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"A LITTLE INSIGNIFICANT COUNTY:" An early pioneer's view of the proposal to separate Pinellas from Hillsborough County in 1887

Donald J. Ivey

Although it is widely known that Pinellas County was created in 1911, what is less well known is the fact that the movement to "secede" Pinellas from Hillsborough County originally began in 1886. According to early Pinellas historian and St. Petersburg Times publisher William L. Straub,

"Away back in 1886, according to a little inside political tradition, a quiet little political deal had been planned, wherein and whereby W.A. Belcher, of Bayview, if elected representative, was to pass through the house a county division bill, and a certain Tampa politician, if elected to the senate, was to pass it there, then move over into the new county, and themselves and friends would be in charge of the 'politics' thereof. But the Tampa politician was not elected to the senate. Mr. Belcher was elected to the house, and introduced and passed such a bill there; and Judge Joseph B. Wall, of Tampa, who was elected senator, promptly killed it in the upper house. Being merely a political gesture, and Pinellas a comparatively uninhabited land, nobody took the incident seriously, and it was forgotten."¹

Other than Straub's brief mention, little was known of this event. Recently, however, a letter was discovered by members of the Dunedin Historical Society which sheds important new light on this movement.

The letter was written by George L. Jones (1847-1912), an early settler of Dunedin who is credited with giving the young

community its first name of "Jonesboro." Jones moved to the area from Marietta, Georgia sometime during the 1870's and built a general store on what is now the northeast corner of Main and Edgewater in downtown Dunedin.²

The recipient of Jones' epistle was William A. (W.A.) Belcher (1846-1935), who had been elected the preceding year to represent Hillsborough County in the Florida House of Representatives. Originally a native of Virginia, Belcher moved to Florida in 1870 and eventually settled in Largo. He soon became a leading member of the community on the Pinellas Peninsula, and also served at various times as a member of the Hillsborough County School Board and the Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners.³

A copy of the original letter is currently on display at the Dunedin Historical Museum in Dunedin, and with the kind permission of Museum Director Vincent Luisi, is here being published for the first time:

"Dunedin May 24th/87

"Hon. W.A. Belcher
"Tall[ahasse]

"Dr Sir

"Sommerville handed me your letter of 9th inst. I must say that your letter is a very Sensible one in regard to the division of this County—⁴

A handwritten letter on aged paper, dated "Dunedin May 24th/87". The recipient is "Hon W. A. Belcher" and the sender is "J. Jones". The text discusses the proposed division of the county and the impact on public schools. The handwriting is in cursive and somewhat faded.

Original of Jones' letter to Belcher, dated Dunedin, Florida, May 24, 1887.

(Courtesy Dunedin Historical Society and Museum)

"You know we would be a little insignificant county, not able to carry on our public schools, for we get more from the School fund than we pay in. Besides, this division cuts off a portion of Pt [Point] Pinellas. I talked with your Brother Elias last Saturday he says himself & many others are not in favor of the division—⁵

"I have talked with a great many who signed the petition, who was scared into it by telling them that Tampa was going to build that large Bridge, Court House and Jail—and would be better to divide & build it our selves

"Admit that should they build the aforementioned, this portion pays a very

small pro rata of the taxes collected—just think of the little valuable property in the proposed new co.[unty]—out of which we would have to build a Court House, Jail, pay Jurors, Witnesses, and county officers—and also the transfer of or transcripts of deeds & [et]c. in the new co.[unty]'s office—Records—⁶

"We [are] far better to wait until the little infant county can Stand alone before advocating a division—Besides if put to vote they would not get one third of the vote of the people—

"I see you have introduced the bill for the new county but your true friends know it was brought about by a petition who a number is not voters or property holders, And that you could not avoid introducing it—But that you would not lend your influence to have it passed—I know your friend Matchett understands it—Your particular friends and advocates here in D[Dunedin] have no fears as to its passage.⁷

"Jim Sommerville, Jno. [John] Douglas [and] Rev. Holmes Send their respects to you—Old Capt. McMullen was here last week and laughed at the blunder of a new co.[unty] and Such an oversight in cutting off a portion of Pt. Pinellas—and leaving in Hillsboro—They object to being cut off if we were to be so unfortunate as to divide—⁸

"You know that Arthur Turner, Munnerlyn & co. who advocated Snedecor first and last—and they now want to use you—⁹

"Mr. Turner in last weeks issue say that if our Representatives fail to divide the county they will be invited to Stay at home. I did not know that Turner put you all in. His influence is like Moffet McClung's—I

would rather have him against me than for me—¹⁰

"Holmes tell[s] me that Munnerlyn is opposed to division. He say[s] M. told Jim McMullen so—I expect he signed [the] petition for a stroke of pollicy [sic] in business.¹¹ Give my regards to Hon. Matchett & Wall—Am sorry for our Bloxham. Pasco is preferable to Perry.¹² These counties who instructed their Legislators to support Bloxham and they disregarded instructions and supported Perry—will have some difficulty in being returned at the next election, such as Polk, Manatee, Alachua, Marion, Hamilton, Madison, Sumpter [Sumter]—Lieut. Governor Mabry desired to be governor & therefore supported Perry—I think he has killed himself politically—Stockton from Gadsden Co[unty] supported Pasco—his county was for Bloxham—¹³

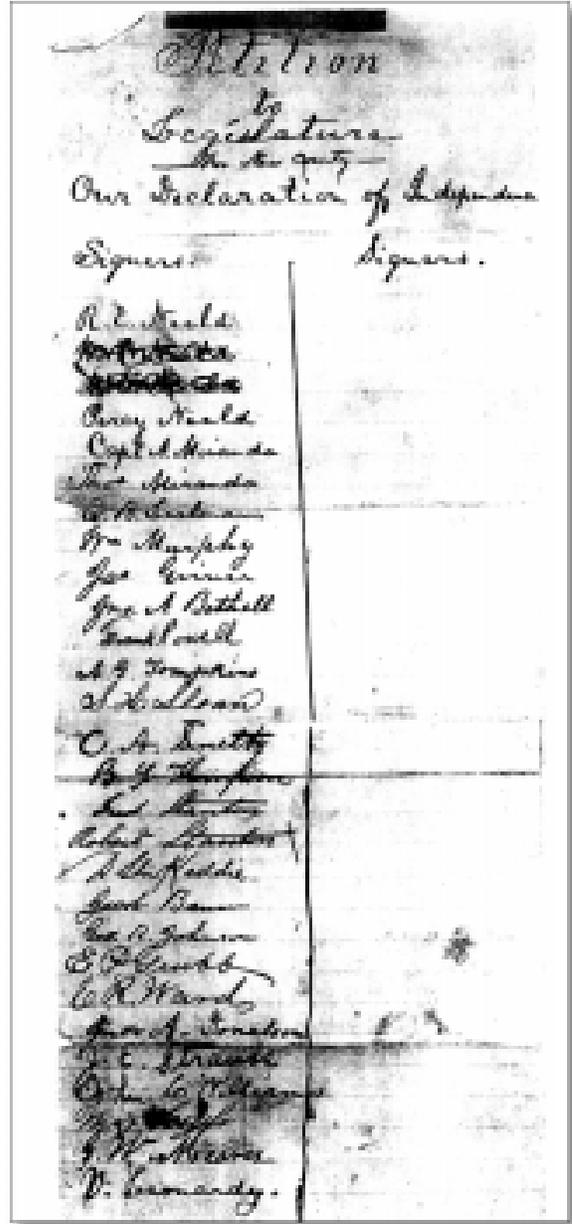
"A Savannah drummer says today who is just from Manatee & Polk Cos. That Davidson influenced Stockton to divide the vote in order to get himself elected; and people down in these counties is down on Davidson—Davidson has lost his political prestige—Bloxham is the masses favorite and idol of a man and statesman—¹⁴

"I recd. Your message by Munnerlyn—am obliged but I had recd. Appointment before your letter arrived.

"'Bill' do you get any good Lager Beer to drink—as there have been so many Candidates for Senator You should not but any—

"Yours truly

"Geo. L. Jones"



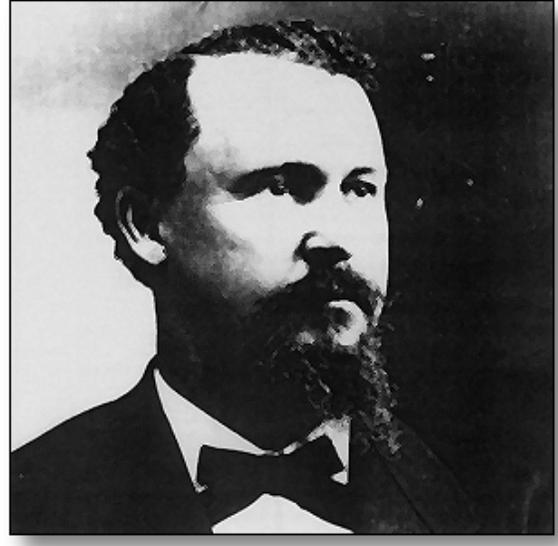
The original "petition" calling for the separation of the Pinellas peninsula from Hillsborough County which Jones mentions in his letter. Note the subheading of the document, "Our Declaration of Independence."

(Courtesy Mr. Michael Sanders)



Samuel Pasco, popular Speaker of the Florida House in 1887 and a compromise candidate in the U.S. Senatorial election of 1887.

(Courtesy Florida Photographic Collection, Florida State Archives)



Robert Hamilton McWhorter (R.H.M.) Davidson (1832-1908), Florida's Democratic Congressman from 1877 to 1891.

(Courtesy Mr. H. C. Davidson, grandson of R.H.M. Davidson)



William Dunnington Bloxham (1835-1911), two-time Governor of Florida (1881-1885 and 1897-1901) and Jones' "idol of a man and statesman" who was Perry's chief rival for the U.S. Senate seat up for election in 1887.

(Courtesy Florida Photographic Collection, Florida State Archives)



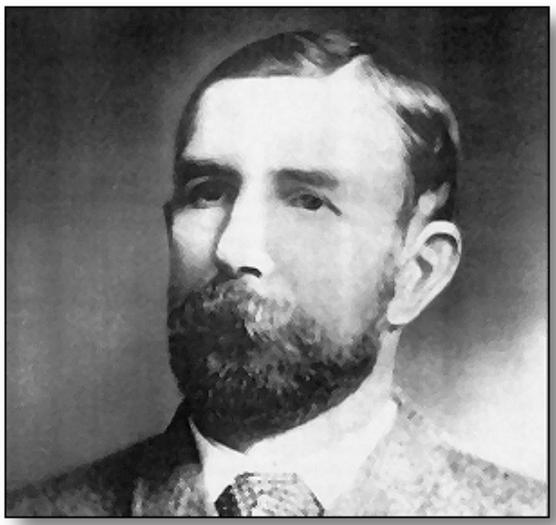
Edward Aylsworth Perry (1831-1889), Governor of Florida from 1885 to 1889, and a candidate for the U.S. Senate in the bitter senatorial election of 1887.

(Courtesy Florida Photographic Collection, Florida State Archives)



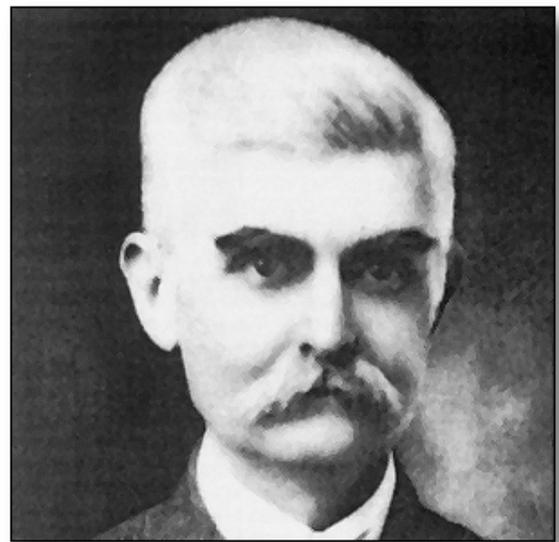
This portrait of the 1887 Florida Legislature originally belonged to William A. Belcher, who is pictured here with hat in hand, third from the left in the second row from bottom, with his arm on the shoulder of a young page.

(Courtesy of Miss Frances Belcher)



William Alexander (W.A.) Belcher (1846-1935), one of Hillsborough's two representatives to the State Legislature in 1887 and the recipient of Jones' letter.

(Courtesy Heritage Village - Pinellas County Historical Museum)



Milton Harvey Mabry (Sr.) (1851-1919), Lieutenant Governor in 1887. Although Jones believed that he had "killed himself politically" for favoring Perry in the Senate election that year, he later went on to become a Justice of the State Supreme Court, and a prominent attorney in Tampa.

(Courtesy Tampa: The Treasure City by Gary R. Mormino and Anthony P Pizzo)

END NOTES

¹ William L. Straub, *History of Pinellas County Florida* (Saint Augustine, Fla.: Record Company, Printers, 1929), p. 52.

² W. Lovett Douglas, *History of Dunedin* (St. Petersburg, Fla.: Great Outdoors Publishing, 1965), pp. 129-131.

³ D. B. McKay, *Pioneer Florida*, 3 vols. (Tampa, Fla.: Southern Publishing, 1959), 3:117.

⁴ "Sommerville" is probably James "Jim" Sommerville, who is also mentioned later in this letter. Sommerville was a native of Scotland, who came to Pinellas by the early 1880's. Together with a partner, John O. Douglas, in 1882 he opened a general store at the foot of Main Street in Edgewater Park in what is now Dunedin. These two men are credited with giving the town its name, after the town of Dunedin, Scotland, where both originally came from. See Straub, *History of Pinellas County*, p. 104 and Douglas, *History of Dunedin*, pp. 109-110.

⁵ Jones is referring to the fact that the proposed county (which was incidentally to be named "Gulf County," not Pinellas) would lack an adequate tax base to support itself. The proposed bill would have also kept "Point Pinellas" (an area roughly comprising the southernmost tip of the peninsula) in Hillsborough, a move probably intended to placate Hillsborough officials by allowing them to retain control of shipping into Tampa Bay. Thus, with only one incorporated municipality (Tarpon Springs, which was incorporated in 1887) and a population of around 500-600 residents (the 1890 Federal census recorded a population of 601), the new county would have been slight indeed.

Jones also mentions Elias G. Belcher, brother of William A. Belcher, who had moved to Pinellas sometime prior to 1880 and was a local farmer. See Leland Hawes, "Founding father' of Pinellas County," *Tampa Tribune*, 12 January 1992; 1880 U.S. Census for Hillsborough County, Florida; and "1880Census-Pinellas Peninsula," p. 2 of 23 in Harvey L. Wells Collection to Heritage Village Library and Archives.

⁶ Earlier that year (1887), a petition to the Legislature was circulated in Pinellas calling for the creation of a new county, which boldly declared itself to be "Our Declaration of Independence." Apparently one of the issues which sparked the petition was a proposal to build, as Jones states, "that large Bridge [probably a

forerunner of the Gandy Bridge, which was the first bridge to span Tampa Bay and which was eventually built in 1924], court House and Jail" for Hillsborough. Residents in the Pinellas felt that their taxes were not going towards roads and bridges on their side of the Bay but were instead being drained off by Tampa and the eastern part of Hillsborough (Pinellas then being commonly known as "West Hillsborough"). It was a sentiment that eventually did result in the successful movement to create Pinellas in 1911. Some notable signers of this early petition included Pinellas pioneers Abel Miranda, John A. Bethell, John A. Donaldson (the first African-American to permanently settle on the peninsula), G.W. Meares, and Vincent Leonardy. See Straub, *History of Pinellas County*, pp. 52-58 and "Petition to Legislature," in Pinellas County-General History file at Heritage Village Library and Archives.

⁷ On May 18, 1887, Belcher introduced the county separation bill, House bill No. 316, "To be entitled an act to create and establish the county of Gulf out of the western portion. Of Hillsborough county, and to provide for its government." Interestingly, this passage suggests that Belcher himself introduced the separation bill in the Legislature only reluctantly. This was probably due to the fact that the "certain Tampa politician" which Straub alludes to in his history was not elected with Belcher, which was part of the original strategy behind creating the new county. With no ally in the Senate to support his bill, Belcher no doubt was only going through the motions in introducing the bill in order to carry out his part of the original bargain. See also Florida House of Representatives, *A Journal of the Proceedings of the House of Representatives of the First Legislature of the State of Florida Held Under the Constitution Adopted by the Convention of 1885* (Tallahassee, Fla.: N.M. Brown, 1887), p.482.

"Matchett" refers to G.W. Matchett, Belcher's colleague from Hillsborough in the State House that year. See John B. Phelps, Clerk of the Florida House of Representatives, *The People of Lawmaking in Florida 1822-1997*, p. 73.

