Rev. Capt. Leroy G. Lesley: Tampa's Fighting Parson

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By SPESSARD STONE

Leroy G. Lesley, a pioneer settler of Tampa, was a minister, soldier, cattleman and civic leader, who travelled down the center of the road never pulling out for anyone.

Leroy Gilliland Lesley was born May 11, 1807 in Abbeville District, South Carolina. He was a son of John Harris and Mary (Gilliland) Lesly, a pious couple who observed morning and evening prayers and the Sabbath. His grandfather William Lesly, of the Scottish clan of Leslie, had colonized in South Carolina, where he was a Revolutionary War soldier, master of a 1,000-acre plantation, and served as district surveyor. Ann (Caldwell) Lesly, his grandmother, was aunt of John Caldwell Calhoun, who developed the states’ right doctrine. Thus Leroy was reared by a God-fearing, don’t tread on me family, whose traits would mold his character.¹

Leroy, accompanied by his younger brother, James Thomas Lesley, in 1829 moved to Madison County, Florida. Leroy settled eight miles from Madison where he became a planter. In Madison County on May 1, 1834, he married Indiana Chiles Livingston, born April 27, 1809, Abbeville District, South Carolina. Indiana’s parents, Thomas and Nancy (Chiles) Livingston, had both died when she was a child, and she had lived with her brothers, Thomas, William and Madison C. Livingston, large land and slave holders of Madison County. Her dowry included several Negro families.²

During the Second Seminole War, Leroy served several enlistments in militia companies. First he enrolled as a private in Capt. Livingston’s Company, Florida Mounted Militia, on December 10, 1835 and served to February 25, 1836. Then he enrolled December 20, 1836 at Fort Palmetto as sergeant in Capt. Livingston’s Mounted Company, 1st Regiment (Warren’s) Florida Militia and was mustered out with his company and honorably discharged June 5, 1837 at Fort Palmetto. Finally, as a private he served in Capt. Livingston’s Company (1st Service), Taylor’s Battalion, Middle Florida Mounted Volunteers, from February 12, 1838 at San Pedro to August 14, 1838 at Ft. Jackson.³
Feeling a call to the ministry, Leroy undertook an intense course of study, which upon completion, he was ordained by Bishop Capers as a minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South at the third annual conference, convened in Quincy in 1847. His first circuit was in North Florida and South Georgia. In 1848 Rev. Lesley was assigned to the Hillsborough Mission for 1849.4

Shortly after the hurricane of September 23-24, 1848, Rev. Lesley and family, consisting of wife Indianna and their children, John T, Emory L. and Mary C., arrived in Tampa. His circuit included Hillsborough and Sumter counties, then a much larger territory than the present counties. A Methodist mission awaited him as in 1846 Rev. John C. Ley "had called together the few members we had in Tampa-seventeen in number-in a small house belonging to the United States garrison and organized them into a church." In 1849 Rev. Lesley with the aid of the Tampa church established a church in Manatee. In 1851 county commissioners deeded to L. G. Lesley, Dr. E Branch, W. B. Hooker, Alderman Carlton and C. A. Ramsey, trustees for the First Methodist Church of Tampa, Lot 3 of Block 14 of the survey of 1847. The construction of a small white chapel on the northeast corner of Lafayette and Morgan streets, under Rev. Lesley's supervision, began late in 1851-52, and was completed in 1853. Heretofore, the congregation had met in such diverse places as private homes, the courthouse, and a hotel, the Palmer House. The falling health of his wife led the Rev. Lesley at the end of 1850 to retire from the active ministry; however, he continued to serve as a supply pastor.5
In July 1849 the slaying by a small band of rogue Indians of a settler at Fort Pierce and Capt. George Payne and Dempsey Whidden at the Kennedy-Darling store near now Bowling Green, fueled by rumors of Indian depredations, led to a panic-seized citizenry, fearing another war. General David E. Twiggs in late August assumed command, entered into negotiations with Indian leaders which resolved the crisis while undertaking defensive measures, which included building a chain of forts across the state. Leroy was appointed army wagon master, with initially in November less than 15 mule teams of wagons manned by Negro drivers, expanded in four months to 200, to haul supplies from Fort Brooke to inland posts.6

With peace restored, Leroy returned to his farm on the edge of Tampa. He was enumerated in the 1850 census, at which time he held in bondage seven slaves (2 males & 5 females). Neighbors included the families of: James McKay, William T Brown, B. G. Hagler (sheriff), and James T Magbee. A cattleman, he on July 8, 1851 registered his mark and brand: pail handle in each ear, LG. On the same day he registered for his son, John T., pail handle in one ear, pail handle & hole in other, LG, and for son, Emory L., pail handle in one ear, LG. In 1853 L. G. Lesley possessed eight slaves and 160 acres. The failure in 1855 of the mercantile firm of Freeman & McDonald, whose store was located at the corner of Tampa and Jackson streets, led to a five-year employment as the 7 creditors’ receiver and liquidator.7

Originally a Whig, Leroy in 1855 became a member of the Know-Nothings, or American Party. At Tampa on September 15, 1855, when the American Party held its convention, Leroy was chosen as chairman. The party, however, never was an electoral success in Hillsborough County and in 1857 did not even field a state of candidates.8

Following the outbreak of the Third Seminole War on December 20, 1855, Leroy organized his own company, Capt. Leroy G. Lesley's Company, Florida Mounted Volunteers. Leroy arrived at Fort Meade on December 26, 1855 and was, as Capt. William B. Hooker, from his arrival in active service scouting for Indians up and down Pease Creek (Peace River), extending his operations towards the Kissimmee. By January 4, 1856 the commands of Captains Hooker and Lesley, then numbering 124 men, had been made into two companies, with Capt. Lesley commanding the upper Pease Creek and Capt. Hooker the lower. By January 12, 1856 Governor James Broome had tentatively accepted into state service six volunteer companies, including Lesley's Company. Lesley's lieutenants were: Strety Parker, Francis A. Hendry, and Henry A. Crane. At least eighty-three enlisted men served in his company, including his sons, John T Lesley and Emory L. Lesley. Emory, a bugler, was killed by the accidental discharge of a rifle on June 1, 1857.9

