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## “More Courage Than Discretion”: Charles M. Hamilton in Reconstruction-Era Florida

By Daniel R. Weinfeld

At the close of the Civil War, Union army officers arrived in Florida to serve as agents of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (the “Bureau”). In addition to their official Bureau duties, the agents, often the sole representatives of the Federal government in their assigned districts, acted as protectors of the newly freed slaves against a recalcitrant white population that refused to accept the blacks’ liberated status. As Congress implemented its Reconstruction plan, the agents helped organize the Republican Party in Florida in anticipation of readmission and encouraged the freedmen to become loyal Republican voters. The Bureau agents soon confronted an unanticipated situation, however, when enfranchised blacks acted not merely as their wards but also as competitors for political power. This struggle for control within the Republican Party continued throughout the Reconstruction Era.

Evaluation of the record of Florida’s Reconstruction-era Republicans has changed over time. After southern-born whites under the Democratic Party’s banner regained control of the state’s government in the 1876 election, blame for the turmoil of the period was placed squarely upon “carpetbaggers.”<sup>1</sup> Beginning

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1. For a historiography of the portrayal of the Florida carpetbaggers, see James C. Clark, “John Wallace and the Writing of Reconstruction History,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 67 (April 1989), 420-2.

in the 1960s, the careers of individual northern-born Republicans active in Florida began to be more favorably reappraised.<sup>2</sup> Such revision, however, has been tempered by the observation that the carpetbaggers enjoyed their brief hegemony at the expense not only of conservative southern whites, but also of progressive African American Republicans.<sup>3</sup>

The brief career of Charles Memorial Hamilton sheds light on Florida's Reconstruction era political climate characterized by the growth and subsequent fracturing of the Florida Republican Party and the emergence of black political consciousness. As a Bureau agent and then as Florida's first post-Civil War Congressman, Hamilton remained fervently loyal to the national Republican Party, particularly its congressional radicals, and sincerely committed to promoting the interests of his black constituents. Hamilton, however, affiliated politically with Florida's less progressive, moderate Republican leadership. As white conservative resistance became increasingly violent and Florida's Republican Party became mired in internecine squabbling, Hamilton remained faithful to his principles. His promising career was cut short by his failure to balance the competing factions in the Republican Party and navigate the vicious personal politics of his era.

Born on November 1, 1840, Hamilton was raised in a farming community near the small town of Jersey Shore in north-central Pennsylvania.<sup>4</sup> He received "an academic education" and studied

2. Claude R. Flory, "Marcellus L. Stearns, Florida's Last Reconstruction Governor," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 44 (January 1966), 181-92; Mildred L. Fryman, "Career of a Carpetbagger: Malachi Martin in Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 56 (January 1978), 317-38; Jerrell H. Shofner, "A New Jersey Carpetbagger in Reconstruction Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 52 (January 1974), 286-93. Canter Brown, Jr. has written of revisionism, however, that "in some instances the point has been taken too far." See Brown, *Carpetbagger Intrigues, Black Leadership, and a Southern Loyalist Triumph: Gubernatorial Election of 1872*, *Florida Historical Quarterly* 72 (January 1994), 278.
3. Jerrell H. Shofner, *Nor is it Over Yet: Florida in the Era of Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (Gainesville, 1974), 184-88; Canter Brown, Jr., *Florida's Black Public Officials, 1867-1924* (Tuscaloosa, 1998), 2-11.
4. The Hamilton family had a long tradition of service and Charles Hamilton grew up hearing stories of his ancestor, Captain Alex Hamilton, who led local farmers in the drafting of the "Tiadaghton" declaration of independence from England in 1776 and died fighting the British allied Iroquois. Robert B. Hamilton, Jr. "Hamiltons of Pine Creek, Pennsylvania" (unpublished, Lycoming County Historical Society, Williamsport, Pennsylvania, 1994); R. B. Hamilton, Jr., letters and conversations with author.

law, though he listed his occupation upon enlistment as farmer.<sup>5</sup> In May 1861, shortly after the shots fired at Fort Sumter, Hamilton and his brother Alexander volunteered for Company A of the 5<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Reserve Infantry Regiment, known as the “Jersey Shore Rifles.” The 5<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania fought in the Peninsula and Antietam campaigns. In December 1862, at Fredericksburg, a bullet fractured Hamilton’s right leg just below the knee while he was “charging in front of his regiment with the colors in his hands, snatched from the grasp of the falling sargeant [sic].” He lay on the field for five days before the Confederates took him prisoner and sent him to Libby Prison in Richmond. In late January 1863, he was exchanged and, during a furlough home, fell ill with typhus fever. Dependant on crutches for a year, Hamilton was transferred to the Veteran Reserve Corps – formerly known as the Invalid Corps – in Washington, D.C. and received a promotion to lieutenant.<sup>6</sup>

During the next two years, Hamilton served in a variety of capacities, including commanding bridges in Washington’s defense network, guarding prisoners, working several months in the Judge Advocate General Corps, and serving as an aide-de-camp to the military governor of Washington. According to William J. Purman’s reminiscences more than sixty years after the event, Hamilton was in attendance at Ford’s Theatre the night of Lincoln’s assassination.<sup>7</sup> After the war, Hamilton, like a number of other Veteran Reserve Corps officers, was assigned to the Bureau. He was posted to Florida as assistant sub-commissioner for Jackson, Washington, Calhoun and Holmes counties and arrived at Marianna, Jackson County, on January 29, 1866.<sup>8</sup>

5. Charles M. Hamilton, Box 35, P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville.

6. The 5<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Reserves was also numbered as the 34<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Volunteers. Charles M. Hamilton, 5<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Reserves, Compiled Military Service Files, National Archives; C. M. Hamilton to Dear Sir, December 5, 1870, Box 35, P. K. Yonge Library; Charles M. Hamilton, Pension File, National Archives. Hamilton saved himself from bayoneting when he made the “sign” to an approaching Confederate who wore a Masonic badge. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, March 10, 1868; Hamilton, “Hamiltons of Pine Creek, Pennsylvania.”

7. M. Hamilton, Veteran Reserve Corps. Compiled Military Service File, National Archives; *Washington Post*, 13 March 1927.

8. C. M. Hamilton to T. W. Osborn, 28 February 1866, Records of the Assistant Commissioner and Subordinate field offices for the State of Florida, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands 1865-1872 (microform), Department of Special Collections, Smathers Library, University of Florida, Gainesville (hereinafter cited as Records, Florida, BRF&AL).



Hamilton found himself the senior federal government authority responsible for the welfare of at least six thousand former slaves largely concentrated in Jackson County. The Bureau assistant commissioner for Florida, T. W. Osborn, had previously appointed civilian agents from among the local white population with instructions to supervise the drafting of labor contracts between freedmen and planters and to establish freedmen's schools. As he surveyed his new territory, Hamilton saw little progress in either area. The freedmen did not trust Osborn's southern-born, civilian appointees and were confident only in the Bureau's military officers. Hamilton recruited new agents and arranged for the appointment of his boyhood neighbor, William J. Purman, as civilian agent for Jackson County.<sup>9</sup> Purman resigned his clerical post at the War Department in Washington, arrived in Marianna in March 1866, and shared Bureau duties with Hamilton for most of the next two years.<sup>10</sup>

Hamilton first focused on the basic functions of the Bureau: arranging labor contracts, establishing schools and distributing rations to destitute freedmen. In some of his counties, no contracts had been formed. In other counties, contracts were so prejudicial as to "place a laborer in a condition worse than slavery." Hamilton abrogated these contracts and insisted that planters and laborers sign new agreements under his supervision that complied with Bureau guidelines. To replace the voided contracts, he drafted and printed a model template.<sup>11</sup>

Various Bureau assistant sub-commissioners differed in their opinions of the better compensation system for the freedmen laborers: money-wages versus crop-sharing.<sup>12</sup> Hamilton strongly encouraged the freedmen to accept a share of the crop harvested

9. C. M. Hamilton to T. W. Osborn, 10 and 28 February, 3 April 1866, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

10. In February 1867, the Bureau transferred Purman to East Florida. Citing his unmanageably large district, Hamilton urged the Bureau to return Purman, "an agent of very considerable efficiency - with a heart devoted to the Freedmen's cause." C. M. Hamilton to A. H. Jackson, 21 March 1867, Records, Florida, BRF&AL. Many freedmen signed a petition pleading for Purman's re-appointment to Jackson County. Emanuel Fortune, *et. al.* to John Sprague, 25 March 1867, Records, Florida, BRF&AL. The Bureau reassigned Purman to Jackson County in June 1867.

11. C. M. Hamilton to T. W. Osborn, 10 February 1866, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

12. George R. Bentley, *A History of the Freedmen's Bureau* (Philadelphia, 1955), 150.

and provisions, rather than cash payments. Eventually, under Hamilton's guidance, it became common practice in the district for farm laborers to receive a one-third crop share, typically cotton or corn, and two hundred and eight pounds of meat. Hamilton thought that crop-sharing benefited both the planter and laborer because, sharing risk and reward, "the necessity of industry and providence would fall upon both alike." Working for a portion of the crop, Hamilton explained, would be an incentive to the laborer and, consequently, he contended, the laborer's productivity and compensation would be higher than if working for stated wages.<sup>13</sup>

The Bureau stressed to its agents the importance of keeping the freedmen employed so they would not wander about the countryside or collect idly in towns.<sup>14</sup> By the end of March 1866, Hamilton reported that the Bureau goal of full employment of freedmen had nearly been achieved. The industriousness and productivity of the freedmen, he concluded, had justified his faith in the superiority of free labor to slavery. To his great satisfaction, Hamilton observed that even the "rebels" admitted their mistake in this matter, conceding that the "freedmen work better, and take greater interest in their work than they did as slaves."<sup>15</sup>

Hamilton discerned, however, the necessity of protecting laborers from those planters who would "take advantage of them whenever an opportunity presents" even within the scope of written contracts. For example, he did not allow planters the power to discharge laborers for dereliction of duty. That would "be putting the key of the safe in the hands of a thief." In instances where he felt that a planter had dealt "unkindly" with his laborers or had

13. At a public meeting in December 1866, Hamilton presented four options for payment terms including three variations of the share system and the alternative of stated yearly wages. C. M. Hamilton to E. C. Woodruff, 31 December 1866, Records, Florida, BRF&AL. See also "Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire Into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States," House Report No. 22, pt. 13, 42d Cong., 2d sess. (Washington, 1872), 285; hereinafter cited as *House Report No. 22*.

14. Bentley, *A History of the Freedmen's Bureau*, 82-4

15. C. M. Hamilton to J. L. McHenry, 31 March, 30 April, 31 July 1866; C. M. Hamilton to E. C. Woodruff, 31 December 1866; C. M. Hamilton to A. H. Jackson, 31 May, 31 August, 30 September 1867; W. J. Purman to C. M. Hamilton, 31 May 1866, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

refused to enter into a written contract, Hamilton found the freedmen employment elsewhere.<sup>16</sup>

Although he continued to champion the share system, during his second spring in Jackson County, Hamilton began to recognize the devastating weaknesses inherent in this arrangement. The continued success of the free labor system depended on the cooperation of the employers and, he observed, such cooperation was not forthcoming. Many planters, for example, had developed underhanded schemes designed to deprive the laborers of their shares at harvest time.<sup>17</sup> When a collapse in cotton prices in 1867 threatened to throw many of the laborers into destitution or a future of inescapable indebtedness to the planters, Hamilton resorted to ordering planters to set aside sufficient corn to sustain the laborers' families.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to their resentment of the imposed contracting system, the Jackson County planters chafed at the fees charged by the Bureau agents. Whereas Hamilton, the military officer, did not receive compensation for Bureau services, Purman, the civilian agent, was entitled under Bureau rules to assess a fee.<sup>19</sup> Agents were authorized to charge as much as one dollar per contract and twenty-five cents for each additional laborer included. Purman was also compensated for the cost of printing, paper and Internal

16. C. M. Hamilton to A. H. Jackson, 31 March 1867; C. M. Hamilton to T. W. Osborn, 28 February 1866; C. M. Hamilton to J. L. McHenry, 31 March, 30 April 1866, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

17. Each plantation had a small store or credit arrangements with local merchants. Laborers were encouraged to run up their accounts at inflated prices. The planter would settle the laborer's account at harvest time by taking the debt owed out of the laborer's share, often leaving the laborer with no proceeds from his year's efforts. Alternatively, the planter might convince the laborer to consign his cotton share to the planter to take to market, whereupon the planter would deduct shipping, hauling, taxes and other charges which, in total, eliminated the proceeds. C. M. Hamilton to A. H. Jackson, 31 March, 31 August, 30 September 1867, Records, Florida, BRF&AL. More crudely, some planters would find an excuse to drive laborers off the property at gunpoint or accuse them of some offense to justify their discharge after a full season of labor but prior to the harvest and distribution of the crop share. C. M. Hamilton to J. L. McHenry, 30 June 1866; W. J. Purman to C. M. Hamilton, 29 September 1866, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

18. C. M. Hamilton to A. H. Jackson, 31 October, 31 December 1867; W. J. Purman to A. H. Jackson, 4 January 1868, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

19. Initially hired as an unsalaried civilian agent, Purman derived his pay entirely from contract fees. Hamilton sent Osborn a request for a salaried appointment for Purman. C.M. Hamilton to T.W. Osborn, 3 April 1866, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.



Revenue stamps. Hamilton later offered that the contract fee charged was twenty-five cents plus five cents for stamps. He insisted that he never received a single penny. No evidence exists that Hamilton authorized fees in excess of standard Bureau practices and there is no record of local freedmen complaining about this issue. Nevertheless, charges of financial impropriety and profiteering arising from supervision of contracts were hurled against Hamilton by local whites.<sup>20</sup>

As with his supervision of labor, Hamilton's experience with the Bureau's educational program included both accomplishments and, ultimately, frustration. Hamilton was "astonished" by the eagerness of the freedmen for education for which, he observed, they manifested "greater interest" than did the whites. On his arrival in Marianna, he found one school for black children, established by Union soldiers the previous year, in operation. Despite his enthusiasm for the project, Hamilton succeeded in opening only one more school during 1866. The following year, Hamilton and Purman redoubled their efforts and in May, Hamilton reported that eleven schools were in "flourishing condition" in his district, although, admittedly, all were "not regular authorized establishments."<sup>21</sup> Actually, there may have been only three regular schools for black children: two in Marianna and one in nearby Greenwood. The remaining schools included a night program for adults in Marianna and several "school societies" – organizations of freedmen who met on Sundays and contributed funds aimed at building schools in their communities.<sup>22</sup>

The Bureau agents and the freedmen faced nearly insurmountable challenges in establishing schools: obtaining the land and funds necessary for the construction of school buildings, finding and paying competent teachers, purchasing books, and weathering the hostility of local whites. Hamilton and Purman gave up building a school at Campbellton, near the Alabama border, concluding local whites would destroy any building designated as a freedmen's school. The Greenwood school opened only after much effort and in the face of opposition. Hamilton was

20. Bentley, *Freedmen's Bureau*, 104; *House Report No. 22*, pp. 281.

21. Jerrell H. Shofner, *Jackson County, Florida – A History* (Jackson County, Florida, 1985), 265; C. M. Hamilton to E. C. Woodruff, 31 December 1866; C. M. Hamilton to J. L. McHenry, 31 March 1866, C. M. Hamilton to A. H. Jackson, 31 May 1867, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

22. W. J. Purman to A. H. Jackson, 4 December 1867, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.



particularly satisfied with the thriving Marianna schools that averaged fifty to sixty pupils in daily attendance. By April 1868, a few months after Hamilton left the Bureau, however, only one children's school, in Marianna, was operating in Jackson County.<sup>23</sup>

Hamilton's greatest frustration arose from his realization that he and Purman were ultimately impotent to enforce the Bureau's directives and their initiatives. The agents were fully cognizant that they retained only the power of persuasion.<sup>24</sup> Hamilton thought that during the harvest settlement and contracting seasons the presence of troops could provide the necessary "influence" to ensure white compliance with Bureau decisions. While the detachment of five soldiers periodically garrisoned in Marianna occasionally intimidated planters into cooperation, the agents and the handful of soldiers dared not risk confronting armed or determined opposition.<sup>25</sup>

Freedmen could not find redress for their grievances in the civil court system. The courts served as yet another instrument for maintaining white dominance. During the fall 1866, one local judge declared Bureau-supervised contracts to be unenforceable because they had not been drafted in accordance with Florida state statutes. Freedmen, generally subjected to "lynx-eyed scrutiny," were arraigned before the authorities on the "slightest pretext," and subjected to disproportionate and crippling fines and court fees.<sup>26</sup> Beginning in 1867, labor contracts included a clause that referred disputes to an arbitration board to include a Bureau agent. Attempts to enforce arbitration decisions against non-cooperating planters proved futile. When freedmen sought compensation for breach of contract or abuse, Hamilton felt he had no

23. C. M. Hamilton to E.C. Woodruff, 31 December 1866, Florida BRF&AL. At Purman's recommendation, Hamilton dismissed George H. Bremen, the incumbent teacher at Marianna, and recruited a local woman, Mrs. Amanda Barkley, to teach. W.J. Purman to C.M. Hamilton, 31 May 1866; C. M. Hamilton to J. L. McHenry, 30 June 1866, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

24. C. M. Hamilton to J. L. McHenry, 30 June 1866, Records, Florida, BRF&AL. "Unless moral suasion is effectual — we are here quite helpless." C. M. Hamilton to A. H. Jackson, 31 March 1867, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

25. C. M. Hamilton to E. C. Woodruff, 26 December 1866; C. M. Hamilton to A. H. Jackson, 31 December 1867, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

26. C. M. Hamilton to J. L. McHenry, 31 July 1866; C. M. Hamilton to A. H. Jackson, 31 March, 31 October 1867; W. J. Purman to C. M. Hamilton, 29 September 1866; C. M. Hamilton to E. C. Woodruff, 31 December 1866, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

choice but to refer the complainants to the civil court even though the court officials and all-white jurors were blatantly biased against the freedmen. The “fulcrum” of white control, Hamilton observed, was the practice of not allowing blacks to serve as jurors. After watching whites accused of murdering blacks acquitted in three separate cases, Hamilton met with Judge Bush of the Circuit Court to request that blacks be seated as jurors at least in cases in which an African American was a party or the parties may agree. These efforts were unsuccessful.<sup>27</sup>

During Hamilton’s two years in Marianna, a series of incidents created the legend, in the imagination of local whites, of the outrageous and inflammatory conduct of Hamilton and Purman. The first major crisis came in June 1866 when a delegation of freedmen requested Hamilton’s approval for an Independence Day parade with the United States flag and portraits of Washington and Lincoln to be followed by a large public barbecue. Hamilton replied that he had no objection to such a celebration and he would “take pleasure to assist them in every proper way.” Nevertheless, Hamilton sought and received confirmation from his Bureau superiors of his decision. With news of the forthcoming event, elements of the white community angrily objected and sent a petition to Governor David Walker protesting the celebration. Rumors spread that any attempt to carry the portraits and flag through Marianna would be met with violence. Increasingly concerned, Hamilton “earnestly” requested that a detachment of troops be sent to Marianna to “afford security to person and property, and protection to the United States flag.” Hamilton consulted the mayor who declared that the celebration, including carrying Lincoln’s portrait, would be “as if the negroes were flaunting defiance in our faces.” The event’s organizer agreed to lay aside the portraits, but Hamilton insisted that the Stars and Stripes be carried. As the day of the event approached, new rumors spread among whites that Hamilton had ordered the freedmen to attend the celebration armed.<sup>28</sup>

To Hamilton’s delight, the Fourth of July event was a complete success. Over three thousand blacks and most male white citizens

27. C. M. Hamilton to A. H. Jackson, 31 May 1867, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

28. J. L. McHenry to C. M. Hamilton, 23 June 1866; C. M. Hamilton to C. Mundee, 24 June 1866; C. M. Hamilton to J. L. McHenry, 30 June 1866, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

of Marianna conducted themselves in a “highly creditable manner” with “not a rude word spoken.” The happy affair and fine barbecue would “long be remembered, both by the whites and blacks.” Hamilton felt so elated that he withdrew his pending request for troops. He saw the celebration as a significant “victory” for the freedmen, exorcising “the secret, baneful social and moral influence that slavery has long engendered.”<sup>29</sup> A similarly successful celebration was held the following Fourth of July when the portraits of Washington and Lincoln were finally carried through the streets of Marianna.<sup>30</sup> Hamilton’s role in these events, however, helped solidify the perception of local whites that the agents were their determined adversaries and advocates solely of black interests.

In May 1867, Hamilton’s handling of another incident contributed to white resentment. Black children had decorated the Marianna public cemetery grave of a Union soldier killed in an 1864 raid on the town.<sup>31</sup> Some young white women threw the flowers onto the public walk and trampled on them. A few days subsequent, Hamilton “respectfully requested the young ladies charged with this act of desecration” to report to his office. They arrived accompanied by many friends, relatives and counsel. After conceding that “the guilty parties could not be sufficiently identified to warrant further action,” Hamilton delivered “a lecture upon the matter,” released the women, and dropped the matter. Hamilton later admitted that the young women had indeed been identified by two black witnesses and the town’s postmistress, but he did not know what he “could do with them, further than to attach the blame” and give them “a lecture.” The Marianna *Courier* snidely advised the women to beware of approaching Hamilton’s “sacred spot” in the cemetery in the future.<sup>32</sup> Three years later, however, the *Courier* was less droll, recalling the “degrading insult... marked

29. C. M. Hamilton to J. L. McHenry, 5 and 31 July 1866, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

30. C. M. Hamilton to A. H. Jackson, 7 July 1867, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

31. For a description of the destructive 1864 Union army raid, known as the “Battle of Marianna,” see Dale A. Cox, *The West Florida War*, (<http://www.jctdc.org/cox.html>, 1989 and 1999).

32. C. M. Hamilton to A. H. Jackson, 31 May 1867, Records, Florida, BRF&AL; House Report No. 22, p. 282. See also, Hamilton’s description of the event and excerpt from the Marianna *Courier*, 30 May 1867 in House Report No. 22, p. 282.



in the arrest of the young ladies of this place to be arraigned before a vile potentate.”<sup>33</sup>

In another incident where whites castigated Hamilton for intervening, a laborer complained that at harvest time he and his family had been driven off the land they worked for “impudence.” When the planters refused Hamilton’s direction to make a settlement, Hamilton dispatched soldiers to protect the laborer who returned to claim his crop share. The soldiers “observed preparation for resistance on the part of the employers” and arrested them. The *Courier* later recounted how the planters had been “insultingly arrested and ruthlessly incarcerated in a filthy old smokehouse to be made to succumb to an unfair and unjust disposition of their property that amounted to absolute robbery.” In subsequent years, the *Courier* invoked this incident when listing Hamilton’s offenses against the people of Jackson County.<sup>34</sup>

In his initial dispatches, Hamilton found the people of the county “generally hospitable and intelligent.” Most of the Marianna white community, however, soon ostracized Hamilton and Purman. The “better order of gentlemen” were friendly on the street, Purman complained, but would “never compromise their social standing by extending to the forlorn Agents an invitation or introduction to their homes and families.” Conversely, at least one Marianna citizen remarked that Hamilton “seemed to prefer the freedmen and certain white men of no social standing, and kept himself aloof from the more respectable portion of the community.”<sup>35</sup> Maine-born farmer F. W. Gillette wrote to his friend Freedmen’s Bureau Commissioner General O. O. Howard that “the rebels hate” Hamilton.<sup>36</sup>

33. House Report No. 22, p. 284. In his testimony before the Congressional Committee, John Williams referred to this incident when listing the causes of resentment against Hamilton. Ibid, 232.

34. Ibid., 283-84; Marianna *Courier*, 8 January 1868 quoted in Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, 14 January 1868; Marianna *Courier*, 7 October 1869, quoted in Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, 19 October 1869, “incarcerated in the filthiest and most objectionable prison the ingenuity of a coward could contrive.”

35. C. M. Hamilton to T. W. Osborn, 28 February 1866; W. J. Purman to E. C. Woodruff, 28 February 1867, Records, Florida, BRF&AL; T. T. Flint to C. F. Larrabee, 9 September 1867, Records, Florida, BFR&AL, quoted in Joe M. Richardson, “The Negro in the Reconstruction of Florida,” (Florida State University, Ph.D. dissertation, 1963), microfilm, 40.

36. F. W. Gillette to O. O. Howard, 1 August 1867, O. O. Howard Papers, (George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collection and Archives, Bowdoin College Library).



By mid-1867, social slights and insults had evolved into threats of violence. When he talked to freedmen in Calhoun County about voting registration, Hamilton reported that “a drunken irish-rebel (hired, I am since informed, for the occasion) approached” with a knife, shouting that “he wanted to ‘get to the d’n Yankee.’” This assailant was stopped and arrested. While Hamilton lectured in Campbellton before a racially mixed audience, a Dr. Colley, allegedly drunk and armed, had “half-concealed himself behind the speakers stand, prepared to perpetuate his evil design ... to shoot.” After Hamilton insisted, the deputy sheriff “reluctantly” arrested Colley. During a trip to Walton County with freedman minister and Republican activist Emanuel Fortune to discuss the election of delegates to the constitutional convention, Hamilton brawled with local whites, who objected to his speaking to a group of blacks. In October 1867, some “rebels” entered Hamilton’s stable and shaved his horses’ tails and manes. Hamilton suspected that the leading culprit was William Coker, son of the prominent Marianna merchant James Coker. James Coker later boasted that more than once he had planned to kill Hamilton.<sup>37</sup>

Hamilton acknowledged that reasonable people could be found among the professional class of the community including a few whites who were willing to express empathy for the Bureau agents and their goals as well as some who actively and openly cooperated. Dr. L. C. Armistead from Greenwood served as registrar for the 1867 fall election and was persecuted for his efforts. Hamilton found a sympathizer in Samuel Fleishman, a German-Jewish immigrant and dry goods merchant in the area for almost two decades, whom Hamilton recommended to fill a vacancy as county tax collector.<sup>38</sup>

The agents’ closest friendships in Marianna came from the Finlayson family. Fairly prosperous land and slave owners before the war, the Finlaysons had suffered financially, particularly during the 1864 raid.<sup>39</sup> The oldest son, Dr. John L. Finlayson, a

37. C. M. Hamilton to A. H. Jackson, 31 May, 31 July 1867, Records, Florida, BRF&AL; House *Report No. 22*, p. 98-9; C. M. Hamilton to A. H. Jackson, 31 October, 31 December 1867, Records, Florida, BRF&AL; House *Report No. 22*, p. 81

38. C. M. Hamilton to A. J. Jackson, 31 May, 31 July, 31 October 1867, Records, Florida, BRF&AL; Daniel R. Weinfeld, “Samuel Fleishman: Tragedy in Reconstruction-Era Florida,” *Southern Jewish History* 8 (2005), 44-5.

39. Shofner, *Jackson County*, 266-7; *Boston Daily Globe*, 7 March 1894.

Confederate army veteran, was about the same age as Hamilton and Purman and became close friends with the two men. Remarkably, Finlayson allied himself with the Bureau, providing medical services to freedmen and teaching adults at the Bureau night school in Marianna. He attended a Florida Republican convention in 1867 and accepted appointments as Bureau medical officer and later clerk of court for Jackson County. Finlayson's sisters, Martha and Leodora, became romantically involved with the two young Yankee veterans.<sup>40</sup>

Hamilton realized that he could not change the attitudes of local whites who continued to view the freedmen as no more than "hewers of wood and drawers of water."<sup>41</sup> Hamilton noted that the Jackson County whites remained "full of the seed of disloyalty, which their subjugation could not destroy; which no magnanimity can remove, and which is nourished and kept in growth." Conciliation was futile since "no power of good will can change them, and all charity and generosity towards them is only accepted as a homage due them, and as a weakness on our part."<sup>42</sup> For freedmen to achieve the full rights of citizenship, change would have to come from a different direction.

Hamilton and Purman willingly accepted the task of educating the freedmen about the implications of their emancipated status. Soon after their arrival in Marianna, they began lecturing the "almost helpless wards of the Government ... on business, in their rights, on the laws of the State, and their duties and conduct under them."<sup>43</sup> The two agents frequently attended meetings of freedmen where it was their "pleasant duty...to impart general information, and instruct & encourage them in their new duties as citizens." With the announcement in the spring of 1867 of the Congressional plan for reconstituting the southern states, these meetings became overtly political, and Hamilton noted that the

40. *Tallahassee Sentinel*, 15 July 1867; C. M. Hamilton to A. H. Jackson, 31 May 1867; W. J. Purman to E. C. Woodruff, 28 February 1867; W. J. Purman to A. H. Jackson, 30 September 1867, 19 and 30 May 1868, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

41. C. M. Hamilton to T. W. Osborn, 28 February 1866; C. M. Hamilton to E. C. Woodruff, 31 December 1866, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

42. C. M. Hamilton to J. L. McHenry, 30 April 1866, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

43. *Ibid.* In a ten month period Purman made forty-six public speeches to freedmen. W. J. Purman to E. C. Woodruff, 28 February 1867, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

freedmen were elated at the prospect of suffrage. Hamilton too looked forward to the “new regime, which is near at hand.”<sup>44</sup>

By the time elections for delegates to a state constitutional convention had been scheduled for November 1867, Hamilton had concluded that only the right of suffrage would permit “this unfortunate race to force justice, and consideration.” The agents became more openly partisan advocates of the Republican Party as 1867 progressed. By May, Hamilton wrote that the “colored citizens” were “almost a unit on Republicanism” and were eager to register to vote. Hamilton advised freedmen in Calhoun County to vote only “for men for office in whom they had full confidence” and to vote for men “of their own color” if they could not find “white ones” to trust.<sup>45</sup> In asking Commissioner O. O. Howard to extend Hamilton’s service, Gillette wrote that “it is essential to our success as members of the Republican Party that we should have his aid until after the Ratification of our new constitution.”<sup>46</sup>

Hamilton arrived in Florida with relatively progressive racial attitudes that reflected his upbringing. A Pennsylvania biographer familiar with the Hamilton family remarked that Hamilton’s support for black suffrage was in line with “his hereditary views.” Further evidence of the Hamilton family’s sympathies was the service of Charles’ brother, John L., as an officer in a U.S. Colored Troops regiment.<sup>47</sup> The former slaves “are supposed to be stupid and unintelligent,” Hamilton wrote soon after assuming his post in Marianna, but “[a]s a mass they are not so very much beneath the white plebians [sic] of the South in intelligence.”<sup>48</sup> After the triumph of the 1866 Independence Day parade, Hamilton increasingly praised the freedmen. He admitted being “very impressed by their courage” and their willingness to “face the consequences” for what they believed to be right. He frequently commended the freedmen on their deportment, particularly in contrast with the local white population. He admired the way they “bore their

44. C. M. Hamilton to A. H. Jackson, 31 May 1867, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

45. C. M. Hamilton to E. C. Woodruff, 31 December 1866; C. M. Hamilton to A. H. Jackson, 31 March, 31 May 1867, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

46. F. W. Gillette to O. O. Howard, 11 December 1867, O. O. Howard Papers.

47. John. F. Meginness, *Biographical Annals of Deceased Residents of the West Branch Valley of the Susquehanna from the Earliest Times to the Present* (Williamsport, Pennsylvania, 1889), 157. John L. Hamilton died at Petersburg in the war’s last week. Tombstone inscription, John L. Hamilton, Jersey Shore Cemetery, Jersey Shore, Pennsylvania.

48. C. M. Hamilton to J. L. McHenry, 31 March 1866, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.



slights” and insisted that their deficiencies were not the result of any “natural incapacity, but the result of their late painful condition.”<sup>49</sup> As he became increasingly bitter toward the white population, Hamilton reported that the freedpeople “are better, worthier citizens, and a more christian people than their late ‘lordly masters’ or their friends.” He was confident they would vote “as a class, quite as intelligently as any other people that have ever inhabited these States – at least since 1860.”<sup>50</sup>

Hamilton’s high regard for the freedmen in his district was reciprocated. Richard Pousser, a Jackson County constable, stated that the freedmen appreciated “Mr. Purman and Mr. Hamilton, because they treated them like gentlemen, and told them how to get along and how to manage.” The freedmen, Pousser continued, would go to Hamilton and Purman for advice and for protection and their condition had deteriorated after the two men left Jackson County.<sup>51</sup> Fortune testified to his close relationship with Hamilton, remembering that together they had gone “through all the combats that were fought” in Jackson County in organizing the Republican Party.<sup>52</sup> Years later, Fortune’s son, Timothy Thomas Fortune, a prominent African American journalist and activist, recalled Hamilton and Purman as “very superior men” who “played a conspicuous and honorable part” in Reconstruction and “made friends with the Negro people.”<sup>53</sup> Gillette wrote of Hamilton that “the negroes love & respect him as their protector.”<sup>54</sup>

On January 1, 1868, more than six-and-a-half years after he first volunteered, Hamilton was mustered out of the United States armed services and, concomitantly, his position as a Bureau military official came to an end. Gillette’s pleas to General Howard to extend Hamilton’s service “as long as possible” because “the entirety of the colored people imperatively demand his further

49. C. M. Hamilton to E. C. Woodruff, 31 December 1866, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

50. C. M. Hamilton to J. L. McHenry, 5 July 1866; C. M. Hamilton to A. H. Jackson, 31 May 1867, Records, Florida, BRF&AL.

51. House *Report No. 22*, p. 275.

52. *Ibid.*, 94.

53. T. Thomas Fortune, “After War Times,” *Norfolk Journal & Guide*, 6 August 1927.

54. F. W. Gillette to O. O. Howard, 1 August 1867, O. O. Howard Papers. Gillette could not commend Hamilton “too highly” and considered him “as indispensable almost to this rebellious county as the rain.”



retention” were to no avail.<sup>55</sup> Despite the frustrations and insults he had endured, Hamilton had reason for satisfaction with the accomplishments of his two years in Jackson County and optimism for the future. The November election had been peacefully and successfully carried out. Four representatives, two black and two white, including Purman, Fortune, and Dr. Armistead, were sent to represent Jackson County at the upcoming constitutional convention. The forthcoming constitution would assuredly establish Florida’s government under Republican principles and clear obstacles placed by the “rebels” in the path of fully realized African American citizenship.

At the end of his term of service with the Bureau, it is unclear whether Hamilton had expectations for a political career. Purman’s immediate leap into the center of the state’s new Republican Party may have interested Hamilton in such a future. Leaving Jackson County, Hamilton visited his Pennsylvania home but returned to settle in Jacksonville. Quite likely, his romance with Martha Finlayson had progressed so far as to persuade him to remain in Florida. He anticipated his need to earn a living after leaving the military payroll when, just a month before he left the Bureau, he gained admission to practice law before the Florida state bar.

At the Florida constitutional convention in late January 1868, most white Republicans, northern and southern born, united under the leadership of carpetbaggers T. W. Osborn and Harrison Reed. These “moderates,” including many Bureau officers who had served under Osborn, promoted economic recovery and black suffrage, but not black political power. Hoping to gain the support of white conservatives, they proposed positions that had the effect of limiting the role of blacks in state government. Radicals, who were mostly black, initially gained control of the Tallahassee convention.<sup>56</sup> Stalling until more allies arrived, Purman convened the moderates in a second, splinter convention in Monticello. Eventually, through much maneuvering, the moderates seized

55. F. W. Gillette to O. O. Howard, 11 December 1867, O. O. Howard Papers. Gillette wrote that “it is the earnest wish and entreaty of every loyal man, white or black, in this district that he be retained.”

56. For a detailed analysis of the composition of the convention see, David L. Hume, “Membership of the Florida Constitutional Convention of 1868: A Case Study of Republican Factionalism in the Reconstruction South,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 51 (July 1972), 1-21.

control of the main convention's floor. Hamilton then briefly, but dramatically, entered the story. According to the radical faction's leaders, Hamilton woke two black delegates from their beds in the middle of the night to join the moderates to form a decisive quorum. The two delegates had complied, the radicals complained, because they thought that Hamilton was still a Bureau military officer with authority to enforce his orders.<sup>57</sup>

The moderates and radicals each dispatched proposed constitutions to Congress for approval. The moderate document differed from the radical proposal in three key provisions which had the cumulative effect of precluding black political control of the state government. While the radicals proposed the election of most state and county officials, the moderates empowered the governor to appoint nearly all officeholders. The moderates also were lenient in their treatment of former Confederates, requiring only a simple loyalty oath to regain rights. Most significantly, the two contending movements differed in their system of electoral representation for the state legislature and senate. The radicals wanted representation proportionate to population which would, for example, have combined several small counties with white populations into one legislative district. The moderates allowed each county at least one legislator with a limit of four. With the black population largely concentrated in a few counties, the moderate plan diluted black voting power and ensured that whites would control of the state's lower house.<sup>58</sup>

Immediately after the close of the convention in late February, the moderates nominated Reed for governor and Hamilton for Florida's sole congressional seat. Elections were scheduled for early May. Hamilton was, of course, the closest associate of Purman, now established as a leading figure among the moderates.

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57. Canter Brown, Jr., *Florida's Black Public Officials*, 7, 10; Jerrell H. Shofner, *Nor is it Over Yet*, 173-4; John Wallace, *Carpetbag Rule in Florida: The Inside Workings of the Reconstruction of Civil Government in Florida After the Close of the Civil War* (Jacksonville, 1888), 69 ("Memorial of Richards-Saunders Team to Congress, March 23, 1868"). Solon Robinson included Hamilton in a list of moderates who were "leading agitators" at the convention. *New York Tribune*, 12 February 1868.

58. Shofner, *Nor is it Over Yet* 185-6; Jerrell H. Shofner, "The Constitution of 1868," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 41 (April 1963), 367-8; *New York Times*, 31 May 1868. Congress felt confident that the powers of patronage conferred on the governor "would be used to secure the state" for the Republicans. *New York Times*, 13 June 1868.



Portrait of Charles M. Hamilton. *Image courtesy of Florida State Archives.*

As a candidate, Hamilton offered a solid record as a Bureau agent, the loyalty of the black population of one of the state's largest counties, an appealing personality, and an "unusually prepossessing" physical presence.<sup>59</sup> In a favorable portrayal, never to be

59. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, 10 March 1868. "[A] tall, florid, blue-eyed youth, with an unsuspecting, pleasing address." Chicago Tribune, 21 April 1871. "In



repeated, the *Weekly Floridian* described Hamilton as “about six feet tall, ‘devilish handsome,’ an admirer says, of splendid intellectual abilities, great nobleness of heart and of accomplished manners.” Poor oratorical skills presented his most glaring weakness as a campaigner.<sup>60</sup>

In early April Congress approved the moderate drafted constitution, and the following month, Florida’s voters endorsed the proposed constitution and the Republican ticket. Reed and Hamilton traveled to Washington at the end of May to urge Congress to complete the readmission process.<sup>61</sup> Florida’s newly reconstituted legislature took the final steps required by Congress for reinstatement when it ratified the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution and selected senators, including Osborn. On June 30, Congressman Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania, leader of the radical Republican faction in Congress, presented Hamilton’s credentials. The next day Hamilton, twenty-seven-years-old, was sworn in as the youngest member of the Fortieth Congress.<sup>62</sup>

Almost immediately upon being seated in Congress, Hamilton threw himself into the controversies of Reconstruction. His first

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urbanity, courtesy and gentlemanly deportment, he had few equals.” Meginness, *Biographical Annals of the West Branch Valley*, 157. In the subsequent fall campaign and throughout the remainder of Hamilton’s public career, however, the *Weekly Floridian* ridiculed him as “Handsome Charley,” Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, 1, 8, 15 December 1868, 21 March 1871, and “Dandy Hamilton,” 16 August 1870.

60. The *Weekly Floridian*, referring to Hamilton’s public speaking, taunted him as “a gas bag” and “Hamilton the gassy.” The Democratic press frequently derided Hamilton’s oratory. Jacksonville *East Floridian*, 12 March 1868 quoted in Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, 17 March 1868. See also, Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, 1, 8, 15 December 1868. Fifteen years after Hamilton left Florida, John Wallace recalled him as “a man of very ordinary capacity” but conceded that Hamilton “possessed courage and will power in a high degree.” According to Wallace, Hamilton was the “cats paw” of Purman who “directed all the operations of the Bureau and put Hamilton forward to do all the dirty or dangerous work.” Wallace, *Carpetbag Rule in Florida*, 107, 112. For analysis of Wallace’s influential but biased book and a historiography of the portrayal of the Florida carpetbaggers, see Clark, “John Wallace and the Writing of Reconstruction History,” 409-27.
61. *New York Times*, 31 May, 5 June 1868. Upon his arrival in Washington, Hamilton wrote to Thaddeus Stevens to defend Reed against charges of political bargaining leveled by the radical faction and to implore the Reconstruction Committee to recognize the moderate-led state legislature. C. M. Hamilton to Thaddeus Stevens, 31 May 1868, Thaddeus Stevens Papers (New York Public Library), microfilm.
62. *Congressional Globe*, 40<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2d sess., 1868, pp. 3614, 3655.

words on the House floor included a resolution from the Florida state constitutional convention that proposed an amendment to the United States Constitution providing for “equal and uniform suffrage in all states.”<sup>63</sup> While being associated with the Florida moderates suggested Hamilton’s complicity with that faction’s plan of precluding black control, such affiliation did not constrain Hamilton from allying himself with the radical Republican leadership in Congress.

Hamilton soon found an opportunity to demonstrate such allegiance. On July 7, Stevens introduced additional articles of impeachment against Andrew Johnson, even though the president had been acquitted by the Senate only two months earlier. At the end of a lengthy address, Stevens moved that further consideration of the subject be postponed for two weeks. