

1993

## Religion at the Polls: A Case Study of Twentieth-Century Politics and Religion in Florida

Wayne Flynt



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### Recommended Citation

Flynt, Wayne (1993) "Religion at the Polls: A Case Study of Twentieth-Century Politics and Religion in Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 72 : No. 4 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol72/iss4/6>

## RELIGION AT THE POLLS: A CASE STUDY OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY POLITICS AND RELIGION IN FLORIDA

by WAYNE FLYNT

**F**LORIDA politicians show up in strange places. Shawn Ryan, pop music writer for *The Birmingham News*, authored a column on March 2, 1990, about Governor Robert Martinez's attempt to purge Florida record stores of obscene material. A special session of the Florida legislature had just pulverized the governor's antiabortion legislative package. Martinez sought to recover by ordering a record by 2 Live Crew, "As Nasty As They Wanna Be," removed from record store shelves in Dade County. The fact that the governor of a state with more than its share of adult book stores and pornography palaces should have targeted records as an issue on which to take his stand probably tells more about political strategy than religion. He explained to a *Newsweek* reporter, "If you answer the phone one night and the voice on the other ends begins to read the lyrics of one of these songs, you'd say you received an obscene phone call."<sup>1</sup>

The fact that Governor Martinez, no bluenose Puritan, took this position emphasizes how enduring religio-moral values are to American political discourse and how, generally, Florida historians have overlooked the subject. Martinez's responses speak to important historical traditions in the state long ignored by historians, who by and large do not take evangelical religion as seriously as do ordinary citizens. This article will explore these trends, using Governor Sidney J. Catts's career as an example of the historic practices at work. Although the times and issues changed from nativist xenophobia in 1916 to moral majoritarianism in 1990, the importance of religion in defining the contours of political debate in Florida remain constant.

---

Wayne Flynt is professor of history, Auburn University. A version of this paper was presented at the 1993 Florida Historical Society meeting in Pensacola.

1. Shawn Ryan, "Off the Record," *The Birmingham News*, March 2, 1990; Jerry Adler, Jennifer Foote, and Ray Sawhill, "The Rap Attitude," *Newsweek*, March 19, 1990, 57.

The political activity of religiously affiliated people demonstrates some very important patterns that have shifted dramatically over the past century. When the century began, Protestants and Catholics operated at predictably opposite ends of the political spectrum. Nativist and anti-Catholic feeling ran so high that organizations such as the American Protective Association, the True Americans, The Guardians of Liberty and the Ku Klux Klan could often count on a solid Protestant vote merely by identifying the religious affiliation of a candidate or the local extent of the "Catholic conspiracy."

By the 1980s Catholics and Baptists were politically if not ecumenically unified on a wide range of issues: opposition to abortion, support for prayer in public schools, and federal aid to church schools, just to name three examples. Fundamentalists have largely controlled the Florida Baptist Convention, severed relations with Stetson University, and generally have more in common with conservative Roman Catholics than with moderate Baptists. In fact, the growing contemporary preoccupation with moral and family issues threatened to redefine the contours of American politics during the 1980s. If historians could ignore the religious context of Florida politics for nine-tenths of the century, they have a lot of catching up to do during this decade.

The claim of historical oversight needs some qualification. David R. Colburn and Richard K. Scher pay brief attention to the formal religious affiliation of Florida governors. They correctly note that nine of fifteen governors between 1900 and 1955 were Baptists (make that ten of fifteen if one includes Albert W. Gilchrist who, though christened an Episcopalian, spent his adulthood active in a Baptist church).

Of course such statistics must be weighed against the political opportunism of several generations of southern politicians who knew well that church membership was good politics. Hence David Sholtz converted from Judaism to Congregationalism. Even Congregationalism might seem a little strange to the state's Baptists, but during the Great Depression there were more important problems to consider. And at least Sholtz would not perplex voters with talk of bar mitzvahs and Hanukkah celebrations. Duncan Fletcher, who faced the constant threat of embarrassment from his wife's Unitarian-Universalism and Spiritualism, kept careful ties to Jacksonville's First Baptist Church. Senator Park Trammell was a more consistent Baptist,

but his biographer suggests this may well have been due more to his wife's devotion than to his own.

