxious that word of the assassination attempt not stimulate Republican support, immediately began disseminating suggestions that the shooting was part of a complicated Republican plot of which Meacham was a coconspirator. They offered a reward for the capture of the culprits, who they indicated were “a certain county official” and his friend. It is unlikely that there was any such Republican plot. Meacham was a family man and a minister respected for his intelligence and honesty. His family and friends were all in a front room of the house at the time of the shooting, and no fact available about his life or character suggests he ever would have placed them in any such position of danger. “Report of the Senate Committee,” 335-36; *Savannah Morning News*, November 2, 3, 1876.

Control of both houses of the Florida legislature passed into the hands of the Democrats as a result of the 1876 election. For the first time since 1868 Meacham found himself in 1877 the chairman of no committee, although his assignments generally remained the same.¹²⁹ In February, his term as superintendent of schools expired. With a Democrat in the governor's office, he could have had no hope of reappointment. The following month, the legislature reconstituted the board of trustees of the state agricultural college, which still had found no home, and stripped Meacham of his membership.¹³⁰ Through it all Meacham maintained his poise and a sense of humor. Once during that session, for instance, as the Democrats pushed a bill to revise the election laws in their favor, Meacham stood and soberly offered an amendment to retitle the bill "an act to count four men into office without being elected."¹³¹ He had no power left, but still he could make a point.

Meacham's fall from political power brought with it a severe financial strain. By the summer of 1877, no longer enjoying the benefits of public salaries other than that of a state senator, he was forced to begin borrowing small sums of money.¹³² Despite the growing acclaim he received for the quality of the crops on his plantation, the financial troubles continued well into 1878.¹³³ He made one last attempt at the congressional nomination in that year and was beaten easily by Simon P. Conover.¹³⁴ Two months later his Monticello church, many of its members new converts to the temperance movement, tried him for intemperance and ejected him from his pulpit. That politics really lay behind the action was illustrated when the Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian* ran the story under the headline, "Dots of the Campaign in Jefferson." The article noted of Meacham: "Poor fel-

129. Florida *Senate Journal* (1877), 14-16.

130. *Laws of Florida* (1877), 103-04.

131. Edward C. Williamson, *Florida Politics in the Gilded Age, 1877-1893* (Gainesville, 1976), 25.

132. Jefferson County, Deed Records, Book 0, 557-58, and Book P, 28, 106-08.

133. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, April 2, 1878; Jefferson County, Deed Records, Book P, 158-60.

134. Williamson, *Florida Politics in the Gilded Age*, 40.

low! politically and religiously dead! dead! dead! 'Where are now the hopes I cherished?' &c."¹³⁵

On December 17, 1878, still Senator Meacham was forced by the pressures of his finances to sell his plantation for \$800, save for one acre he had deeded to the A. M. E. Church for a sanctuary and school.¹³⁶ The following month, he and Stella sold their Monticello home for an additional \$400.¹³⁷ Meacham most probably moved his family to Tallahassee at that point, where for the first three months of 1879 he was occupied with his duties as a senator. Those duties were greatly diminished, however, as his assignments had shrunk to two committees.¹³⁸ When the session ended, Meacham no longer held public office.

The whereabouts of the Meacham family are uncertain following the close of the 1879 legislative session until July 1, 1881. It has been suggested that the former senator moved to Gainesville where he assumed a federal position.¹³⁹ It seems more likely, however, that he remained at Tallahassee in the position he held on July 1, 1881, that of messenger in the office of his old friend Malachi Martin, then Florida's surveyor general. Meacham's salary was \$30 per month.¹⁴⁰

The former senator made one final foray into the political field in 1882, this time in support of the Independent candidacy of Daniel L. McKinnon for Congress. In May of that year, one newspaper reported: "[McKinnon] states he is forming a coalition with Republicans . . . and that Robert Meacham, a notorious negro leader, has already been induced to coalesce with him. In the last issue of the [Tallahassee] *Economist* a card from the above radical leader appears, in which he advises his political friends to give the independent their support and in addition proposes that a convention of the colored people of the state of Florida

135. The temperance or "Murphy" movement gained great strength among north Florida blacks during the summer of 1878 as a result of the efforts of the Reverend Millard "of San Francisco" who traveled from town to town preaching the word and administering the pledge. Millard was at Monticello in mid July. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, May 14, July 23, October 1, 1878.

136. Jefferson County, Deed Records, Book P, 422-23, 710-12.

137. *Ibid.*, 439.

138. Florida *Senate Journal* (1879), 6-8.

139. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 336.

