1995

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DAVID LEVY YULEE: FLORIDA’S FIRST U.S. SENATOR

By HAMPTON DUNN

Political, business, and social leaders of Florida during the territorial and early statehood days in the mid-1800s were men of strong character; hardy souls who helped to shape the future of the frontier area. Only the strongest survived in those times when the Indian wars were no sooner settled than Florida became a full-fledged state of the Union, only to drop out soon and become involved in the Civil War.

Standing tall among the staunch leaders was David Levy Yulee - lawyer, statesman, agriculturist, U.S. Senator, Confederate leader, businessman, railroad magnate and plantation owner.

A biographical sketch on Senator Yulee, published many years ago, closed with a tribute paid to him by an unnamed citizen of New York, who called Yulee "the greatest man that Florida ever produced, and his life has been an inspiration to some who could appreciate his greatness." The laudatory remarks continued, "I have compared him a thousand times in my mind with other representative men of their day as I have seen them from year to year, and he has always held the prime position as I remember him in his life."2

There have been other "greatest Floridians" since that was written, for instance, Governor LeRoy Collins, General James A. Van Fleet, and numerous others. But that does not take away from the generous accolade paid Yulee many decades ago.

Probably no Floridian had a more exciting life adventure than did Yulee. And the colorful background surrounding this sensational man goes back several generations before he came along. Yulee, a name he adopted after his election to the U.S. Senate, was born on the island of St. Thomas in the British West Indies (now the Virgin Islands) on June 12, 1810.3 The island of his birth was transferred from the ownership of England to Denmark when David was but a lad of five. His parents were Moses Elias Levy and Hannah Abendanone, and they eventually divorced.4

David Levy Yulee - Courtesy National Archives
David’s grandfather was Jacoub Ben Youli, Grand Vizier to the Sultan of Morocco. His grandmother was Rachel Levy, the daughter of an English physician, who was captured by Barbary pirates en route to the British West Indians, and then sold into Ben Youli’s harem at the slave market at Fez. When the sultan was overthrown, Rachel took her small son, Moses, with her to Gibraltar, where she subsequently gave birth to a daughter. The three assumed Rachel’s family name of Levy. When Moses grew up, he brought his mother and sister to the island of St. Thomas, where he became a prosperous lumber man. David’s grandfather, by the way, was condemned to death and beheaded by order of the new emperor.5

The noted historian and newspaper publisher, D.B. McKay, explained in his book Pioneer Florida that David’s grandfather was "racially a Portuguese and held a high position in the court of the Emperor of Morocco. His grandmother was an English Jewess."6

In 1819, Moses sent David to Norfolk, Virginia, to be educated in a private school.7 He was nine years old, and he never returned to St. Thomas. According to McKay, "The school at Norfolk was conducted by an English clergyman who was fond of declaring 'However we may fail in teaching our pupils the classics or mathematics, we do hope that we do teach..."
them to play the game.’ His teacher was chiefly bent, and energetically so, toward forming his pupils' character.”

As we shall see, David learned well how to play the game of life, especially the perplexing "game" of politics. Indeed, one writer tagged Levy, or Yulee, as "The Wheeler Dealer of All Time."

Young David remained in school for six years while his brother was at Harvard. "Suddenly both boys received letters from their father in which he stated he would no longer contribute to their support except as he would to any other of God's creatures - an ungenerous utterance from a father." But, as McKay adds, "He was a strange man. He was educated at an English university. His own father was a Mohammedan, his mother a Jewess, his religious convictions were in a state of chaos." Thus, at the age of fifteen David was on his own. He elected to go to his father's plantation at Micanopy, Florida, where a kindly overseer taught him how to run the operation. David arrived there "with a good elementary education, a little Latin, no Greek and some French of sturdy British variety."

Ambitious to continue his education, David acquired many friends in St. Augustine, and he studied law there with Robert R. Reid, who was to become a Governor and a
Federal Judge. David began his law studies while he was still in his late teens, and he was admitted to the Florida Bar in 1836.  

No doubt about it, young David had hitched his wagon to a star, as one biographer put it, "for Judge Reid was an influential leader among Democrats in Florida." Yulee himself soon gained recognition as a leading Democrat. So much so that one observer, writing about that era, said: "The most able, capable, loyal and interesting of the Democrats was a Jew, David Yulee [the Moorish spelling of Levy]."  

Judge Reid, who would become the fourth Territorial Governor in December, 1839, chaired the St. Joseph Convention in 1838-39 that drafted Florida's Constitution in anticipation of statehood.  

It was of this Convention that William T Cash, who was the first Florida State Librarian, and who once was a history professor at Florida State College for Women (now FSU), wrote: "There have been few bodies of men chosen in America more competent than the fifty-five delegates who framed Florida's first Constitution." David Levy Yulee, of course, was one of the fifty-five.  

