

1967

## Secession of Florida from the Union - A Minority Decision?

John F. Reiger



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

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

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

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

---

### Recommended Citation

Reiger, John F. (1967) "Secession of Florida from the Union - A Minority Decision?," *Florida Historical Quarterly*: Vol. 46 : No. 4 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol46/iss4/7>

## SECESSION OF FLORIDA FROM THE UNION- A MINORITY DECISION?

by JOHN F. REIGER

IN 1860 THE MAJORITY of white Floridians probably assumed that a victory for Republicanism would put in power those who would oppress the South. With the election of Lincoln, many Floridians believed secession the only alternative to northern domination. Others, however, refused to believe it.

The most important group in Florida that hoped to stave off secession was the Constitutional Union Party and its supporters - the *Lake City Independent Press*, the *Marianna Enterprise*, the *Milton Courier*, the *Pensacola Gazette*, and the Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*.<sup>1</sup> The party and its advocates readily acknowledged alleged "wrongs inflicted on the South," but nevertheless advocated "pacific, rational, and judicial methods for righting these wrongs."<sup>2</sup> The party held its state convention in Quincy on June 27, 1860. Delegates from twenty-seven counties attended. The national candidates of the party, John Bell of Tennessee for president and Edward Everett of Massachusetts for vice-president, and the national party platform - "the Constitution of the Country, the Union of the States, and the enforcement of the laws" - were endorsed by the convention. The party nominated Edward A. Hopkins of Duval County as candidate for governor and Benjamin F. Allen of Leon County, editor of the Tallahassee *Sentinel*, for Congress.<sup>3</sup> The Constitutional Unionists, made up mostly of planters, conservative Demo-

1. *Fernandina Weekly East Floridian*, July 26, 1860. These journals had formerly been Whig papers and except for the Lake City paper all were in West Florida. One paper, the *Jacksonville Mirror*, supported Stephen A. Douglas, the Northern Democratic candidate, for president. For a history of contemporary Florida journalism see Horace Gibbs Davis, Jr., "Florida Journalism During the Civil War" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Florida, 1952); J. Pendleton (Gaines, Jr., "A Century in Florida Journalism" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Florida, 1949).
2. *Tallahassee Floridian & Journal*, April 14, 1860, quoted in William Watson Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York, 1913), 39. See also facsimile edition with introduction by Fletcher M. Green (Gainesville, 1964).
3. *Tallahassee Floridian & Journal*, June 30, 1860.

crats, and old-line Whigs, had for their opponents the radical, secessionist Democrats and most of the influential newspapers of the state. They were prepared to wage an intensive political campaign in an effort to take political power from the radical Democrats.

The Democrats had already held their state convention in Tallahassee on April 9, 1860, to appoint delegates to the national convention at Charleston.<sup>4</sup> Nineteen of the thirty-seven counties were present or represented by proxy. The convention adopted resolutions stating that Negro slavery was an unalterable domestic institution, and that Congress had an obligation to protect the institution in the territories and strictly enforce the fugitive slave law.<sup>5</sup> A second Democratic convention met in Quincy, June 4. Secession was declared preferable to northern domination, and John Milton, a Jackson County planter, was named Democratic gubernatorial candidate on the twenty-third ballot after a fiery contest.<sup>6</sup> R. B. Hilton of Leon County was nominated for congress.

In the struggle for political supremacy, the secessionist Democrats had most of the advantages. Madison Starke Perry, the incumbent governor, was a radical, as were most members of the state legislature. Secessionist Democrats controlled the political machinery of the state and were able to exert tremendous pressure in favor of disunion. The radical Democrats also had the overwhelming support of the press. If five Florida papers supported the Constitutional Unionists, the Democrats had the backing of sixteen journals, including the most influential, and they used this press support effectively. According to the *Quincy Republican* the following Florida papers supported the Democratic tickets in 1860: *Pensacola Tribune*, *Marianna Patriot*, *Apalachicola Times*, *Quincy Republican*, *Tallahassee Floridian*, *Monticello Family Friend*, *Madison Messenger*, New-

4. The delegates were Thomas Jefferson Eppes, B. F. Wardlaw, John Milton, C. E. Dyke, James B. Owens, and G. L. Bowne.

5. *Fernandina Weekly East Floridian*, April 19, 1860; *Tallahassee Floridian & Journal*, April 14, 1860.