140. *Official Register of the United States* (Washington, DC, 1881), vol. 1.

be held at Tallahassee to consider and decide what is best for them to do. what amount of influence Meacham has, if he has any at all, will be discovered.¹⁴¹ That discovery was made at the Republican congressional convention held at Quincy in September. Meacham appeared on McKinnon's behalf, offering a resolution of endorsement and "supporting it at length." Other leaders, including Jefferson County's George W. Witherspoon who had received the nomination two years previously, fought him vociferously and defeated him.¹⁴² With that, Robert Meacham exited the political stage.

Through July 1, 1883, and, likely, until the inauguration of Democrat Grover Cleveland as president in March 1885, Meacham remained at Tallahassee, employed as a messenger in the surveyor general's office.¹⁴³ By May 1887 he once again had moved and was living at Key West where he was serving as a clergyman for the town's largest black congregation, the Zion A. M. E. Church. One newspaper mention suggests that at that time he was moving to New York to accept a "call" to the Bleeker Street Church, but a February 1888 city directory lists the minister as still living at Key West.¹⁴⁴ In November of the same year, the *Fort Myers Weekly Press* reported: "Rev. Meacham, formerly of Punta Gorda, is the colored minister of the M. E. Church here. He has started a project for the erection of a church for his people."¹⁴⁵ Six months later it was said that he had "quit the [A. M. E.] Church."¹⁴⁶

The return of the Republicans to the White House in 1889 offered some hopeful possibilities for Meacham. They were realized early in 1890 when he was appointed postmaster at predominantly white Punta Gorda. Local citizens were furious

141. Williamson, *Florida Politics in the Gilded Age*, 84; *Pensacola Semi-Weekly Commercial*, May 26, 1882.

142. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, September 12, 1882.

143. *Official Register of the United States* (Washington, DC, 1883), vol. 1, 556.

144. The author was unable to locate any reference to Meacham as a resident of New York City. Betty Odabashian to author, August 25, 1989; Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, May 26, 1887; Tom Hambright to author, July 7, 1989.

145. *Fort Myers Weekly Press*, November 8, 1888.

146. Benjamin W. Arnett, ed., *Proceedings of the Quarto-Centennial Conference of the African M. E. Church, of South Carolina, at Charleston, S. C., May 15, 16 and 17, 1889* (Charleston, 1890), 175.

at the news and held an "indignation meeting."¹⁴⁷ When Meacham arrived in late May 1889 to claim the office, a DeSoto County newspaper labeled his appointment "a studied insult to the people of that town."¹⁴⁸ Meacham once more displayed that tenacity which so marked his efforts in the 1870s and, despite the animosity to his presence, remained in Punta Gorda for two years. By the time of his departure, he had turned the community's anger into respect. The local newspaper later remembered of him, [N]otwithstanding his color and his politics, he stood high in the esteem of the white people."¹⁴⁹

Following his departure from Punta Gorda, Meacham's activities and location elude definition, although in February 1896 it was said that he "hails from Deland."¹⁵⁰ In that month and year, tragedy yet again entered the aging man's life. Once more it almost resulted in his death.

On February 12, 1896, Meacham was in Tampa to attend the term of the United States District Court.¹⁵¹ That afternoon

147. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, February 8, 1890.

148. *Ibid.*, June 6, 1890.

149. *Punta Gorda Herald*, March 7, 1902.

150. There are a few clues as to Meacham's whereabouts after leaving Punta Gorda. Southwest Florida historian Vernon Peeples recalls a conversation he had with A. C. Jordan, son of the *Punta Gorda Herald's* post-1900 editor A. P. Jordan. In that conversation, the younger Jordan remembered his father saying that he had known Meacham during the years before 1901 when he (Jordan) served as editor of the *Leesburg Commercial*. According to Jordan, Meacham at that time was "serving as a mail clerk on the railroad." At some point in 1894, Meacham was in Orlando, although it is not known whether he was living there or only visiting. As to a Deland residence, he was not listed as owning property or paying a poll tax in Volusia County in any year from 1892 to 1896. If he were residing in Deland, it is possible that he had returned to the A. M. E. church and was serving there as pastor of the Bethel A. M. E. Church. The early records of the church have been lost. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 13, May 20, 1896; telephone interview with Vernon E. Peeples by author, April 9, 1990; Volusia County, Tax Books, 1892-1896, Clerk's Office, Volusia County Courthouse, Deland; interview with Mrs. Mildred Coulter by author, August 15, 1989; Deland.