Dr. Fishburne tells us: "From Reid, David Levy would learn far more than how to practice law. He would master the art of making it and using it to serve defined goals, and he would experience the practical utility of political parties in the never-ending struggle over who gets what, when, how -- the hallmark of all politics, properly understood."

Soon the young Floridian was practicing politics. In 1836, Levy was elected Representative of St. Johns County in the Territorial Legislative Council. Two years later, in 1838, he became Senator from a multi-county district. His first public position was as Clerk to the Territorial Legislature.  

In 1841, David Levy was elected Territorial Delegate representing Florida in Washington. One historian noted: "The National House of Representatives at that time [184t] contained some of the most brilliant debaters in history." He added:
The Delegate from Florida made his first favorable impression by his sturdy defense of his eligibility which had been challenged by some of the Whigs representing the majority of the house.

He [Levy] was soon drawn into the debates on slavery and for fifteen years was one of the most ardent champions of the cause of the Southern states, though he always upheld his side of the contention with an imposing array of logic and facts unmixed with the bitter partisanship and prejudice of so many of the debates of the period.21

When Florida achieved Statehood in 1845, Levy was elected one of the two first United States Senators from Florida; James D. Westcott, Jr., was the other. Levy had been dubbed "Architect of Florida statehood." When the State Legislature chose Levy and Westcott, they drew lots to decide who would have the longer term and Levy won. He requested the Legislature to change his name to Yulee.

Yulee was the first Jew in the nation's history to hold the office of United States Senator.22 In Washington, he soon became a popular social figure. One biographer noted: "If his political convictions were sectional, Senator Yulee's personal feelings were not; for no Southerners mingled more generally in Washington society than his wife and himself."23 In 1846, he had married Nancy, the daughter of Ex-Governor Charles A. Wickliffe of Kentucky. Washington society called her the "Wickliffe Madonna" because of her goodness and beauty. One writer said about Nancy "all heads were turned when the Yulees came to a banquet or opera for she was one of the country's most beautiful women."24

Yulee served a full six-year term as Senator, and then sought re-election in 1851, however, he was upset by Stephen R. Mallory of Pensacola who, like Levy, was born in the West Indies.

William T Cash wrote that Yulee's defeat "was in reality a good thing for Florida."25 He was able to pursue his work on a railroad from Fernandina to Cedar Key, giving Florida its first cross-state transportation line, from the Atlantic to the Gulf of Mexico.

It was about the time of his political defeat that Yulee harvested the first crop of sugar cane from his 5,100 acre Homosassa plantation, which he called "Margarita," the Spanish word for pearl. His home was built on Tigertail Island in the Homosassa River.26

Yulee's agricultural curiosity helped develop one of Florida's oldest varieties of oranges -- the "Homosassa." It originated as seedling in Yulee's orchard on his plantation.27

In 1943, Webber, an authority on agriculture, wrote "the selection must have been planted not later than 1865, for in 1877 the Variety Committee of the American Pomological Society recommended it as a first-class variety. It was extensively planted for decades, and there are orchards still in existence. Like certain other Florida varieties, however, 'Homosassa' is of indifferent quality in arid climates and has not achieved commercial importance elsewhere."28

The "Homosassa" orange was considered a mid-season fruit. In the mid-1880s, a writer for the Southern Sun singled out this variety of orange when he wrote: "Famous as present fact are the oranges, which take their peculiar character from some mysterious
 combination of climate and soil, or perhaps from some origin which reaches back, as legend says, to days when Spanish visitants, bringing with them the choice fruits of the Mediterranean, tarried for a season amid the charms of Isthloe. The inimitable flavor still abides, and the 'Hemosassa' orange, or magnum bonum, not only remains chief prize-taker at State Fairs, and with the best on market lists - but this variety is sought for groves far and wide, even on the Pacific shores."29

Watching Yulee's progress on his trans-Florida railroad were the civic and business leaders in the Tampa Bay area. They saw it as a shot in the arm for the struggling economy in the small fishing village. With a rapidly growing port, Tampa called itself the "Gateway to Panama." While Yulee had not revealed his route, it seemed logical to Tampans that the proposed railroad would wind up in Tampa, linking it with the shipping lanes connecting Florida with Cuba, Panama, and points south. A biographer relates what happened:

Everyone [in Tampa] was jubilant as they watched the railroad's progress. The ties were laid as far as Gainesville when the word came: Senator Yulee had perpetuated the greatest political, economic double-cross. Instead of continuing his railroad to the Gulf at Tampa, he turned to the sea many miles north, at Cedar Key, where he had extensive real estate holdings.