Lesley's Company on March 23, 1856 arrived at Fort Winder, but was soon after dispatched to the Manatee settlement. Detachments were sent to protect settlers in the region and scout for Indians. Following the Indian attack on the Braden plantation in which seven slaves and other provisions were stolen on March 31, 1856, volunteers under Lt. Henry A. Crane of Capt. Lesley's Co. and Lt. John Addison tracked the perpetrators to the Big Charlie Apopka Creek where ensued a battle on April 3 that resulted in the deaths of at least two Indians, followed by their scalplings. When on April 15 John Carney of now Bloomingdale was slain, Capt. Lesley personally led a de-
attachment to track the killers, but due to an eighteen-hour headstart was unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{10}

Capt. Lesley, no sunshine soldier, stayed the course of the war. Resolutely enduring hardship and threats to his well-being from the country, he traversed the prairies, palmettos, hammocks, streams, sawgrass, and swamps of Southwest Florida scouting for Indians. Herewith follows summaries of some of those expeditions:

On October 20, 1856 Capt. Lesley crossed Peas Creek (Peace River) with fifty-eight head of beef cattle, of which he and his then twenty-eight men delivered nineteen, five days later to Fort Denaud and the balance to Fort Myers the following day. They then began a search for Indians. After crossing Fisheating Creek on October 29, they found an Indian camp that had been used to raise hogs and two days later came upon an abandoned Indian town of thirty or more houses which had been home for at perhaps one hundred Indians. They returned to Alafia on November 4. In November 1856, while differing with Capt. Sparkman on the necessity of a guard at Thomas Sumneralls’ plantation at Fort Green, he observed: "If we are to protect the frontier population and stock Peas Creek or the head waters of Horse Creek should be the proper point. Between Peas Creek and Kissimme is doubtless 8 or 10 thousand head of cattle... that Indians have not or do not occupy any portion of our State North of Peas Creek."\textsuperscript{11}

On January 19, 1857 Capt. Lesley led his men on a scout from Alafia to Fort Meade. Crossing Aldermans Ford, they traversed Manatee County but found no signs of Indians. On January 24 they reached the mouth of the Miakka; then five days later, near Fort Ogden, they found an old Indian town but no Indian signs. Passing "Joshs Creek," Capt. Lesley noted it as "the ground where Lt. Crane attacked the enemy last year, the bones still there as a warning to other robbers." On January 31 they reached Fort Meade. Capt. Lesley concluded, "My opinion is from the abundance of Game throughout my entire route that the Indians do not cross Peas Creek, or if so, only as spies, or single ones..."\textsuperscript{12}

A scout from April 10-29, 1857 commenced at Fort Meade, then proceeded along the south prong of the Alafia River into eastern Manatee County to the Miakka River, then returned via Horse Creek, to the east side of Peas Creek where near the mouth of Charlie Apopka Creek a one or two-year-old Indian cow pen was found, then to Troublesome Creek and Fort Hartsuff where exploration of a nearby hammock found "some 2 Jugs & much sign of Indians though nothing less than a year old." Capt. Lesley concluded, "I have no hesitation in making the assertion that there are no Indians within the district assigned me."\textsuperscript{13}

The Indians had sought refugee in the Big Cypress and were there pursued. On December 16, 1857, Capt. Sparkman, with the companies of Capts. Lesley and Carter, left Fort Meade and arrived on Christmas Day at Camp Rogers, near the Big Cypress, where nearby in November Capt. C. L. Stephens had briefly fought the Indians. In early January 1858 Lesley, now under Major Dozier, discovered the Indians had fled easterly after burning their town. He also reported seeing seven vacated settlements. On January 11 Capt. Simeon L. Sparkman, with the companies of Lesley, Carter and Bullock, proceeded into the Big Cypress where, after dividing into three divisions with Capt. Lesley on the right and Lt. Sparkman on the left, the latter came upon an Indian when firing commenced, with the Indian wounded and taken prisoner. The captive informed Capt. Sparkman that Sam
Jones, Assinwah and other chiefs were encamped nearby with thirty-five warriors. Trailing the elusive foe, they found their island camp, but no Indians. Continuing the pursuit, Capt. Lesley was fired on by an Indian who fled, but gave warning to his comrades who would fire from 300 or 400 yards and run off, the depth of the water and mud allowing them to evade capture. Reluctantly, it was decided to end the pursuit, but they had found a field of 20-25 acres of potatoes (which they dug 40 or 50 bushels) and beans, and in a hammock they destroyed nearly 100 bushels of corn and 10 or 12 of rice, leaving the Indians destitute of supplies. In mid-June Capt. Lesley, with twenty-six men, commanded the post at Fort Myers and remained on duty at Fort Myers although the war had been declared ended May 8, 1858 and his official record listed his service ending May 17, 1858.\textsuperscript{14}

The discovery of the Indians’ sanctuary in the Big Cypress forced them to negotiate peace. In March 1858 Seminole leaders accepted peace terms and on May 4, t858 thirty-eight warriors, including probably all of the bands of Billy Bowlegs, Assinwah, and Sam Jones, plus eighty-five women and children, departed from Fort Myers aboard the \textit{Grey Cloud}. A stopover at Egmont Key took aboard over forty more Indians to exile in the west.\textsuperscript{15}

A family story related Capt. Lesley’s narrow escape from death at the hands of Billy Bowlegs:

After the surrender of the Indian Chieftain, Billy Bowlegs, and while he was quartered near Tampa before he and his men were sent away he told this tale to G. grandfather, Capt. L. G. Lesley. After a hot pursuit of a band of Indians headed by Bowlegs, G. grandfather and his men thought they had the warriors surrounded in a Bayhead. The men dismounted and searched thoroughly the heavy brush but discovered not one of the \textit{w11}ley savages. Bowlegs told with great enjoyment how he outwitted grandfather, an officer in the U. S. Army, by hiding under a log that Capt. Lesley stood on to see over into a clump of palmettoes. He confessed openly that he would have shot him there if it would not have given away his hiding place to the other soldiers.\textsuperscript{16}

Another family yarn of the war is apropos:

Great grandfather Lesley used to tell this tale on himself of how small his legs were. During the Indian war, 1855-58, he, with some of his soldiers while out on scout, stopped at a small stream to drink and refresh their horses, and fill their canteens. When Capt. Lesley (several of the older generation said that was the way all the people spoke of him, same as his son) came near the water a mocassin lying on the bank struck at him and missed. It struck the second time, missed and missed again the third time. G. grandfather remarked that a snake that could not hits its mark in two tries was not worth living, and picked up a stick and killed it.\textsuperscript{17}

On April 30, 1860 Indianna Lesley died and was buried in Oaklawn Cemetery, Tampa. On May 5, 1861 Leroy married Lucy Jane Sandwich, born April 18, 1825, Lincoln County, Georgia.\textsuperscript{18} L. G. “Lesly” and daughter, Mary, were enumerated in the 1860 census of Hillsborough County, dated July 5. His son John T, "cattle drover," and wife were neighbors as were the families of
B. Hart, H. A. Crane, William S. Spencer (sheriff). Leroy in 1860 was taxed on 320 acres, valued at $1,000; 13 horses, asses, and mules, assessed at $925; with the bulk of his estate embodied in eleven slaves appraised at $5,500. Preparatory to removing from the county, Leroy engaged in several transactions. On October 22, 1860 Leroy G. and John T Lesley sold 1,800 head of cattle, marked SV and H, or Hooker brand turned upside down, for $2,000 to James McKay. In December 1860 L. G. Lesly advertised that on January 1, 1861 he would sell to the highest bidder his improvements in the City of Tampa, house and kitchen furniture, three head of horses, and 680 acres of land, with terms made known on day of sale. In April 1861 Leroy sold for $1,000 to William B. Hooker fractional section no. 1, of Section 24, containing 6.95 acres, and the fifth fractional part, containing 53 acres, and the sixth fractional part, containing 75 acres of section 13, township 29 South, Range 18 East, together with fractional part no. 5 of Section 18, township 29 South, Range 18 East, which was his home place on the east side of East Street, Tampa, the same being a portion of the late U. S. Military reserve near Fort Brooke.19

Thereafter, Leroy moved to a plantation known as the Ellis' place, a few miles south of Brooksville in Hernando County. On July 5, 1861 he had purchased from Theophilus and Elizabeth Higginbotham for $1,000 200 acres, 1. e., the NE 1/4 of Section t6, and the SW 1/4 of the NW 1/4 of Section 15 in Township 23 South, Range t9 East. In 1862 he was taxed on 11 slaves and 200 acres.

In December 1863, he and his neighbor David Hope, were engaged in the production of salt, twenty-five miles southwest of Brooksville. "Hope, Leslie & Ryals" advertised salt for $10 per bushel and that they'd give $5.00 per bushel for corn, or give one bushel of salt for two of corn. On January 16, 1864 "Hope & Leslie" gave notice that they would sell their stock of 800 head of cattle, more or less, for $20,000; also for $8,000 their salt works, producing 10 to 15 bushels per day. In 1864 L. G. Lesley was taxed on 200 acres, valued at $500, with $500 in improvements, 10 slaves assessed at $10,000, for which he paid $71.84 in county taxes and $35.92 in state taxes. In 1866 he was taxed on 200 acres.20

With the outbreak of the Civil War, Leroy readily given his allegiance to the South. In Hernando County in 1863 he raised his own company, Captain L. G. Lesley's Company, Col. C. J. Munnerlyn's Battalion. Numbering about 112 men, including officers W. W. Wall, John Parsons, Anderson Mayo, David Hope, and John Knight, the company was based at Brooksville and gathered and drove beef cattle north to supply the Confederate Army. They further acted as a home guard unit, engaged in picket work and general guard duty, and kept watch on the Federal blockade runners. Capt. Lesley had also been ordered by Gen. Finegan to arrest all deserters and send them to their respective commands and assist confiscatory and conscript officers in carrying out their orders. John T Lesley in command of some 135 men, Company B, 1st Battalion Florida Special Cavalry, C. S. A., acted in a similar capacity at now Plant City.21

While on scout on the Hillsborough River about July 5, 1864, Capt. Leroy G. Lesley and six men, including Lt. John Knight and R. G. Bradley, discovered in the pine woods a camp of Federal soldiers. Hearing Lesley's approach, the seven men fled to the edge of a swamp and attempted to defend themselves, but their guns misfired. Lt. Knight then shot one of the men, identified
only as Duncan. Capt. Lesley, accompanied by Bradley, approached Duncan, who was lying in the muck. Duncan requested that he be taken out of the water. After a coarse denunciation of Duncan, Capt. Lesley set his foot upon Duncan's head and sank it beneath the surface of the water. Lesley's reaction, thereafter, is disputed. It would appear though that Bradley prevented Duncan's death by beseeching, "Oh, Captain don't drown him." Lesley then removed his foot from Duncan's head, and possessing some medical skills, he then removed the ball and sent Duncan to his mother's home.22

Meanwhile on July 1, 1864, 120 men of the Union 2nd Florida and 120 men of the 2nd U. S. Colored Troops, under the command of Capt. J. W. Childs, embarked from Fort Myers, Florida for Bayport. Landing at Anclote Keys, they on July 7 encountered pickets, and skirmishing commenced. The Federals, occasionally skirmishing with Capt. Lesley's troops, proceeded into the interior where they halted one mile from Brooksville. On July 10, the U. S. forces raided the plantations of prominent Confederates David Hope, Aaron T Frierson, William B. Hooker, and Leroy G. Lesley. Later that evening Capt. John T Lesley was wounded by friendly fire. USA Lt. William McCullough observed:

On July 11 the Union invaders reached Bayport. They then returned safely to Fort Myers.23

In February 1865, Major William Footman led the companies of Francis A. Hendry, John T Lesley, and Leroy G. Lesley to an ill advised attack on Fort Myers. Beset by a rain-soaked country, the expedition managed to capture eight men outside the fort and kill a black sergeant, but a demand for surrender was rejected and after a brief skirmish on February 20 the Confederates withdrew. Leroy succinctly noted:

On the trip to Fort Myers, Major Footman in command. Carried one big gun and four big, fine horses. Lot of trouble encountered getting down. Arrived at night. Think Billy Wall wanted to surprise them in an immediate attack. Footman refused saying, 'It would be a fair fight or no fight at all. Every man will be given a fair chance for his life.' Next morning a flag of truce exchanged and a demand for surrender. Federals replies, 'surrender when you make us.' He backed it all up. On return trip all gave out and the tremendous cannon waggon was abandoned at the flat ford on 6 mile Creek.24

It was now about 10 at night, and everything fixed for a fight if the enemy dared to show themselves. The party that was on the road proved to be the old Capt. Lesley, as we learned from some ladies who came in to see their sons we had taken the second morning after landing at Anclote Keys. Young [Lesley], the old Captain's son came up, and his father taken him for one of the yankees, fired into him wounding his own son...

On April 2, 1865 President Jefferson Davis and party escaped from Richmond. On April 9 General Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox and General Joseph E. Johnston, whom Davis had urged to continue the war, followed suit on April 26 at Hillsboro, North Carolina. On May 3 the entourage reached Abbeville, South Carolina where Davis was finally forced to admit, "All is indeed lost." On May 10 President and Mrs. Davis were captured near Irwinsville, Georgia.25
Judah P. Benjamin, Secretary of State, had previously on May 3 separated from the Davis party. According to Theodore Lesley, at Abbeville the Secretary had met members of the family, who directed him to their kinsmen in Florida, including Thomas G. Livingston who met Benjamin in Georgia, escorted him into Florida, and directed him to his uncle, Leroy G. Lesley. Theodore Lesley continued:

Armed with letters of instruction to Florida citizens Secretary Benjamin... crossed the Suwannee River on May 14th at Moseley's Ferry, twenty-five miles east of Madison ... Under the name now of Charles Howard, Mr. Benjamin... made his way southward as rapidly as possible and arrived in Brooksville some four days later...

Upon confronting Captain Lesley Benjamin made himself known and produced letters from his South Carolina relatives introducing a Charles Howard and bespeaking Lesley's aid to the bearer in his travels through Florida.

... Captain Lesley immediately sent for his son, Major John T Lesley, then at his home in Tampa. Upon his arrival at Brooksville it was decided that without further delay the Secretary must set out for the Florida coast near Manatee where a boat would be provided to commence the recommended journey to Cuba. Here, or later at Manatee, Benjamin objected to the Cuban destination with the reason that he had little confidence of finding protection there under the weak Spanish government, and preferred chancing it at one of the British islands of the Bahamas, a government that had unofficially professed friendship for the Confederacy.

... Captain Lesley guided his companion through Hernando and into Hillsborough County .. Late in the afternoon of the second day they arrived at the Alafia River. Here they were met by Colonel William I. Turner, of 'Oak Hill,' now Parrish, Florida, who had received an advance message from Captain Lesley to meet them there.

Introductions were made and the invitation to spend the night at his home was accepted. Next morning leaving Benjamin behind Captain Lesley went on to Manatee alone to see if the route was safe for travel, and finding it so he returned to Oak Hill that night. The following day, a bright morning in the first week of June, he and Benjamin resumed their journey. Late in the afternoon of that same day they arrived at their destination and rode through the gates of the Gamble estate...

Here resided Archibald McNeil ... Captain Lesley, with the Secretary's permission, revealed his identity... Major John T Lesley had made an hurried trip in advance for the purpose of setting the stage for quick action ... Captain Lesley crossed the river in search of Captain Frederick Tresca, another sea captain of long experience in the Gulf and Atlantic waters ... Captain Tresca advised him that he could undertake such a trip, if a boat was available, and could depart at once. He, thereupon, returned with Captain Lesley to the Gamble Mansion and there met
Secretary Benjamin and offered him his aid...

... Some years later when Benjamin began to enjoy the great success he enjoyed at the British Bar ... Captain Lesley wrote him congratulating him on his new life. Benjamin graciously replied in a short note of thanks. He, also, sent at this time a bolt of silk cloth to Mrs. Lesley for a dress, complete with buttons, thread, trimmings and needles.”

In February 1866, the U. S. Army opened an investigation and charged L. G. Lesley as follows:

Charge 1st Treason "Specification 1st. In this the said L. G. Lesley late Captain in the Rebel Service and now a Minister of the Gospell residing in Hernando County, Florida, did on the 8th day of October 1865 while on the stand in the course of his remarks to the audience assembled at a Camp Meeting in Polk County, Florida, assert that Jas. D. Green late Captain of the 2nd Regt. Florida Cavalry, U. S. Forces committed a Heinous Sin in destroying Rebel Property while on a raid in Hernando County Florida.

Specification 2nd. In this L. G. Lesley aforesaid did endeavor by his Harranguing to Inculcate on the minds of the Congregation -- that Officers who discharged their duty in putting down the Rebellion is guilty of a Sin in so doing and requires his Special Prayer for there Redemption. At the same time endeavoring to Imbitter the minds of his hearers against the officers and Soldiers of the United States Army.

All in the above Charge at the time and place above mentioned.