151. Meacham, in 1895, had been sued by Democratic United States Attorney Frank Clark for a default on his Punta Gorda postmaster's bond. The amount in question was only \$280.67. Since his immediate predecessor and two immediate successors in office also were sued, the matter likely arose out of some accounting practice in place at the Punta Gorda post office. The suit was scheduled to be tried February 18, 1896. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 13, 1896; Minute Book No. 1, U. S. District Court, Southern District of Florida, record group 21, Federal Records Center, East Point, Georgia.

he encountered on the town's streets a woman he had met two years previously in Orlando. The woman was crying, said her boyfriend had just put her out, and asked Meacham for help. He obliged by offering to take the woman, Georgia McGraw, later in the day to a Central Avenue boarding house where he felt she could find a place to stay. Not long after the two arrived at the boarding house, and as they were talking with a second woman, McGraw's boyfriend, black Tampa policeman Thomas Milton, also arrived. Milton was in a "blind rage," having been told by a fellow officer that Georgia had gone off to a boarding house "with a white man." He spoke briefly with Georgia and the second woman, then drew his revolver and shot Georgia twice in the stomach. Quickly he turned the gun on Meacham and fired three times, striking the sixty-one-year-old man in the chest and groin.¹⁵²

At first, neither McGraw nor Meacham was expected to live. Georgia, paralyzed from the waist down, struggled for several weeks before succumbing. Meacham's wounds proved less severe, and he survived.¹⁵³ Although leaving him alive, the shooting seriously weakened Meacham, and he chose to remain thereafter at Tampa. Stella joined him there, and they made themselves a home at 251 LaSalle Street. To support the family, the former senator opened a shoe shop at 321 Main Street, a major business thoroughfare in the heart of West Tampa's cigar district.¹⁵⁴

152. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 13, 14, May 20, 21, 1896.

153. Officer Milton gave himself up and was tried for the murder of Georgia McGraw. On May 20, 1896, he was convicted of murder in the first degree, without recommendation for mercy. He was sentenced to life imprisonment. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, May 20, 21, 1896; *Punta Gorda Herald*, March 7, 1902.

154. By not later than the turn of the century, the Meachams had been joined at Tampa by their son, Robert, and their daughter, Stella. Stella married a chauffeur, Luther Alexander, and remained at Tampa. Robert married Christina Johnson, a force behind the organization of the Florida Negro Teachers Association and Tampa's first black woman principal. The Meacham Early Childhood Center at Tampa, originally an elementary school, was named for her and remains as a memorial to her work. A. E. Schole, *Schole's Directory of the City of Tampa, 1901* (Savannah, 1901); telephone interviews with Leland Hawes by author, July 13, 1989, February 19, 1990; Leland Hawes, "Miss Tina' Spurred Students for 40 Years," *Tampa Tribune*, February 25, 1990.

Robert Meacham died of unknown causes at Tampa about 1:00 p.m. on Thursday, February 27, 1902.¹⁵⁵ He was buried in the rain at 10:00 a.m. the following morning as Tampans grappled with widespread flooding from an overnight thunderstorm.¹⁵⁶ His final resting place is unknown.¹⁵⁷

The *Punta Gorda Herald* noted of his passing, "Meacham's death is regretted both in Tampa and Punta Gorda."¹⁵⁸ A historian of the A. M. E. Church may best have memorialized Robert Meacham's life prior to his death. The Reverend J. J. Sawyer in 1889 wrote: "Rev. Robert Meacham was the first of Florida's own sons that was ordained to the ministry of our Church, or was among the first. He was a fine preacher, a good pastor and was famous in his day for building houses of worship. After serving the Church many years, sometimes as pastor and sometimes as Presiding Elder, he quit the Church. While he is not now among us, we feel that on this occasion of thanksgiving his name should be mentioned and his works remembered."¹⁵⁹

Robert Meacham's life involved great triumphs and great tragedies. Remarkably, throughout most of his almost sixty-seven years he commanded the respect of friends and enemies alike. That central fact remained unchanged when, through no fault of his own, his power was lost and his prosperity was wrecked. His life serves as a reminder that there were many fine men, former slaves, who with little preparation or education made their positive marks upon the state of Florida and left legacies that endure yet today.

155. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 28, 1902.

156. *Ibid.*; Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, March 1, 1902.

157. Leland Hawes to author, September 22, 24, 1989.

158. *Punta Gorda Herald*, March 7, 1902.

159. Arnett, *Proceedings of the Quarto-Centennial Conference*, 175.