The last Baptist to serve as Florida's chief executive was Acting Governor Charley E. Johns, a Baptist businessman and legislative power broker who served most of Daniel McCarty's term from 1953 until 1955 after the governor died of a heart attack. It may be instructive that of the four governors to whom Colburn and Scher attribute the lowest public ethics, two (Sidney Catts and Charley Johns) were Baptists, and the other two (Haydon Burns and Claude Kirk) were Methodist and Episcopalian.<sup>2</sup> Whether Charley Johns's practice of voiding state contracts in order to award new ones to political allies dealt a death blow to Baptist governors is unknown. Likely the changing religious and political demography of the state had more to do with the eclipse of Baptist influence. Florida's increasingly heterogeneous religious landscape dominates the post-Johns religious affiliation of the state's governors: two Episcopalians, two Methodists, a Presbyterian, a member of the United Church of Christ, and a Roman Catholic.

Religion often became an issue of controversy in twentieth-century Florida's public life. Scholars have shown that in 1928 and again in 1960 evangelical Protestants bolted the Democratic party in large numbers rather than vote for a Catholic presidential nominee. In 1978 Robert L. Shevin lost a runoff for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination to Robert Graham partly because he was Jewish and from Miami.<sup>3</sup> Which of these facts hurt him more is a matter of speculation.

Despite such passing recognition, no systematic treatment of the religious context of Florida politics exists. In their biographies of Napoleon Bonaparte Broward and LeRoy Collins, Samuel Proctor and Tom Waggy do not analyze religion extensively. The book on Florida governors by Colburn and Scher devotes half a page to religion and only lists denominational affiliations. Although Waggy ignored religion as a topic, like several other essayists, he correctly emphasized religio-moral values

---

2. David R. Colburn and Richard K. Scher, *Florida's Gubernatorial Politics in the 20th Century* (Tallahassee, 1980), 35-39, 291.

3. Marie Marmo Mullaney, *Biographical Directory of the Governors of the United States, 1983-1988* (Westport, CT, 1989), 73-75.

as the source of LeRoy Collins's courageous stand for racial justice. Speaking to Presbyterian churchmen, Wagy notes that Collins challenged them to go "All the Way for Christ" when racist mobs howled at their doors or when innocent people were fired for their kindness to blacks. The governor warned that no legal resolution could end racial injustice because the issue involved "moral rights" and "principles of brotherhood." To demand that African Americans "stay in their place," forgoing their legitimate rights, was "not a Christian point of view." Although Wagy makes it absolutely clear that Collins's religious and moral presumptions underlay his racial assumptions and provided his most effective arsenal against Florida's racists, religion does not play a role in the story. A passing reference to "Presbyterian" is all that appears.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary commentators on Reuben Askew's courageous advocacy of school busing frequently mentioned his religious values, but whether historians seeking other motives do any better explaining his actions remains to be seen.

A number of studies have recognized the significant correlation between religion and political action nationally. They have shown that 57 percent of Catholics who voted for president in 1960 identified themselves as Democrats. Among Jews the figure was 66 percent. Among Baptists it was only 47.6 percent. In fact, Baptists have been moving toward the Republican party since Harry Truman, one of their own, carried Baptist counties on his way to the 1948 Democratic upset victory. In 1956 Adlai Stevenson received 50 percent of the Baptist vote, Lyndon Johnson carried 49 percent in 1964, Hubert Humphrey got only 24 percent (George Wallace and Richard Nixon split the other 66 percent) in 1968, and George McGovern 25.5 percent in 1972. Jimmy Carter, of course, dramatically reversed this downward cycle in 1976, winning 57 percent. But 1976 was the "year of the Evangelical," when news magazines ran features on born again Christians, and Jerry Falwell launched the Moral Majority. Although Carter did better among self-styled evangelical voters than Democrats normally, he still failed to woo most of them from the Grand Old Party.<sup>5</sup>

