Lesley Diary of 1885 Constitutional Convention Re-Discovered

Donald J. Ivey
Col. Wm. I. Turner's order turning over command of Fort Brooke to Capt. John T. Lesley
— Courtesy Lesley Family

Receipt for Special Tax issued to Mrs. M. J. Brown, stepmother of Mrs. John T. Lesley
— Courtesy Lesley Family
In last year's edition of the *Sunland Tribune*, my article "John T Lesley: Tampa’s Pioneer Renaissance Man" alluded to a diary once kept by Lesley, one of Tampa's earliest pioneer leaders, while he served as a delegate to the Florida State Constitutional Convention in 1885. According to Tampa historian D.B. McKay, he kept a diary during this period which briefly touched on his service during the Constitutional Convention, and showed a growing frustration with the proceedings of that body. In it, McKay relates, "he dwells rather scornfully on the time wasted by both sides, of frequent sessions lasting only from 10 A.M. to 1 P.M., and of the incessant 'squabbling' about trivialities." Few other details were known about this diary (which was presumed to have been lost) although McKay does mention that "Each day he recorded at the opening of his entry the condition of the weather — warm, hot, cold, pleasant or raining. Then he would record the financial transactions of the day — from 15 cents paid for a shave to a sale of real estate or cattle involving $10,000 to $12,000."¹

Recently, *Tribune* editor Kyle VanLandingham re-discovered the diary among the voluminous holdings of the Lesley Collection in the Special Collections Department at the University of South Florida Library in Tampa. Among Lesley’s diaries located were those for 1879, 1884, 1885, 1895 and 1906.
What follows is a transcription from the 1885 diary which is being published here for the first time.

Monday June 8, 1885: "At Jacksonville warm

pd fare – 375¢

pd Medicine - 1 50

Start to Tallahassee 7 30 AM

pd Dinner 75

arrive Tallahassee - 330 PM

Caucus Tonight Pasco selected chairman of convention."

Tues. June 9: "At Tallahassee warm

pd. [paid] fees for Phillips + Finley 25.00

Meet in convention at 12 noon Judge Maxwell [Judge A. E. Maxwell, delegate from Escambia County] elected as temporary chairman S. Pasco [Samuel Pasco, delegate from Jefferson County and later U.S. Senator from Florida] unanimously Elected Permanent Chairman.

Adjourn in Respect to the Governor to tomorrow." [This refers to the adjournment of the Convention as a "mark of respect" to Florida Gov. Edward A. Perry, whose daughter — Genevieve Perry Parkhill, first wife of Charles B. Parkhill of Tampa — had died the previous Sunday.]

Wednesday June 10: "At Tallahassee warm

Meet at 10 A.M.

pd. for stamps .80

Completed the Election of Officers of the Convention"

Thursday June 11: "At Tallahassee warm

Meet at 10 A.M. squable [sic] over a 5th page

Select Fowlers Son [a reference to the election of H.W. Fowler, son of delegate G.P. Fowler of Putnam County — apparently a friend of Lesley’s — as a fifth page at the Convention] pd. Telegram to Dixon .80"

Friday June 12: "At Tallahassee warm

Meet in convention 10 A.M. select chaplain Mr. McCants [the Rev. A.C. McCants of Tallahassee]
Saturday June 13: "At Tallahassee warm
Meet 11 A.M. accept the rules laid down by committee [the Committee on Rules, which established the standing rules of the Convention]
adjourn until Monday 10 A.M.
pd. for slippers 1.50
Rent pd. Himes at Home 2.00
Several Members go home"5

Sunday June 14: "At Tallahassee warm
remain at House pretty [sic] much all day write a [few letters?]
Sam Tucker arrives [Samuel C. Tucker was a prominent Gainesville attorney appointed 1885 by President Cleveland as Register of Public Lands at Gainesville.]6
pd. for Drinks .30"
[The reference to "Drinks" here presumably refers to alcohol, somewhat of an ironic twist considering that according to one source Lesley "For years . . . has advocated the cause of temperance, although not a Prohibitionist."]7

Monday June 15: "At Tallahassee warm
Meet at 10 A.M. do but little
Adjourn at 12 noon til tomorrow 10
pd. for Drinks .75
Caucus to night by those in favor of Election by the People" [A reference to a faction among the delegates who favored election of cabinet officers by popular vote. Interestingly also, Lesley modestly omits his own unanimous election to office, as one of the two Vice Presidents of the Convention on this day. Furthermore, in the assignment of committees which was also made on this date, Lesley drew two — Census, Apportionment and Boundaries, and Private Corporations, which he chaired.]8

Tuesday June 16: "At Tallahassee warm
Some excitement getting up as to Eligibility & suffrage caucus held tonight by those in favor meet in Convention 10 A.M. & adjournment at 1 P.M. till tomorrow" [The "caucus" referred to here probably was a Democratic party caucus for those delegates who were also elected officials in Florida state government, among whom was Lesley, who was representing Hillsborough County in the State Senate at the time. Unfortunately, details of the meeting have yet to be discovered, but probably it involved discussion on including a poll-tax provision into the Constitution, which was designed by the Democrats to exclude Florida's African-American population from voting — the vast majority of whom were Republican.9

Wednesday June 17: "At Tallahassee warm
Meet at 10 A.M. do but little squabbling over Mann's resolution
the whole matter laid on the table [probably a reference to Hernando Austin S. Mann’s resolution "relative to printing resolutions" proposed on this day.]