⁸ "Old Capt. McMullen" is James P "Capt. Jim" McMullen (1823-1895), one of the earliest settlers on the Pinellas Peninsula and a prominent member of the local community there. He originally came to the area from South Georgia about 1842 while recuperating from tuberculosis, and drifting over to Pinellas, found it "the closest place to heaven that he could imagine." In 1852 he settled permanently on the peninsula and built a log cabin in the area that

later became known as Coachman Station, near Clearwater. In 1977 the cabin was moved to Heritage Village, which now survives as the oldest existing structure in Pinellas County. McMullen became involved in both farming and cattle operations in the area and soon became one of the leaders of the young community. During the Civil War, he commanded a company of volunteers to protect Clearwater Harbor (now Clearwater) from Federal incursions, and later joined the Confederate "Cow Cavalry," which played an important role in helping to supply the Confederate Army with beef. He also served as a member of the Hillsborough County Commission both before and after the war, from 1853-1855, 1859-1861 and 1881-1883. For more on McMullen, see my article which appeared in the *Sunland Tribune*, "The Accidental Pioneer: Capt. Jim McMullen and the Taming of the Pinellas Peninsula," *Sunland Tribune* 22 (November 1996): 27-40. Incidentally, McMullen was Belcher's father-in-law not once, but twice over: in 1872, Belcher married McMullen's daughter Mary Katherine and after her death in 1880, he married her sister Sarah Jane.

The "Rev. Holmes" mentioned here is otherwise unknown, although he was probably a relative of James Holmes, who was at the time bookkeeper of the Sommerville and Douglas store. James Holmes came to Dunedin in 1875 and homesteaded 160 acres on present-day Hercules and Sunset Drive. See Douglas, *History of Dunedin*, p. 124.

⁹ Arthur Campbell (A.C.) Turner (1844-1929) was an early pioneer of Clearwater. A merchant, farmer and citrus grower by profession, he also served as postmaster of Clear Water Harbor from 1872 to 1885, and from 1884 to 1892 was editor of the *West Hillsborough* (Hillsboro) *Times*, the peninsula's first newspaper. One of the area's leading proponents of division from Hillsborough, when Pinellas County was created in 1911, he served as the new county's first treasurer.

"Munnerlyn" refers to James K. Munnerlyn, an early pioneer of Clearwater who ran a general store at the foot of Cleveland Street. Together with Turner, he had apparently first supported the Rev. James G. Snedecor (the "Snedecor" mentioned here) for the Legislature before supporting Belcher. Snedecor came to the area from Memphis, Tennessee during the early 1880's and initially settled in Dunedin. In 1884, he moved to the Safety Harbor area, where he lived in a log cabin homestead that still stands on Sixth Avenue south of Main Street. He appears to have been involved with the movement to separate Pinellas from Hillsborough. See Rowland H. Rerick,

Memoirs of Florida, ed. Francis P. Fleming, 2 vols. (Atlanta: Southern Historical Association, 1902), 2:733-734; Ralph Reed, "Arthur Campbell Turner was Pioneer," *St. Petersburg Times*, 28 March 1960; David W. Hartman and David Coles, *Biographical Rosters of Florida's Confederate and Union Soldiers 1861-1865*, 6 vols. (Wilmington, N.C.: Broadfoot Publishing, 1995), 4:1642; Barbara L. Fredericksen, "Quaint Little Log Cabin is a Solid Piece of History," *St. Petersburg Times*, 30 December 1986; and Bob Henderson, "Cabin Logs a Century of County's History," *St. Petersburg Times*, 19 October 1990. (I am further indebted to Clearwater historian Michael Sanders, who conscientiously helped me to identify Snedecor and Munnerlyn, and who generously supplied me with copies of a letter from Munnerlyn (described as "Dealer in General Merchandise, and Real Estate Agent") to Belcher, dated 22 April 1887.)

¹⁰ (John) Moffet McClung (1847-1920), a native of Virginia, settled in Dunedin in 1868. He homesteaded a 160-acre tract near present-day Patricia Avenue and became a citrus grower. He was also an active member for many years of the local First Presbyterian Church. His influence, as Jones alludes to here, was apparently less than considerable. See Douglas, *History of Dunedin*, p. 137.

¹¹ Existing copies of the 1887 petition calling for the separation of Pinellas from Hillsborough (see note 6) do not contain the name Munnerlyn among the 26 persons to sign. The allusion Jones makes here is that Munnerlyn signed the petition only as a way of gaining popular support for his local business enterprise—a not uncommon tactic in that (or this) day and age.

Writing to Belcher on April 22nd however, Munnerlyn stated that:

"On last Saturday there was a meeting here at this place [Clear Water Harbor] for the purpose of dividing the County. It was held by a certain clique who are not any popular with the local people here, and consequently not largely attended . . . a great many who are in favor of the measure object on account of oposition [sic] . . . I am in favor of the measure and am willing to use the men so far as we need them. I am anxious to know what you think of the move, and will appreciate any advice you will give in regard to any steps that it would be best to be taken in regard to making it a popular movement. ." (Letter of James K. Munnerlyn to William A. Belcher, Clear Water Harbor, Florida, 22 April 1887, courtesy Michael Sanders Collection.)

¹² "Wall" is Judge Joseph B. Wall of Tampa, who then represented Hillsborough County in the State Senate. Jones is referring to the bitter contest which was then underway that year in the Legislature to elect a U.S. Senator for Florida. (Prior to the adoption of the 17th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1913, U.S. Senators were elected by their respective state legislatures, not by the people.) Initially, two candidates for the office emerged: former Governor William D. Bloxham of Tallahassee, who was then serving as U.S. Surveyor-General for Florida; and incumbent Governor Edward A. Perry of Pensacola. After more than 50 ballots, the Legislature deadlocked, and a third candidate was nominated: State House Speaker Samuel Pasco of Jefferson County. Finally, on May 18th, both Bloxham and Perry withdrew, and after more than a month of balloting, Pasco was elected. See Phelps, *People of Lawmaking in Florida*, pp. 11, 88, 119; Allen Morris, comp., *The Florida Handbook 1995-1996*, 25th ed. (Tallahassee: Peninsular Publishing, 1995), pp. 336-337, 440; and Edward C. Williamson, *Florida Politics in the Gilded Age 1877-1893* (Gainesville, Fla.: University Presses of Florida, 1976), pp. 150-152.

¹³ This passage refers to Milton H. Mabry, Sr. (1851-1919), who at the time of this letter was serving as Lieutenant Governor of Florida. Mabry, a native of Alabama, came to Florida in 1879 and after serving one term in the Legislature, was elected Lieutenant Governor as a Democrat in 1884.

Although Mabry did indeed never become Governor, he was far from being "killed" politically, as Jones asserts. In 1891 he was elected to the Florida Supreme Court, and served twelve years there until his retirement from office in 1903. He died in March 1919 in Tampa at the age of 68. His sons Giddons Eldon Mabry and Milton H. Mabry, Jr. were also prominent in the legal profession in Tampa. Another son, Army Capt. Dale Mabry, for whom Dale Mabry Highway in Tampa was named, was killed in a dirigible accident in 1922. See McKay, *Pioneer Florida*, 3:15-16 and Karl H. Grismer, *Tampa* (St. Petersburg, Fla: St. Petersburg Printing Company, 1950), pp. 280-281.

Ironically, the office of Lieutenant Governor was abolished in the Constitution of 1885, although Mabry was allowed to serve out the remainder of his four-year term. Florida would not have another Lieutenant Governor until 1969, when the state constitution was revised and the office was re-created. (Incidentally, a Pinellas County

resident—Ray C. Osborne, then a Republican member of the Florida House from St. Petersburg—was the first to hold the recreated office, being appointed Lieutenant Governor by Governor Claude R. Kirk on January 7, 1969.)

¹⁴ "Davidson" is Robert H.M. Davidson (1832-1908), a native of Quincy in Gadsden County, who was then serving in Congress as Representative from Florida's 1st Congressional District—an area which included the Tampa Bay region. Elected in 1876 as the first Democrat to represent Florida in the House since the close of the Civil War, he was a leading member of the state's "bourbons," or conservative Democrats, which at the time largely controlled the state. Jones' analysis of Davidson's political strength in this instance was perceptive: while he was narrowly renominated and re-elected to a seventh consecutive term in Congress in 1888, Davidson lost the party's nomination two years later to Stephen Mallory of Pensacola, son of the former Confederate Secretary of the Navy. For more on Davidson, see Rowland H. Rerick, *Memoirs of Florida*, 2 vols. (Atlanta: Southern Historical Association, 1902), ed. by Francis P Fleming, 1:504-505; and my unpublished biography of Davidson, "The Life and Times of Robert Hamilton McWhorter Davidson (A.D. 1832-1908), A Chronological Biography," in the Heritage Village Library and Archives.