6. Milton was also appointed as a delegate to attend the Southern Democratic convention which was to be held at Richmond, Virginia. See William Lamar Gammon, III, "Governor John Milton of Florida, Confederate States of America" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Florida, 1948), 61-62.

nansville *Dispatch*, Ocala *Home Companion*, Lake City *Herald*, Jacksonville *Standard*, Cedar Keys *Telegraph*, Fernandina *East Floridian*, Tampa *Peninsular*, St. Augustine *Examiner*, and Key West *Key of the Gulf*. One, the Fernandina *East Floridian*, declared that dismemberment of the Union was only a matter of time, and that the South "is as well-prepared for that grave issue now, as she will be one or ten years hence."<sup>7</sup>

With both political leaders and press exhorting the people to view secession as the *only* alternative to northern oppression, and to consider anyone holding a moderate position as a coward or worse, something approaching hysteria began to sweep the state. Leading Unionists, like former Governor Richard Keith Call, were labeled "submissionists,"<sup>8</sup> and "Union Shriekers,"<sup>9</sup> while other pro-Union citizens were beaten and driven out of the state. One of the worst examples of this emotionalism was the case of Unionist William Hollingworth, who was fired on at night and seriously wounded by fanatics calling themselves "regulators."<sup>10</sup> The purpose of these extra-legal bodies was to seek out and destroy all pro-Union sentiment.

Under these conditions it is not surprising that the Democrats won the state elections. What is surprising is that the vote was not more disproportionate. John Milton, the Democratic gubernatorial candidate, defeated Edward Hopkins, the Constitutional Unionist candidate, by a vote of 6,994 to 5,248.<sup>11</sup> This narrow margin indicates that a very large minority of Floridians still favored the ideal of Union. The Democrats did carry their other races with large majorities and maintained a safe majority in both houses of the General Assembly.<sup>12</sup> The results of the national election of November 6, 1860, also reveal

7. Davis, "Florida Journalism During the Civil War," 18-20. See also Fernandina *Weekly East Floridian*, May 10, 1860.

8. Ellen Call Long, *Florida Breezes; or, Florida, New and Old* (Jacksonville, 1883), 283. See also facsimile edition with introduction by Margaret L. Chapman (Gainesville, 1962).

9. Key West *Key of the Gulf*, September 1, 1860.

10. Davis, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida*, 43.

11. Tallahassee *Floridian & Journal*, November 17, December 3, 1860; John E. Johns, *Florida During the Civil War* (Gainesville, 1963), 10.

12. Milton's majority of 1,746 votes in 1860 was four times that of Governor Perry over his Know-Nothing opponent in 1856. Perry interpreted this result as conclusive evidence of Florida's readiness to secede should Lincoln be elected. See Dorothy Dodd, "The Secession Movement in Florida, 1850-1861. Part II," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XII (October 1933), 50.

the continuing presence of a huge pro-Union minority in Florida. The Breckinridge and Lane (Southern Democratic) ticket carried the state with 8,543 votes, while the Bell and Everett (Constitutional Unionist) platform received 5,437 votes. Douglas and Johnson (Northern Democrats) received only 367 votes<sup>13</sup> and Lincoln and Hamlin (Republicans) none.<sup>14</sup> While it cannot be asserted that every vote for Breckinridge was a vote for secession, it seems safe to assume that a vote for Bell or Douglas was a vote for Union under the constitution.

That Lincoln received no support in Florida is hardly surprising. But why was Stephen A. Douglas only able to obtain an insignificant 367 votes? The answer probably lies in his Freeport Doctrine which stated that though slavery might be "legal" in a territory it could not exist where the people failed to enact legislation "friendly" to it. Thus, in spite of the Dred Scott decision, the people of a territory might still exclude slavery. The statements made by Douglas at Freeport destroyed any chance he might have had in Florida, because the people of that state demanded complete protection for their "peculiar institution" - supported, as it was, by the labor of almost 62,000 slaves.<sup>15</sup> Douglas' 367 votes were probably cast by recent settlers from the North whose political views were Democratic but whose social traditions were anti-slavery.

What is most significant about the elections is that of a total of 14,347 votes cast, the Breckinridge and Lane majority was only 1,369. When one considers the emotional campaign waged by the radical Democrats, and the fact that their cause was aided by the state's political leaders, by the most influential of Florida's newspapers, and by the demoralizing effects on the conservatives of the defeat of the Constitutional Unionists in recent state elections, the results of the national election may be interpreted as a manifestation of continuing, strong pro-Union sentiment in the Peninsula State.