Meeting of caucus again good deal of dissatisfaction." [The "dissatisfaction" referred to here no doubt involved the ongoing debate within the Democratic caucus on the issue of suffrage.]

Convention historian Edward C. Williamson summed up the controversy in these terms:

The most important difference in the convention was suffrage and eligibility. Here the delegates from the poorer piney-woods counties broke with the cotton-growing black belt "Bourbons." When the majority report on suffrage came in, the "Bourbons" were most displeased. "Farmer" [Austin S.] Mann had had the courage to divorce the issue of disenfranchisement of the Negro from the constitution. Furthermore, he warned the convention that to inject this issue now would be hazardous, and he suggested that it be voted on as a separate ordinance. Indignant "Bourbons" [conservative Democrats, of whom Lesley was one] immediately rejected this unwanted advice on race relations by a young Yankee upstart. On the other side a sizable group of white county Democrats supported Mann. A wild rumor circulated that Mann had broken the hitherto solid Democratic front and was accepting support from the Republicans. That such support was available was made clear by the Republican leadership. Thomas V. Gibbs urged his fellow party members to shake off their lethargy and help defeat the poll tax. A stormy session of the convention ensued on July 22 when ex-Judge Edwin M. Randall presented a petition from the Working-man's Association of Jacksonville. These white laborers had clearly seen that a poll tax would work an injury on labor and poor whites in general. They bluntly warned that convention that such a tax would convert Florida from a democracy into an aristocracy. In support of their resolution Mann affirmed that a poll tax was unfair to the laboring class.

It soon became obvious that the youthful citrus man was fighting a losing battle. The minority report of the suffrage committee was the weapon by which the "Bourbons" delivered a sharp blow to Mann's rising political star. This report, authored by James E. Yonge of Pensacola, became part of the constitution by a vote of eighty-six to twelve [Lesley voting with the majority on this provision]. Surprisingly, a few Republicans — including ex-Senator Simon B. Conover, Hannibal Rowe of Santa Rosa County, and William F. Thompson, a Leon County Negro — supported the measure which was obviously directed at the disenfranchisement of the Negro and the obliteration of the Republican Party in Florida.

Thursday June 18: "At Tallahassee warm
Meet at 10 A.M. one or two committee reports to day adjourn at Eleven til 10 tomorrow [?]Write several letters to-day introduce my first ordinances." [Here Lesley mentions the first of 5 resolutions he introduced on the floor of the Convention:

Ordinance No. 17, on "Formation of new counties-" and Ordinance No. 19, "Relative to the removal of county seats." These ordinances eventually were incorporated into the final draft of the Constitution as Sections 2-4 of Article VIII on Counties and Cities.]^{11}

Friday June 19: "At Tallahassee warm

Meet at 10 A.M. & adjourn til Monday next 10 A.M.

pd. Drinks .85 pd. Express on [Millet?] .75

Many Members leave for home"

Saturday June 20: "At Tallahassee warm

pd. per Milon .25

[laid?] around doing nothing

pd. For Drinks .80

feeling badly

Rent pd. Hines at Home $3.00"

Sunday June 21: "At Tallahassee warm

Lay up all day

[Sweat?] run off all night last night feeling badly today"

Monday June 22: "At Tallahassee warm

pd. for pants $9.00

pd. for stamps .50

pd. for [flour ?] .15

pd. for Drinks .40

Did but little work Meet at 10 A.M. & adjourn at 1230 till 10 tomorrow

Tuesday June 23: "At Tallahassee warm

Meet in Convention 10 A.M. adjourn at 1 PM. next tomorrow

pd. for Drinks .50"

Wednesday June 24: "At Tallahassee warm

Meet in Convention 9 A.M. take up Article five [on the Executive Department] & squabble over it all morning

adjourn 4 P.M. til 10 tomorrow

[?] Henry family arrive in Tallahassee

pd. for shoes .15"^{12}

Thursday June 25: "At Tallahassee warm

Meet at 10 A.M. still considering Article 5 adjourn t:30 PM. until 9 tomorrow"

Friday June 26: "At Tallahassee warm
Meet in Convention 9 A.M. take up Article four [on the Legislature Department] sqable [sic] over it all day

adjourn at 1 P.M. till 9 tomorrow pd.
For stamps .80" 13

Saturday June 27: "At Tallahassee warm
many go home

Adjourn till Monday 10 A.M."