---

4. Tom R. Wagy, *Governor LeRoy Collins of Florida: Spokesman of the New South* (Tuscaloosa, 1985).

5. Albert J. Menendez, *Religion at the Polls* (Philadelphia, 1977), 197-99.

By 1980 many evangelicals who had voted for Carter four years earlier repented and returned to the house of their fathers, now made more hospitable by the presence of Jerry Falwell and assorted Southern Baptist luminaries. In fact, in 1976 many new right evangelicals rejected Carter as a religious imposter. Third Century Publishers rushed out a "Christian's guide" in 1976 to help evangelicals elect "God-directed candidates." The guide denounced Carter while rejoicing in the election of Mickey Edwards in Oklahoma, Bob Durnam and Bob Badham in California, and John Myers and Dan Quayle in Indiana.<sup>6</sup> Specific Florida data tying Carter's declining popular vote from 1976 to 1980 to religion are impossible to produce. But if evangelicals nationwide were disappointed in Carter's performance, it seems logical that some of his eroding support in the sunshine state stemmed from disillusion among his born again 1976 supporters.

The Christian right thrived during the 1980s when Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush granted its leaders unparalleled access to the White House. Bush and Vice-President Quayle spoke to the Southern Baptist Convention, though neither was Baptist, an honor that, incidentally, was not bestowed upon Jimmy Carter who was a born again believer and one of their own.

Nor did religious rightists return to the traditions of their fathers in 1992. Despite an unprecedented Democratic ticket composed of two Southern Baptists and one spouse whose opposition to nasty record lyrics sounded like Governor Martinez's, white southern evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants opted for a politically correct Episcopalian. Admittedly Clinton's reputation as a womanizer made this defection easier to understand than the 1980 desertion of Carter, but by and large the religious right seemed capable of forgiving sins of the flesh more easily than sins of ideology.

Clinton-Gore in fact won a majority of Catholic, Jewish, black Protestants, and religious liberals and narrowly lost mainline

---

6. *Ibid.*, 203. For insight into the nature of Christian right political involvement see Matthew C. Moen, *The Christian Right and Congress* (Tuscaloosa, 1989), and idem, *The Transformation of the Christian Right* (Tuscaloosa, 1992).

Protestants— usually a GOP bastion. But Bush won decisively among the 17 percent of the electorate that identified itself as “white born-again Christians.” He took 61 percent of that vote compared to 23 percent for Clinton and 15 percent for Perot. In ninety-six heavily Southern Baptist counties in eleven southern states, including Florida, Bush won 46 percent to Clinton’s 40 percent. Bush’s three strongest states were Mississippi, Alabama, and South Carolina. Among the 40 percent of Alabama voters who listed themselves as “white born-again Christians” Bush beat Clinton 67 to 23 percent.<sup>7</sup>

Victories by religious right candidates in Oklahoma, California, Indiana, and Michigan make clear that Florida has no monopoly on voters whose ballot choices are swayed by religious issues. But the denominational mix is significantly different according to region. For instance, 58 percent of Baptists in the mid 1970s resided in the South, while only 16 percent of Roman Catholics and 19 percent of Jews lived in Dixie (64 percent of Jews live in the East, 10 percent in the Midwest, and 7 percent in the West; for Roman Catholics 41 percent live in the East, 28 percent in the Midwest, and 15 percent in the West). Even within the South the pattern varied. The traditional bible belt South is a Baptist camp. In Alabama, Baptists represent 31 percent of the population, in Arkansas 26 percent, in Georgia 28, Kentucky 26, Mississippi 32, North Carolina 25, Oklahoma 26, South Carolina 28, Tennessee 28, and Texas 22.<sup>8</sup> Florida is notably absent from states of the Baptist dispensation, although that would not be the case if the discussion pertained only to north Florida. The bible belt meanders across state boundaries well into central Florida before it encounters a solid barrier of religious heterogeneity constructed from immigrants drawn from every state and a multitude of foreign countries.

Florida politics in the twentieth century can be analyzed in numerous ways. The most famous description is “every man [and woman] for himself [herself],” reflecting the politics of factionalism. The rise of a strong Republican party is changing that characteristic by forcing Democrats to impose some unity and order onto its natural and preferred state of anarchy. Supreme

7. Albert J. Menendez, “Analysis: Clinton Won Most Religious Votes,” *Baptists Today* 10 (November 26, 1992), 1; *The Alabama Report* 1 (November 1992), 2.