Abraham Lincoln may not have received a single vote in Florida, but he won the North and far West, and with them the

13. Dodd, "Secession Movement in Florida," 51.

14. Edwin L. Williams, Jr., "Florida in the Union, 1845-1861" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1951), 555.

15. *Eighth Census of the United States: 1860, Agriculture*, 225. The number of slaves in 1860 was 61,745. There were 1,177 slaveholders in the state who owned fifteen or more slaves. See *ibid.*, 247.

presidency. Now that the "Black Republicans" were elected, Florida's radical press clamored for immediate secession. A week after the election, the headlines of the Fernandina *East Floridian* read: "Secession of the State of Florida. Dissolution of the Union. Formation of a Southern Confederacy." The editor told his readers: "THE TIME HAS COME - Lincoln is elected. . . . Throw doubt and indecision to the winds. . . . The requisite steps should be taken promptly by the Legislature for the arming and equipment of every able-bodied man. . . . The irrepressible conflict has commenced. We must meet it manfully and bravely. . . . FLORIDA WILL SECEDE."<sup>16</sup>

Events now moved rapidly. On November 26, 1860, Florida's General Assembly convened in regular session. The next day Governor Perry delivered his message to the legislature: "The crisis, long expected by men of observation and reflection, has at length come. . . . The only hope the Southern states have for *domestic peace* . . . or for future respectability and prosperity, is dependent on their action now; and that the proper action is *-Secession from our faithless, perjured confederates*. But some Southern men. . . . object to secession until some overt act of unconstitutional power shall have been committed. . . . If we wait for such an overt act, our fate will be that of the white inhabitants of St. Domingo<sup>17</sup>. . . . I most earnestly recommend a call of a Convention of the people of the State, at an early day, to take such action as in their judgment may be necessary. . . ."<sup>18</sup>

When the bill recommending a convention to consider secession was presented to the legislature on November 28, it passed unanimously.<sup>19</sup> Two days later Governor Perry signed it into law and issued a proclamation calling for elections to be held on December 22 to select delegates for the convention scheduled to meet in Tallahassee on January 3, 1861.

The radicals, now in political control of the state, did everything in their power to insure election of secessionist delegates.

16. Fernandina *Weekly East Floridian*, November 14, 1860.

17. This is a reference to the slave rebellion led by Toussaint L'Ouverture which occurred at the time of the French Revolution.

18. Governor's message, Tallahassee *Floridian & Journal*, December 1, 1860.

19. *Journal of the Proceedings of the Senate of the General Assembly of the State of Florida, 1855-1865* (Tallahassee, 1855-1866), 1860,

15. See also the Tallahassee *Floridian & Journal*, December 8, 1860.

To no avail, the opposition denounced secession as "treason against our Constitutional government."<sup>20</sup> Undoubtedly, a large segment of the population was intimidated to the point of not voting at all. A Union refugee later remembered that pro-secession leaders of the state had "used the most shameless and unconcealed intimidation, declaring boldly that no Union candidate should ever be nominated."<sup>21</sup> John Francis Tenney, a Northerner who left Florida on the eve of the Civil War, later noted: "Florida voted herself out of the Union along with the other states, but would not have done so if a fair election could have been held. There was an undoubted majority of the people who desired to remain in the Union. The secession craze carried everything before it. The election machinery was all in the hands of the secessionists, who manipulated the election to suit their end."<sup>22</sup>

Popular opinion by December 1860 had become so inflamed that the Unionists wondered if it was wise to continue open opposition.<sup>23</sup> Yet in spite of the radicals' attempts to wipe out all pro-Union sentiment, Florida's Unionists remained active. On the morning of election day, December 22, a letter by Governor Call appeared in the Tallahassee *Sentinel* in which he expressed hope that "reason may not be dethroned by passion that no attempt will be made rashly to strike the American flag - that no attempt will be made to declare Florida a Nation alien and foreign to the American people."<sup>24</sup> Call's appeal was ineffectual. Few except "the honest countrymen would listen [now] but . . . they have lost the power to denounce, and none know how long their [national] patriotism can withstand this fanfaronade of threats and braggadocio."<sup>25</sup>

The proceedings of the convention would soon reveal that the delegates elected represented a great victory for the radicals. In the twelve-day period after the elections and before the convention began, the secessionist press continued to clamor for

20. Richard Keith Call, *An Address To The People of Florida, From Gen. R. K. Call, December 1, 1860* (Tallahassee, 1860), n. p.

21. *New York Tribune*, February 20, 1864.