Sunday June 28: "At Tallahassee warm
lay around the house all day doing nothing"

Monday June 29: "At Tallahassee warm
Meet 10 A.M. do but little today order of Busbees paid [?] 7.00"

Tuesday June 30: "At Tallahassee warm
pd. For stamps && .80
getting along slow"

Wednesday July 1: "At Tallahassee warm
pd. Drinks [.80?] 
adjourn after two hours discussions till tomorrow"

Thursday July 2: "At Tallahassee warm
Sparkman Wall & Henderson come up to day [The individuals referred to here are probably Stephen M. Sparkman, Joseph B. Wall and William B. Henderson, all prominent Tampans and close friends and political allies of Lesley's. Sparkman was at the time of the Convention serving as state’s attorney for the Sixth Judicial Circuit (which included Hillsborough County). Also, according to Tampa historian Karl Grismer, "In the early 1880s he became counsel for the South Florida Railroad and when that line was acquired by the Plant System was retained in the same capacity." Wall was also a prominent Tampa attorney and was at one time a partner of Henry L. Mitchell, who became governor of Florida in 1893, and later of Peter O. Knight. And lastly, Henderson was a very successful Tampa merchant, banker and businessman who at one time was Lesley’s partner in the cattle business. During the Civil War, he had also served as 1st lieutenant in Company B, 7th Fla. Infantry and after the war the two had been partners in various businesses for a time.]
fighting over Homestead Land I am in the chair" [This reference refers to an ongoing debate within the Convention over Article VI, on Homestead Exemptions. In one instance during the afternoon session on this date, Lesley was called to briefly preside over the Convention during debate on this article.]14

Friday July 3: "At Tallahassee warm
Meet at 9 A.M. do but little adjourn till Monday 10 A.M.
pd. For stamps .50
pd. Repairs on [?] 1.50

many of the members leave for home
Saturday July 4: "At Tallahassee warm
go to Monson's ferry to 4th July celebration Judge Wescot, Dr. Wescot & Mr. [Holliman?] & I speak [with Charley Baird on?] declaration of Judgement
return 4 P.M. watch short [?] between Pensacola & Tallahassee [?] in favor [?]"

[The "Judge Wescot" mentioned here probably is James D. Wescott, Jr., who served as an Associate justice on the Florida Supreme Court from 1868 to 1885; the "Dr. Wescot" is probably Dr. John Wescott of St. Augustine, delegate to the Convention from St. Johns County. The references to "Charley Baird" and the "declaration of Judgement" are otherwise unknown.]15

Sunday July 5: "At Tallahassee warm
do nothing but write a few letters"

Monday July 6: "At Tallahassee warm
good rain today
Meet at 10 A.M. quorum present do but little
pd. Drinks 1.00
pd. Telegram to Chase 1.10
Rent pd. Hines at Home 2.00"

Tuesday July 7: "At Tallahassee warm
Recd. Of [L.C. Pearce?] 4,000.00
1 year at 10% int [erest] signs note J.A. Henderson [W.B.?] Henderson Jno. T. Lesley."

[This no doubt refers to a sale of cattle by Lesley from his vast South Florida cattle operations, one of his many enterprises which was at its zenith at about this time. The "J.A. Henderson" referred to here was John A. Henderson, brother of William B. (W.B.) Henderson and for years a prominent Tampa and Tallahassee attorney]

Meet at 9 A.M. adjourn till 5 P.M.16

Here the diary abruptly ends. The Convention would continue to meet until August 3, when the final draft of the Constitution was signed by the delegates. Lesley himself appears to have left for home on the 2nd without having signed the document. However, in spite of Lesley's personal disillusionment with the proceedings of the Convention, he won the respect of delegates on both sides of the aisle, and prior to the close of the Convention on August 1st he was presented with a beautiful gold-headed cane by the Republican minority to thank him for his impartial service as Vice President.17


3 Ibid., 26.

4 Ibid., 31-32.

5 Ibid., 35-50.
Lesley Family Scrapbook in possession of Lesley family.


Convention Journal, 52-54; Regarding the use of caucuses during the Convention, Convention historian Edward C. Williamson commented that "Throughout the convention the Democrats resorted to the caucus- a proven unification device. Thus any former Independents who exhibited wavering tendencies could be prevented from voting with the Republicans and upsetting the "Bourbon" [i.e., conservative Democrats, of whom Lesley was one] cotton wagon." See Edward C. Williamson, "The Constitutional Convention of 1885," Florida Historical Quarterly 41 (October 1962), 121.

Williamson, 122-123.

Convention Journal, 68-69; and Williamson, 68-69.


Ibid., 112-127.

Ibid., 142-154.


Hartman, 2:694.

Convention Journal, 1885, 581. Also, the cane which Lesley was given at the close of the Convention is still in the possession of the Lesley family today.