8. Menendez, *Religion at the Polls*, 207, 216.



Governor Sidney J. Catts (1917-1921). *Photograph courtesy P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History.*

Court cases mandating one person/one vote, with the resulting transfer of power to southern Florida, took a long time to bring results, but now a south Floridian can become governor. The rapidity of population growth in Florida creates the greatest political flux of any southern state, making reelection an unusually risky venture.

Today's conventional political wisdom is tomorrow's ancient history. Courthouse gangs and party elites have come and gone with such regularity since the 1960s that one needs a scorecard to keep up with the players. In many ways Florida is the most nonsouthern of southern states. In politics, as in religion, it drifts ever closer to national patterns. Other than Sidney J. Catts, Florida cannot even claim a respectable demagogue. Claude Kirk tried but fell far short of Catts's "high standard."

Two givens characterize the state: religion is an increasingly important barometer of political behavior, and Florida is a different sort of southern state. From these two facts one may draw an obvious conclusion. Scholarly discussion of twentieth-century Florida politics must focus less on politicians and political processes and more on religious context.

Precisely how would attention to religious context enrich our understanding of Florida's political processes? The administration of Sidney J. Catts offers a concrete historical example. He was admittedly the only preacher-governor in the state's history, but, as references to Robert Martinez, Robert Shevin, LeRoy Collins, and others illustrate, he was by no means the only governor to address issues directly within the context of religious and moral assumptions. Catts was elected governor as an Independent Prohibitionist in 1916, was defeated handily by Duncan Fletcher for a Senate seat in 1920, and then lost close gubernatorial contests in 1924 and 1928. How did religion affect Catts's career and produce these outcomes?

In 1916 Florida's Negro Baptists led all denominations with 70,000 members, and Southern Baptists accounted for the largest number of white Protestants in the state with 57,732 members organized in 686 churches. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South trailed just behind with 51,505 communicants. Roman Catholics lagged in fifth place with only 24,650 members, or 7.5 percent of the total church population. The Catholic Church ranked sixth in terms of the value of its property.<sup>9</sup>

These rankings remained fairly constant for a decade. In 1926 Florida's 528,000 church members (a 57 percent increase from 1916) were divided among the same three leaders: Southern Baptists (white) 103,000, Negro Baptists 98,000, and

---

9. United States Bureau of the Census, *Religious Bodies: 1916* (Washington, 1919), pt. 1, 160-62.

Methodist Episcopal Church, South (white) 74,000. The number of Roman Catholics had increased only to 39,000.<sup>10</sup>

Sidney Catts understood the world of white southern evangelicals as well as any man in Florida. Indeed, he had served a long apprenticeship as a Baptist pastor in Alabama prior to living in Florida. Here he honed many of his basic approaches to life and religion.

One skill nourished by the southern evangelical church, but little understood by historians, was the power to persuade an audience. At the heart of any evangelical religious process is the ability to move people to action: to accept Christ as personal savior, to change conduct, to tithe, to assume a position of service or ministry. Clergymen assumed roles of leadership in southern politics, and many Florida Populist leaders were evangelical preachers. In the next generation many preachers carried the banner of progressivism, as did Sidney J. Catts.

Offspring of a black belt Alabama planter family, Catts attended several schools before deciding on a career in law. Following a short stint at Cumberland University Law School in Tennessee, Catts practiced law briefly before feeling "called" to the Baptist ministry. As with every other decision in his life, he defined this one in religious metaphors. He described his decision to enter Florida's 1916 governor's race in similar terms: "For weeks before I announced, I could not sleep at night. I felt a call that I was trying to resist. I firmly believe, and was finally convinced that I was called of God to make that race. And after I got into the fight I was more and more convinced of the truth of my vision."<sup>11</sup> Catts needed a near-messianic confidence in his own vision and mission. He had resided in Florida only five years, had no money, contacts, or name recognition, and was ignored by both the press and his own party.