Incensed by his treachery, the entire population of Tampa stormed the courthouse, stuffed a scarecrow labeled 'David Levy Yulee' and hung him in effigy. As they massed around the bonfire, they burned all hopes of Tampa's future as a thriving port. Little did they know that 100 years later Tampa would be hailed as a leading metropolis and the sleepy village of Cedar Key would be no more than a favorite fishing spot with 700 residents.30

Henry B. Plant brought his railroad to Tampa in 1884, but the population of Cedar Key spurned his attempts to bring it there. The local friends of Yulee wanted no competition for their Senator, so they tried to gouge Plant when he tried to purchase the real estate needed. Plant, in turn, put a curse on the small community, predicting that "hogs would wallow in their streets, and owls would roast in their attics." Plant looked southward, selecting Tampa for the terminus of his cross-Florida railroad. The rest of the story is history.31

Yulee's railroad, which started in early 1856, was completed to Cedar Key on March 1, 1861, about six weeks after Florida seceded from the Union. The railroad became the Florida Central in 1888, and eventually became part of the Seaboard Air Line Railroad in 1900.32

In his book on the history of the Democratic Party in Florida, William Cash paid high praise to Yulee for his pioneering efforts in railroad building when he said: "This great Democrat [Yulee] was one of the most constructive citizens Florida has ever had, and he deserves far more credit for building a railroad across the state during the 1850-1860 period, when there was hardly an average of a resident to every five miles along the route, than does [Henry M.1 Flagler for opening up the east coast. Yulee was, in comparison with Flagler, a poor man, but he went outside and made capitalists believe in his project, and thus he got a transportation route through the state. It was said in 1862, that for the previous
seven years no other state in the world had constructed as much railroad mileage as had Florida.  

According to Cash, Stephen R. Mallory, who had defeated Yulee for the U.S. Senate in 1851, was Yulee’s "able colleague in Washington" from 1855 to the Civil War.  

Yulee was the first Southern Senator to resign after secession. A week before his resignation, Yulee wrote a letter to his railroad contractor, Joseph Finnegan, in which he advocated Florida’s seizure of the Federal facilities in the state, and the organization of a Confederate army and government. This letter would become the basis for Yulee’s imprisonment for treason in Fort Pulaski Prison in Savannah for ten months beginning in May, 1865. 

The same historian also said, "Senator Yulee’s brother-in-law, Judge Advocate General Holt, was instrumental in the arrest and imprisonment of the Senator. He argued vindictively for the hanging of his wife’s sister’s husband." 

While the Southern patriot, Yulee, was a prisoner of war at Fort Pulaski, his wife Nancy visited him there. She also wrote to many influential men in an effort to gain her husband’s freedom. Finally, General Ulysses S. Grant, himself, intervened to obtain Senator Yulee’s release from prison. Yulee continued in political service during the war, serving in both Confederate Congresses. 

In 1885, the Yulees were living in Washington when Nancy died in March. Nineteen months later, the Senator contracted pneumonia and died at the Clarendon Hotel in New York City on October 10, 1886. They are both buried in Georgetown Cemetery in Washington. 

Both a county and a town in Florida keep David Levy Yulee’s memory alive. Levy County, with Bronson as the county seat, was established on March 10, 1845. This happened during the same year that Florida became a state, an event in which Yulee had played a leading role. The town of Cedar Key is located in Levy County. And the first community that motorists who are traveling on U.S. I see after they cross the border into Florida is Yulee in Nassau County. The official State Welcome Center on Interstate 95 is also at Yulee. The village of Yulee was once known as "Hart's Road" and was a stop on Senator Yulee’s railroad. In 1893, it was renamed "Yulee" in honor of David Levy Yulee. 

Ironically, although Florida’s first United States Senator was a Jew, it was not until 1974 that Florida was to elect another Jew to that post, when Richard (Dick) Stone of Miami defeated Jack Eckerd of Belleair and John Grady of Belle Glade in the general election for United States Senator. 

ENDNOTES 

1 Hampton Dunn, "David Yulee - State’s Greatest Man?" Florida Trend, November, 1971, 84. 
3 Dunn, "David Yulee," 84. 
4 Charles C. Fishburne, The End of the Line at the Cedar Keys, 1843-1861 (Cedar Key, FL, 1982),12. 
7 Florida Department of Natural Resources, Brochure on Yulee Sugar Mill Ruins. (Tallahassee, FL, October, 1980),2.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
24 June Hurley Young, "Portraits of Early Floridians," Florida Historical Society, 1976, 2. (Publication funded by a grant from Florida Endowment for the Humanities.)
26 Dunn, *Citrus County*, 28.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 29.
29 Information on the "Homosassa" orange provided by John T Lesley, Sr., former general manager of the Florida Citrus Exchange.
33 Cash, *Democratic Party*, 35.
34 Ibid.
35 Mickler, "Florida's First Senator," 12.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
40 Mickler, "Florida's First Senator," 12.
41 Allen Morris, *Florida Place Names* (Coral Gables, FL, 1974), 92.
42 Ibid., 153.
43 Telephone Interview, Hampton Dunn with Dr. Henry Green, Director, Judaic Studies Program, University of Miami, April 5, 1994.