Charge 2nd. Inhuman Treatment to a United States Soldier. "Specification. In this L. G. Lesley late Captain in the Rebel Service now a Minister of the Gospell residing in Hernando County Fla. did in the month of July 1864 fall in with a United States Soldier who was on leave of absence from his command, fireing upon said soldier without ordering said Soldier to Surrender - a ball takeing effect in the body of said soldier causing him the said Soldier, to fall into the Water by which he was Standing, the said Soldier calling out, for the Lords Sake to help me or I shall drown. Whereupon the aforesaid Capt. Lesley walked to where the wounded soldier was lying and remarked, help you, you infernal Tory Sone of bitch (or words to that effect) at the same time setting his foot upon the said soldier's head and sinking it beneath the surface of the water.

All this in Hernando County Florida, on or about the 5th day of July 1864.

Capt. Lesley gave himself up, and entered a plea of not guilty, with the exception of the words, "At the same time setting his foot upon said soldiers head and sinking it beneath the surface of the water." He was then allowed to return to Brooksville while the investigation continued. The first charge concerned free speech and apparently wasn't pursued as earnestly as the second. However, the second charge involved the attempt to kill a wounded enemy soldier, a violation of the laws of war and humanity. To resolve this, excerpts follow from the testimonies of R. G. Bradley, John Knight,
and of Capt. Lesley himself. Bradley stated in part:

We routed these fellows about 1/4 mile from Swamp where they run into. There they made a stand and tried to fight us. They popped a cap at Knight as soon as they done that Knight jumped off his horse and runs into the swamp and shot Duncan. When that was done he called to Capt. Lesley and says come in Capt. I have got one down. Me and Capt. Lesley went in together where Duncan was lying. Says Duncan to us take me out of the water. Capt. Lesley says I will do it, sir, and put the toe of his boot on the top of his head and mashed him under. I asked him what he done that for and he said to wash the mud off his face and to keep him from fainting. We then carried Duncan to his Mothers. Capt. Lesley dressed and cut his ball out of him. He then prescribed for him and then we went back to Brooksville...

Lt. Knight averred:

I know Duncan. I shot him myself. The circumstances are these: These fellows we found in the edge of the swamp and they had their guns presented to us. When we come up, they popped some caps at us but their guns wouldn't go off. I jumped down off my horse and went into the Swamp to get behind a tree to protect myself. After I got into the swamp I saw one and I shot him. It was Duncan I shot. Capt. Lesley was not there at the time. I hollered out to him, don't know what I said and he and Bradley come into the swamp together and went to where Duncan was lying. I can't tell you what he did. I couldn't see him. I was loading my gun at the time and the bushes was very thick and I was looking out to see that I don't get shot myself. After that Capt. Lesley, Mr. Bradley and myself helped tote him to his Mothers. When I first went up to Duncan after he was shot Capt. Lesley was standing holding three guns in his hands, and Bradley was holding Duncan up out of the water. All that I heard Capt. Lesley say to Duncan was that he asked him whose company he belonged to.

Capt. Lesley testified:

When I got sixty or eighty rods around the swamp I fired a gun. Soon after I heard someone crying for mercy asking someone to take him out of the water or they would drown. I made for him as fast as I could. Mr. Bradley with me. When we got there, the man was lying in the muck resting his body on his hands or elbows, I forget which. There was no part of him out of the water but his Knees and apart of his head. I walked up to him and put my knee at the back of his head to support it. I either heard from him or young Knight, who he was. He commenced by upbraiding us for our treatment of him, said that he never would have hurt any of us. Said he could have shot us if he had wanted to have done so. Said that he had quit Green's Co. and never intended to return, that he wanted to get into my Company for a long time but was suffered to go to Brooksville. It was then that I gave him the his [?] and said to him could have been construed to be abusive language...
About that time I had three guns in my hand. His head was covered with black mud and he seemed to be in a sinking condition. Not having a hand to spare, I placed my toe on his head and pushed his head under the water. Mr. Bradley Seeing me do this took me by the leg and says, 'Oh Captain dont drown him.' I told him 'no' I had no such intention. I then had him carried out of the Swamp superintending it my self I had him put on a quilt and carefully carried to his house. I washed him, extracted the ball, put clean clothes on him, and left him as comfortable as the circumstances should admit. He pledging himself he would come to Brooksville and join my company if he ever got well. I would further state that during the four years of the war and ______ [?] ______ [?] that I have lived in the Indian wars of this country, that I have never shot a man or shot at him to kill or scare him. As to the language I used to the young man it was pretty strong but not as strong as the language of the Specification. I was very much excited and do not recollect my exact words...31

On March 4, 1866 it was concluded the evidence against L. G. Lesley was an offense not sufficiently strong to warrant his being brought before a military commission for a trial; therefore, Capt. Franklin D. Harding, 99th USCT, Comdg. Post of Tampa, was ordered to stop all proceedings against Lesley. James D. Green later complained that he had not been allowed to give testimony and alleged that Capt. Harding had a conflict of interest as he was an intimate friend of Capt. Lesley's son. Further, Green charged: "The conduct of Lesly was an outrage at which some of his own followers are indignant, besides the evidence against him is strong & the charge can be sustained if the matter is soon tried by the proper tribunal." The case was not reopened.32

Leroy and family moved to a plantation on the Alafia River, near Peru (now Riverview) in Hillsborough County where he soon became involved in community affairs. In 1866 he successfully petitioned the county commissioners for permission to operate a ferry at his place across the Alafia. Rev. Lesley organized the Methodists in the area into a society, and a modest building, used also as a schoolhouse, was erected known as Lesley's Chapel, facing the river. Leroy, not only found himself acting as a spiritual advisor, but also at times as a physician, dentist, and deputy sheriff.33