A second skill Catts learned in Alabama churches also served him well at Florida political rallies. Churches that place the pulpit in the middle of the church send a powerful symbolic message: the sermon and not the liturgy is central. The ability to move a congregation of people to voluntary action to change

10. United States Bureau of the Census, *Religious Bodies: 1926*, 2 vols. (Washington, 1930), I, 44-45, 58, 162, 310.

11. *The Birmingham Age-Herald*, December 14, 1916.

conduct or society is no small accomplishment. One person who heard Catts preach called him “a power in the pulpit.” Another termed him “one of the best impromptu speakers I ever listened to.” In his 1904 race in Alabama’s Fifth Congressional District against Thomas Heflin, one correspondent described his campaign through the hill country: “The people here have not heard anything to equal this address since the days of the campaigning of the lamented William I. Samford [former governor].”<sup>12</sup> When Governor-Elect Catts visited Birmingham in December 1916, curious citizens asked him to speak about his recently ended campaign, which had created such a national sensation. He obliged with an hour-and-a-half address. The newspaper reporter described a speech “of gripping intensity with a narrative filled with dramatic incidents, interspersed with humorous happenings.” The “more impassioned parts of the speaker’s address were cheered to the echo,” and when Catts finished the audience cheered for more.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, the two parts of Catts that were so interchangeable to him—religion and politics—confound historians who insist that the expression of Christian faith in Dixie was essentially other-worldly and escapist. The actions of Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Jesse Jackson, the Moral Majority, and Operation Rescue in the last decade of the twentieth century place this assertion on weak ground. Sidney Catts’s career casts doubt upon the premise as applied to the first decades of the century.

In its mildest form, southern religion called for moral rearmament. A revivalist sermon at Catts’s Fort Deposit church in July 1894, for example, attacked “ballot box stuffing as a common practice that Democrats used to count out Populists in that election year, Blind Tigerism, Waltzing, vulgar anecdotes and such things.”<sup>14</sup> This curious philippic, blending public and private and political and personal morality, points to themes that extend throughout Catts’s Florida career. He frequently engaged in political campaigns on behalf of prohibition. As pastor

---

12. *The Alabama Baptist*, March 26, 1891, June 22, 1893; *The Montgomery Advertiser*, April 9, 1904.

13. *The Birmingham Age-Herald*, December 14, 1916.

14. *The Alabama Baptist*, August 2, 1894.

of Tuskegee Baptist Church, he also kept careful watch for heretical racial views at Tuskegee Institute. As a speaker at the 1904 Alabama Baptist Convention, he spoke on "The Preacher and Politics." He had precise notions on the subject. As pastor of Mt. Willing Baptist Church, he had just completed an unsuccessful campaign for Congress against a demagogue who taught him well how to appeal to the masses.<sup>15</sup>

The religious world of Sidney Catts was also obsessed with the menace of immigrants, particularly those who were Roman Catholic. In 1894 the nativist American Protective Association came to Mobile, Alabama, where it waged war against a Catholic candidate for mayor. During these decades all three of Alabama's major cities— Mobile, Montgomery, and Birmingham— elected Catholic mayors. Evangelicals grew increasingly uneasy about the link between the Vatican and American politics. *The Alabama Baptist* editorialized in 1894: "There is one peculiar fact about Catholicism. Wherever it prevails you observe a low state of morals. Marital ties set lightly. Fornication and adultery are common. The Sabbath has been changed from a holy day to a holiday. Gambling is fashionable. Saloons are numerous and prosperous. . . . There is no question that rum and Romanism go together. Indeed, the very stronghold of rum in this country is Romanism."<sup>16</sup>

How deeply such attitudes penetrated Catts's consciousness soon became apparent. Speaking at Tuskegee Institute on the "Persecutions and Martyrdoms of the Church," Catts described ecclesiastic and secular history as a battle between Papist and democratic forces. He reasoned that "every movement of Jehovah seems to be directed against the temporal power of the Pope, and for enlightenment and good government." Historical evidence appeared on every hand: Italian unification was a blow to the power of the church, as were Andrew Jackson's incursions into Florida.<sup>17</sup> Catts was discovering what many Florida politicians would learn: bad history can make good politics.

But the most complete revelation of Catts's remarkable blend of religious context and political opportunism came in his De-

---

15. *Ibid.*, May 2, 1901; *Alabama Baptist State Convention, Report for 1904*, (n.p., 1904), 46; *Hayneville City-Examiner*, March 31, 1904.

16. *The Alabama Baptist*, February 15, 1894.

17. *Ibid.*, February 1, 1900.

ember 1916 speech in Birmingham. So many critical elements of Florida's political tangle were unraveled there. He was introduced that evening by Dr. A. J. Dickinson— pastor of First Baptist Church, graduate of the University of Chicago, theological liberal, pastor to Hugo Black (who may well have been in the audience), advocate of social Christianity, and himself a future candidate for public office. The man who presided at the meeting, a man name Dozier, was one of the leading anti-Catholic luminaries in the city. Dickinson opened the meeting with a simple premise: no one should be allowed to vote who held obligation to any agency or institution higher than America. Dozier also announced a meeting of the Ku Klux Klan to be held in the same hall immediately after Governor-Elect Catts finished his speech.

Catts no doubt swelled attendance at the Klan meeting by his remarks. He stated that his decision to run for governor resulted from “the pernicious influence” and “domination of the Jesuits.” He entered the campaign to force the other candidates to explain where they stood “on the principles of our organization” (The True Americans?). But they clearly “knew nothing about our American platform and they cared less.” “I had been lecturing in every little church and schoolhouse scattered over the state every night after I finished my work. . . . I had informed the people in the country on the menace which threatened our state.”

What was the menace? Less than one-fifth of Florida's population was Catholic, he warned (the real figure was nearer one-fifteenth, but that was too low to frighten the common folk), yet they held two-thirds of all offices in Florida (a bit of ministerial hyperbole, like estimating the size of a revival congregation). Catholics, through “unseen and invisible methods,” controlled government and the press: “The Catholics were about to take Florida and I told the people about it wherever I went. I was trampling on their toes and raising the devil to such an extent that many of the Catholics wanted to kill ‘Old Catts.’” Weary of harassment from police and threatened with assassination, he spoke “with both hands on big pistols which were loaded in every chamber.” Eschewing towns, he campaigned in the country, taking a collection at each stop to get him to the next. His campaign to take “our public schools out of the hands of those holding allegiance to a foreign potentate” triumphed despite

attempts to steal the election from him. Lest Catts appear exclusively as the hero of this crusade, he acknowledged that he did have friends in high places: there was God, of course, but also Tom Watson, Catts told his hushed audience, "the greatest leader of our cause, Americanism." At this point the crowd broke into thunderous applause.<sup>18</sup>

Thomas E. Watson, former leader of Georgia Populism and still a spokesman for rural, southern plain folk, began publishing a series of articles in 1909 on "the Roman Catholic Hierarchy" in his *Jeffersonian* magazine. The paper had many subscribers in Florida between 1910 and 1916, and secret anti-Catholic societies spread like wildfire under the stimulus of Watson's acid-tipped pen. The paper's emotional excesses help explain how sane, kindly people became so mesmerized by Catts's crackpot mixture of religious bigotry and pseudohistory. Italics and bold-faced type, all-capital letters, and red-inked headlines added a sense of urgency to the torrid prose. The series on "The Roman Catholic Hierarchy: The Deadliest Menace to Our Liberties and Our Civilization" began in August 1910 and ran for twenty-seven months. It was so successful that the series spawned an even more lurid sequel entitled "The History of the Papacy and the Popes." Published in book form, the exposés enjoyed wide circulation until banned from the mail for their salacious content during the First World War.

A sample of what rural Floridians were reading just prior to and during Catts's gubernatorial campaign helps explain his phenomenal rise to power. Article titles do justice to the finest grocery store tabloid: "The Murder of Babes"; "The Sinister Portent of Negro Priests"; "How the Confessional is Used by Priests to Ruin Women"; "One of the Priests Who Raped a Catholic Woman in a Catholic Church"; and "What Happens in Convents." Tom Watson probably provided the most prurient reading available to an entire generation of Florida evangelicals.<sup>19</sup>

Such activity slowly changed the state. In 1910 the nativist Patriotic Sons of America helped defeat St. Augustine Catholic congressional candidate Lewis W. Zim. Four years later United States Senator Nathan P. Bryan, a Methodist layman, appointed

---

18. *The Birmingham Age-Herald*, December 14, 1916.