22. John Francis Tenney, *Slavery, Secession and Success. The Memoirs of a Florida Pioneer* (San Antonio, 1934), 15.

23. Herbert J. Doherty, Jr., *Richard Keith Call: Southern Unionist* (Gainesville, 1961), 157.

24. Tallahassee *Sentinel*, December 22, 1860.

25. Long, *Florida Breezes*, 283.

disunion. The editor of the St. Augustine *Examiner* confidently told his readers: "Our political sky as we enter upon a new year is overcast with clouds indicating a political tempest; and along the northern horizon is written the demon declaration - 'IRREPRESSIBLE CONFLICT!' Well, let it come and with stout hearts and armed nerves in defiance of freemen's rights, we will encounter it."<sup>26</sup>

Because of poor traveling conditions, not all the delegates were able to reach Tallahassee on the scheduled date, and those present decided to adjourn until Saturday, January 5. Friday, January 4, had been proclaimed by President Buchanan as a day for fasting and prayers for peace, but the rector of St. John's Church in Tallahassee used the occasion to preach a sermon endorsing secession. Francis H. Rutledge, Episcopal bishop of Florida, announced that as a South Carolinian by birth he had already seceded with his native state.<sup>27</sup> From the moment the convention was called to order, it was obvious that the great majority of delegates had assembled to decide, not *whether* Florida should secede, but rather *how* she would secede. On this first day, John C. McGehee, a radical slaveholder from Madison County who was elected president, quickly appointed committees to recommend methods for altering Florida's constitution to allow her to become politically independent of the United States.<sup>28</sup>

On the second day, two proposals for accomplishing secession were presented. The first was that of George W. Parkhill, a prominent Leon County planter. He thought the convention should act quickly on secession and then present its findings to a popular vote-but only after Alabama and Georgia had taken definite action on the question of secession. The delegates were in too much of a hurry to give this conservative plan serious consideration, and it was promptly tabled. The second plan was presented by McQueen McIntosh of Apalachicola, who had resigned his federal judgeship upon the election of Lincoln. He expressed his belief that secession was a constitutional

26. St. Augustine *Examiner*, December 29, 1860.

27. Dodd, "Secession Movement in Florida," 60.

28. *Journal of the Proceedings of the Convention of the People of Florida, Begun and Held at the Capitol in the City of Tallahassee, on Thursday, January 3, A.D. 1861* (Tallahassee, 1861), 6 ff. Hereafter referred to as *Journal of the Proceedings of the Convention*.



right, that "existing causes are such as to compel the State . . . to exercise that right," and that the convention represented the people of Florida and had the right to act for them. Though this plan was also tabled, President McGehee ordered 100 copies printed and circulated. Further consideration of secession plans was postponed until the following Monday, January 7.<sup>29</sup>

As scheduled, the convention reconvened on the latter date, but before considering which of the two plans of secession would be approved, the delegates heard speeches made by three well-known secessionists: Edward C. Bullock, commissioner from Alabama, Leonidas W. Spratt, commissioner from South Carolina, and the most vehement "fire-eater" of them all, the man who would soon have the dubious honor of firing the first shot against Fort Sumter - Edmund Ruffin of Virginia.<sup>30</sup> After being thus entertained, the delegates returned to their work, and in a relatively short time adopted the plan for immediate secession. The adoption meant that the delegates had decided they could legally act in the name of the people of Florida, making a popular vote on secession unnecessary.

The sixty-nine delegates were not unanimous in accepting either the plan for immediate secession or the prepared ordinance itself. George T. Ward of Leon County and Abraham K. Allison<sup>31</sup> of Gadsden County were leaders of a faction that wanted to delay secession until after Alabama and Georgia had seceded, or, if they did not secede, until the voters of Florida had approved the ordinance of secession. An amendment to the ordinance including these proposals was presented to the convention, but it lost by forty-two to twenty-seven.<sup>32</sup> Ward then presented a second amendment that did away with the referendum, but which would have forced the convention to wait until Alabama and Georgia acted on secession. Significantly, the amendment was defeated by the close vote of thirty-nine to thirty.<sup>33</sup> Three other amend-

29. *Ibid.*, 14-15.

30. Dorothy Dodd, "Edmund Ruffin's Account of the Florida Secession Convention, 1861," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XII (October 1933), 67-76.

31. Allison became lieutenant governor under Governor John Milton, and when the latter committed suicide on April 4, 1865, he became acting governor of Florida.

32. *Journal of the Proceedings of the Convention*, 31-32.