During Reconstruction, Leroy embraced the Democratic Party. At the Democratic County Convention on August 1, 1868, he in a speech stated that he was perhaps the oldest man in the Convention, being sixty odd years of age, yet the youngest Democrat. He said he had almost been taught to hate the name of Democracy and had never voted a Democratic ticket, but that for the future he intended to set with the great Democratic party. His reasons for belonging to the party was that it was endeavoring to restore himself and his friends to their legitimate rights as citizens of the United States and that the Radical party was endeavoring to do the reverse. Leroy served the Democratic Party as chairman and was on the Executive Committee for many years. The party succeeded in 1876 in ousting the Republicans and ending Reconstruction. Leroy was that same year elected Tax Assessor of the county and served to 1880 and to him fell the duty of rectifying the Reconstruction assessment lists.34
Lucy Jane (Sandwich) Lesley died October 18, 1879. Capt. Leroy G. Lesley was taken very ill on the night of September 2t, 1882 at the home of his son, Capt. John T Lesley, in Tampa and was confined to his bed until he died on October 31, 1882. They are buried in Oaklawn Cemetery. Upon his death he was eulogized by many: "Capt. Leroy G. Lesley, one of the oldest, most respected and highly esteemed citizens of Hillsborough county... He died full of years and honors and will be sincerely mourned by a large circle of relatives and friends. A good man and true has been called to his Master. May he rest in peace.” By his church he was esteemed:

... our honored father in Israel and brother in Christ, the Rev. Leroy G. Lesley, whose long and unaltering devotion to the Church, won for him the confidence and affection of his brethren and illustrated in the view of the world, the power and worth of Christianity; and, whereas, we realize that in this grievous chastening, the Methodist Church in this circuit and county, has been deprived of one of its chief pillars, and this Quarterly Conference of one of its most faithful and efficient members, and society at large, of a useful citizen, whose heart was always open to the calls of Christ, and whose hand was every obedient to the commands of duty…

D. B. McKay, seventy-seven years after Lesley's death, judged him "...a venerable father in Israel and the faithful servant of Caesar. Yet as a leader he was absolutely unreasonable with those who could not hold with his views on politics, culture and religion. Domineering, arrogant and demanding, all qualities of the time and breeding that produced him, yet he balanced these attributes with strict fairness, honesty and loyalty.”

A family story revealed Capt. Lesley's character:

When L. G. Lesley used to visit them from his plantation on the Alafia River, the boys used to ride with him out the old road that went down Nebraska Ave. Not far out was an old pond which in rainy weather was pretty full of water and covered the road bed. When returning home one day, the old gentleman started through the Pond. On the other side, at an equal distance, was approaching a Pond. On the other side, at an equal distance, was approaching a wagon drawn by two mules and fully loaded. The two keep approaching, neither one seemed to be noticing the other, so the grandson asked his sire if he saw the wagon, and if he wasn't going to pull out and let him by. The gruff reply was, 'No, let him pull out.' So the two keep coming until the head of g. grandfather's mare touched the mules' when both were forced to stop. The driver hollowed and asked him, 'Why don't you turn out for me.' G's reply was, 'Why don't you turn out for me young man.' The answer was in equal spirit, 'because I'm heavily loaded and am not going to risk getting stuck. You can either pull to one side, or I'll sit here all night. I'm close to town and not in a hurry to get there.' "G. Grandfather quietly sat there and looked at him for a minute, and then nonchalantly pulled his horse to one side, circled the wagon, and continued on his journey.
Father said he was like that all the time. Would travel down the center of the road never pulling out for anyone.38

Rev. Lesley and his (1) wife, Indianna Chiles (Livingston), Lesley had children # 1-3, while he and his (2) wife, Lucy Jane (Sandwich) Lesley, had child # 4 as follows:

1. John Thomas Lesley, born May 12, 1835; died July 13, 1913; married on August 26, 1858, Margaret Adeline (Brown) Tucker, daughter of William T and Elizabeth (Townsend) Brown, widow of William W. Tucker.

2. Emory Livingston Lesley, born April 2, 1837; died June 1, 1857.

3. Mary Camillus Lesley, born October 4, 1845; died July 2, 1929; married (1) on July 28, 1866 William Henry Brown, son of William T and Elizabeth (Townsend) Brown; (2) Urban Sinclair Bird, January 17, 1883.

4. Emma Celestia Ruth Lesley, born November 13, 1862; died November 25, 1889; married William James Frierson, February 14, 1882.39

ENDNOTES

The author wishes to thank Kyle VanLandingham for his research assistance.

1 Theodore Lesley, typescript untitled biography of LeRoy G. Lesley, 1, Lesley family private collection; Theodore Lesley, "Family Group Sheet," Lesley Family Collection, University of South Florida Special Collections; D. B. McKay, Pioneer Florida, 3 vols. (Tampa, 1959), II, 353. The spelling of the family surname appears variously as Lesly, Leslie and Lesley; hereafter, it will be Lesley unless cited otherwise. The Rev. Lesley's first name was written "LeRoy" by Theodore Lesley, but all other records have "Leroy." It is noteworthy that the Leslie Clan of Scotland was famous for producing soldiers of fortune. See Neil Grant, Scottish Clans & Tartans (1987), 143.

2 Theodore Lesley, biography, 1; McKay, 354; Rowland H. Rerick, Memoirs of Florida, 2 vols., (1902), II, 591-592.

3 E. T Conley to Theodore Lesley, War Department, Washington, D.C., December 6, 1935; McKay, 355.

4 Theodore Lesley, biography, 1; John C. Ley, Fifty-Two Years in Florida (Nashville, Tenn., 1899), 69. Ley spelled his name "Leslie." 

5 Theodore Lesley, biography, 1, 2; McKay, 354; Ley, 153; Elizabeth Chase, The Pioneer Churches of Florida, (1976), 33, 62. John T Lesley in an affidavit in behalf of John Whidden (1839-1926) on June 4, 1910 stated, The Whidden men were frontier men and here before I was and I came in 1849." See pension application of John Whidden, National Archives. See also Rerick, II, 591-592, which has 1849 for the move. 1848 and 1849 are cited by Theodore Lesley. See also Donald J. Ivey, "John L Lesley: "Tampa' s Pioneer Renaissance Man," Sunland Tribune 21 (November 1995), 4, 15. Ivey cited 1848 due to a school attendance record of son John T A throat ailment is also given for the Rev. Lesley's retirement. See McKay, 354. Ley, p. 68, wrote, "July 26 [1846] To-day I preached at Tampa, opened the doors of the church, and organized a society, the first ever organized in this place. Dr. J. Roberts was appointed class leader." Ley, p 75, at the 7th session of the church on January 9, 1851 noted enigmatically that L. G. Lesley "located." The Rev. Lesley was described by McKay as, "Six foot two, red-headed, and as slender as his stipend;" however, a family story by Capt. Lesley makes reference to how small his legs were, thus calling into question a height of 6'2." See Theodore Lesley Composition Book, Lesley Family Collection, University of South Florida Special Collections.

6 Canter Brown, Jr., Florida's Peace River Frontier (Orlando, 1991), 82 90; McKay, 355.

7 McKay, 355; U.S. Original Census Schedules, 7th Census 1850, Hillsborough County, Florida; Harvey L. Wells, "Slave Owners-1850 Census- Hillsborough County;" "Hillsborough County: Early Marks & Brands," South Florida Pioneers 7 (Jan. 1976), 23; Tax Book, 1853 Hillsborough County; Theodore Lesley, biography, 3. See also Karl H. Grismer, Tampa.- A History of the City of Tampa and the...
Tampa Bay Region of Florida (1950), 325, in which William T Brown is listed as coming to Hillsborough County in 1854; in fact, as stated, he and his wife Elizabeth and children were listed in the 1850 census of Hillsborough County.

8 Tampa Florida Peninsular September 29, 1855; Theodore Lesley, biography, 4. For more on the party, see Spessard Stone, "The Know-Nothings of Hillsborough County," Sunland Tribune 19 (November 1993), 3-8.

9 James W. Covington, The Billy Bowlegs Mar 18-55-18,58 The Final Stand of the Seminoles Against The Whites (1982), 1, 2, 37; Sol diers of Florida, (1903), 19-20; Conley to Lesley; L. G. Lesly to Col. Monroe, January 19, 1856, Letters Received, Registers of Letters Received, and Letters Received by Headquarters, Troops in Florida, and Headquarters, Dept. of Florida, 1850-1858, Roll 4, National Archives; McKay, 355; Grismer, 323; Rerick, II, 591-592; Kyle VanLandingham, "Captain William B. Hooker: Florida Cattle King," Sunland Tribune 22 (November 1996), 6. Capt. Hooker arrived at Fort Meade on December 29, 1855. On January 19 Lesley contemplated a week or more scouting for Indians (none yet found) "operating near the mouth of the creek [Pease Creek] on the south side, - thence examine Charley Apopka Lake & its vicinity-then to the Kissimme, by way of Fort Bassinger _ [?]." Emory L. Lesley served from August 20, 1856 to February 19, 1857 and from February 24, 1857 to June 1, 1857 when he died at Tampa.

10 Covington, 42-45; Brown, 111-112.


13 Lesly to Hazzard, April 30, 1857.

14 Lesly to Major Francis N. Page, Jan. 4, 1858, Roll 10; S. L. Sparkman to Col. S. St. George Rogers, Jan. 20, 1858, Roll 10; Lesly to?, June 15, 1858; record group 393, NA; Covington, 80; Conley to Lesley. The January 1858 expedition had resulted separately in the finding of an abandoned sick six or seven year-old child and a sick woman, mother of the child, was also found. The woman identified herself as the wife of Assinwah. Left behind, she "...gave up the child cheerfully, said when she felt well she would come in and bring in the rest of her children. The child died the third night after we got it..."

15 Covington, 78-79.

16 Theodore Lesley, Theodore Lesley Composition Book, University of South Florida Special Collections.

17 Ibid.

18 Theodore Lesley, "Family Group Sheet."

19 U.S. Original Census Schedules, 8th Census 1860, Hillsborough County, Florida; Tax Book, 1860 Hillsborough County; Tampa Florida Peninsular, December 8, 1860; Hillsborough County Deed Book C.

20 Theodore Lesley, biography, p. 3; Hernando County, Deed Book 1, 509-510; Hernando County Tax Books 1862, 1864, 1866; Gainesville Cotton States, March 19 & April 16, 1864.


22 "L.G. Lesley," Compiled Service Records ... Confederate... Series 982, Roll # 14 [1st Batt., Spec. Cav., Fla.], microfilm, N.A.; David W. Hartman and David Coles, Biographical Rosters of Florida Confederate and Union Soldiers 1861-1865, 6 vols. (1995) III, 971, & V, 1799. The identity of Duncan is uncertain, but he was, probably, either Benjamin E Duncan or Bryant Duncan. Benjamin E Duncan (b. 1835?) and Bryant Duncan (b. 1845?) both enlisted July 24, 1863 at Brooksville in Company I, Ninth Florida Infantry, CSA, and both deserted April 1, 1864 from Fort Dade. Both then enlisted at Fort Myers in Company B, Second Florida Cavalry, USA. Benjamin E Duncan, b. 1839 (?) Tw1ggs Co., Ga., a refugee from the Confederacy, was appointed corporal August 13, 1864, and died of diarrhea February 2, 1865 at Fort Myers. Bryant was dropped after June 1864. A family history by Clyde S. Stephens, Stephens Ancestors and Pioneer Relatives (July 1982), 51, has that Benjamin Franklin Duncan
served as stated, and on August 23, 1862 [?] in Hernando Co. had married Charity Ann Stephens (1844-1926), who after the war settled near now Ona, Fla. What happened to Bryant Duncan after June 1864 is undetermined.

23 Samuel Proctor, editor, Florida A Hundred Years Ago, 1963, Ju-64-2; Theodore Lesley, biography, 3; Kyle VanLandinghain, editor, "My National Troubles, Civil War Papers of William McCullough," Sunland Tribune 20 (November 1994), 62, 63, 66, 84, 85; Donald J. Ivey, "John T Lesley: Tampa's Pioneer Renaissance Man," Sunland Tribune 20 (November 1995) 8-9. It is noteworthy how the accounts of a Confederate descendant and Union officer vary in regard the saving of the Lesley home. Theodore Lesley related, "Upon reaching Captain Lesley's the troops immediately overran the estate. To the martial airs, played on the piano by one of them, the others ransacked the house. The trail to the hammock, where were hidden most of the valuables, was discovered by the soldiers and by them all was destroyed. They returned to the yard, where the barns and outhouses were burned, and the home it self saved only by the courageous action of Mrs. Lesley, and daughter, who through her herculean efforts, extinguished every flame that was set to their dwelling." Lt. McCullough noted in his diary: "...we ... marched thence to Capt. Lesley's, the officer we had fought the day before, this place was sacked, the corn crib, wagons, and wagonhouse burned to the ground, the dwelling house being spared by the family left with it. The lady met us with a flag of truce and begged us to spare her. Capt. Barthoft [Bartholf] thought best to do so, but allowed the blacks to pillage." [Italics inserted by author.] Capt. John T Lesley sustained a permanent injury to his left arm, but apparently continued on active duty But see Hartman and Coles, II, 694. Lt. David Hope of Capt. Leroy G. Lesley's Company is believed to have been the soldier who wounded Capt. John T Lesley. On May 7, 1865 from Brooksville, Leroy wrote his son . I have heard it said that some of your old Company have been heard to say, That if they ever got a chance, they would have Satisfaction out of Hope for Shooting you; The later part I contradicte... " See Lesley to Lesley, May 7, 1865.

24 Brown, 173-174; "Diary of L. G. Lesley," Collection of Theodore Lesley, but now lost. The quote is from notes taken by Vernon Peeples. "Major Footman was a Dutchman. Heavy set with dark complexion. Very pompous, had to stand around when he came up. A savage fellow," see Theodore Lesley Composition Book. Lesley was succeeded as captain before the war ended by W. W. Wall, see Hartman and Coles, V.


26 Theodore Lesley to C. W. Schaffer, March t, 1957; Rodney H. KitePowell, II, "The Escape of Judah P, Benjamin," Sunland Tribune (November 1996), 63-67. See Mr. Kite-Powell's article for a more thorough analysis of Benjamin's escape, including the McKay family's "more complex and less believable explanation of Benjamin's voyage to Manatee." See also Proctor, Ju-65-4, for this 1865 reference: "June 23 __ Judah P Benjamin, former Confederate Secretary of State, has been hiding the last several days in the home of Major Robert Gamble on the Manatee River, is leaving the area today, and hopes to make it safely to the Bahamas. Benjamin occupied the home upon the invitation of Captain Archibald McNeill, deputy commissary agent of the Manatee section under Confederate Captain James McKay. McNeill is also being sought by the Federals. Captain Frederick Tresca, who occupies a home near Manatee and who gained much knowledge of the coast before the war while piloting his freight sloop Margaret Ann from Cedar Keys to Key West and who also ran the blockade to Nassau, has agreed to take Mr. Benjamin to the Bahamas. The Reverend Ezechiel Glazer, a member of Florida's Secession Convention of 1861, is transporting Benjamin overland to a point on Sarasota Bay. There he will be met by Captain Tresca and H. A. McLeod in the small yawl The Blonde."

27 "L.G. Lesley," Compiled Service Records ... Confederate... Series 982, Roll # 14 [1st Batt., Spec. Cav., Fla.], microfilm, N.A. Witnesses to the first charge were N. H. DeCoster, 1st Lt., 2nd USC Inf. and Sergeant Reuben Carlton and Private A. Carlton, both of Co. B, 2nd Fla. Cav. R. J. Bradley was the witness for the second charge.

28 Ibid. Lt. John Knight also surrendered and stayed in Tampa while awaiting the outcome of the case against him. On Feb. 28, 1866 it was concluded by Capt. Franklin D. Harding, Capt. 99th USCT. "In the case of Citizen John Knight I will not trouble you with it as I am of the opinion (after a careful examination of all parties concerned) that it will amount to nothing." He also added of a prominent Tampa citizen, "In the case of Jas. McKay I have examined no witnesses and will do so as soon as possible." See Harding to Maj. Wentworth, ibid.
29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.


33 Theodore Lesley, biography, 5; McKay, 356; Garnet K. Tien, "A History of the Methodist Church at Riverview," 1959. Tien cited 1866 as the founding of Lesley's Chapel, where in 1866 Rev. Lesley "...Moved his family into the log cabin church Benjamin E Moody had reared, and promptly set about collecting funds with which to build another. In this he was ably assisted by William B. Moody, Benjamin's oldest son ... [who] gave land beside the river for a building in which to worship God ... the commodious new church was named Lesley's Chapel. It stood near the ferry across the Alafia which L. G. Lesley operated and which was a main connecting link between Tampa and the south Florida coast. It is thought to have been completed in 1870 and pastored by Rev. Lesley with the help of Rev. A. M. Samford for the first ten years of its life. In 1880 - it became part of the Methodist Episcopal Conference and had a circuit riding preacher appointed it." Tien listed Rev. Urban S. Bird as pastor in 1884. The 1894 discovery of pebble phosphate in the Alafia River led to a town named Riverview and a new church (blown down five years later in a windstorm) which was supplanted by the 1900-constructed Riverview Methodist Church, which preserved the wooden benches for the choir from Lesley Chapel at the time the building was sold.

34 Tampa Florida Peninsular, August 8, 1868; Theodore Lesley, biography, 4-5; McKay, 356.

35 Lesley, "Family Group Sheet"; Tampa Sunland Tribune, November 2, 1882.

36 Tampa Sunland Tribune, November 2 & December 20, 1882. The former was his obituary; the latter was "Tribute of Respect Passed By The 4th Quarterly Conference, Oak Hill Circuit, Tampa District, Fla. Conference."

37 McKay, 356.

38 Theodore Lesley Composition Book, USF. But he did pull out on this occasion.