19. Selected titles from *The Jeffersonian*, 1910-1916.

Peter Dignan postmaster of Jacksonville. Dignan was a respected member of the city council and was also a Catholic. Billy Parker, a newly arrived immigrant from Pennsylvania, used the appointment as the catalyst for a series of bitter speeches on Jacksonville street corners vilifying Catholics in general and Dignan in particular. It was Parker who apparently organized Jacksonville's chapter of the Guardians of Liberty and circulated its paper, *The Menace*, across the state. Soon Protestant backlash to the Dignan appointment reached such proportions that anti-catholic groups persuaded Baptist governor Park Trammell to abandon his already announced candidacy for the First Congressional District and to enter the Senate campaign against Bryan.<sup>20</sup>

The best expression of the cumulative effect of all this propaganda on Florida residents is contained in a brief, bigoted, but eloquent correspondence to Park Trammell in May 1916. One writer was M. F. Green of Perry, Florida, located squarely within north Florida's bible belt: "I think most of us of Florida [in Taylor County at least] has enough of Bryanism, Negroism, and Catholicism, they can all go to H - for my part."<sup>21</sup> Trammell had tuned his ear to Florida's religious discord as finely as had Catts. Senator Trammell had stopped white teachers from instructing black pupils in a Catholic school and arrested three sisters who persisted in their educational tasks. William Collins, chief of police in Okeechobee, wrote Trammell congratulating him for removing white teachers from Catholic schools enrolling blacks. He also deplored a Catholic paper circulating in Florida that criticized the way Trammell had handled the matter. S. G. Bartow, exchange editor of *The Menace*, wrote Trammell from the Aurora, Missouri, headquarters of The Guardians of Liberty. He requested information regarding Florida's new law restricting whites from teaching blacks for use in a forthcoming issue

---

20. W. T. Cash, *History of the Democratic Party in Florida* (Live Oak, 1936), 123-24; Wayne Flynt, ed., "William V. Knott and the Gubernatorial Campaign of 1916," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 51 (April 1973), 423-30. The most complete account of the role of religious nativism in the 1916 Florida elections can be found in Wayne Flynt, *Cracker Messiah: Governor Sidney J. Catts of Florida* (Baton Rouge, 1977), 25-93.

21. M. F. Green to Park Trammell, May 12, 1916, Park Trammell Papers, reel 1, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida (hereinafter, Trammell Papers).

of *The Menace*. The masthead of Bartow's stationary carried a logo that was playing well in the sunshine state: "The Roman Catholic Political Machine: The Deadliest Menace to Free Institutions and Liberty," R. C. Boulvare wrote Trammell eight days later from Kendrick, Florida, boasting of his membership in an anti-Catholic organization claiming 15,000 members in Florida: "We are . . . instructed to vote for Catts and Trammell!"<sup>22</sup>

It was true, as Fuller Warren wrote in 1949, that Sidney Catts "hanged the Pope to every oak tree in West Florida during the years between 1910 and 1925."<sup>23</sup> But Catts did not purchase the rope. He arrived in a state already seething with religious animosity and xenophobia. To understand Catts's remarkable 1916 Florida race without understanding his evangelical roots or the religious context of his political campaign is like *Newsweek* trying to comprehend Robert Martinez's assault on 2 Live Crew without reference to a Florida religious mindset fed up with cultural sewage. Historians who ignore religious context are constantly surprised when they encounter men like Sidney Catts and Robert Martinez in American politics. More careful attention to religious popular culture would reduce the surprise.

- 
22. William Collins to Trammell, May 15, 1916, S. G. Bartow to Trammell, May 15, 1916, R. C. Boulvar to Trammell, May 23, 1916, reel 1, Trammel Papers.
  23. Fuller Warren, *How to Win in Politics* (Tallahassee, 1949), 175. For examples of the impact and spread of anti-catholic nativism and bigotry during the 1920s see David P. Page, "Bishop Michael J. Curley and Anti-Catholic Nativism in Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 45 (October 1966), 101-17; and Stephen R. Prescott, "White Robes and Crosses: Father John Conoley, The Ku Klux Klan, and the University of Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 71 (July 1992), 18-40.