33. *Ibid.*, 32.

ments attempting to delay secession were presented. One was a proposal that would have required the ordinance of secession to be subjected to a popular vote that was introduced by George Ward and Jackson Morton of Santa Rosa County, and it was soundly defeated by a count of forty-one to twenty-six.<sup>34</sup>

The votes on these amendments make clear that a large majority of the delegates were consistently against submitting secession to a referendum. Was this because they were simply in a hurry to make Florida the next state on the Confederate banner, or was it rather because they were afraid that a popular vote would reveal a strong pro-Union undercurrent in a sea of secession? The question has no certain answer. But one thing is sure - over half the delegates, as shown by the close vote on the second amendment, wanted to delay proceedings until moral support could be obtained from their sister states. The delegates were, in other words, still hesitant about taking the final step to "sovereignty."

When the convention reconvened on January 10, spectators crowded the hall of the House of Representatives and the corridors outside, expectantly waiting for the final vote on the ordinance of secession. It read as follows:

We, the People of the State of Florida, in Convention assembled, do solemnly ordain, publish, and declare, That the State of Florida hereby withdraws herself from the Confederacy of States existing under the name of the United States of America; and from the existing government of the said States; and that all political connection between her and the Government of the said States ought to be and the same is hereby totally annulled and said Union of States dissolved, and the State of Florida is hereby declared a Sovereign and Independent Nation; and that all ordinances heretofore adopted, in so far as they create or recognize said Union, are rescinded, and all laws or parts of laws in force in this State, in so far as they recognize or assent to said Union, be and they are hereby repealed.<sup>35</sup>

---

34. *Ibid.*, 33.

35. *Ibid.*, 35.

## SECESSION OF FLORIDA FROM THE UNION 367

After a two-hour debate between radicals and conservatives, most of those delegates who voted for delay finally decided to come over to the radical camp. All sixty-nine were present when the final vote was taken, and all but seven voted for secession. At exactly twenty-two minutes past twelve in the afternoon, the clerk declared the ordinance adopted, and "then was heard from the people who thronged the hall one simultaneous shout declaratory of the dawn of liberty."<sup>36</sup> One spectator reported that "the applause was deafening."<sup>37</sup>

Even at this late moment, Richard Keith Call and his followers had not given up all hope. At the same time the convention's delegates were taking the fatal vote, pro-Union leaders of the state were holding a rally at Lake Jackson Church near Tallahassee. About 400 people, "whose heart beat time to the music of the Union," attended, but "only three [of them] had courage or inclination to go from the capitol, so great the counter influence, and so fearful was every man of incurring suspicion."<sup>38</sup> Before the meeting could get under way, "it was reported that the convention had passed the ordinance, and it only awaited the ceremony of signing to become the law of the land." Thus, "the meeting . . . which was intended to call forth and encourage the Union sentiment, proved but the obsequies of that Union."<sup>39</sup>

Next day, January 11, 1861, on the east portico of the capitol, the formal signing of the ordinance of secession took place. One observer recalled that "Capitol Square was so crowded you could see nothing but heads, and the Capitol itself was full of people looking from the windows."<sup>40</sup> As the town clock struck one, the delegates, led by President McGehee, walked out on the portico, and, one by one, began signing the document. Colonel George T. Ward, leader of those who hoped to delay secession, walked up to the table upon which the ordinance lay and holding his pen aloft, said: "When I die I want it inscribed upon

36. Jacksonville *Southern Confederacy*, January 16, 1861, quoted in *New York Herald*, January 25, 1861.

37. Long, *Florida Breezes*, 306.

38. *Ibid.*, 306.

39. *Ibid.*, 307.

40. Susan Bradford Eppes, *Through Some Eventful Years* (Macon, 1926), 144-45.

my tombstone that I was the last man to give up the ship.”<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, he added his name to the ordinance.

Even now, five of the sixty-nine delegates declined to sign the document. This fact, however, went unnoticed by the majority of those present, for they were bent on making Florida a “Sovereign and Independent Nation.” As the last delegate affixed his signature, “cheer after cheer rent the air.” But in the midst of the jubilation, one spectator chanced to look towards Richard Keith Call, and “saw that the tears were streaming down his face.”<sup>42</sup> For him, and for many others in Florida and the South, secession was no victory to be wildly celebrated; it was indeed an event which would “Open the gates of Hell.”<sup>43</sup>

---

41. *Ibid.*, 145. Ward was later to fight and die as a Confederate soldier.

42. *Ibid.*, 146.

43. Johns, *Florida During the Civil War*, 21.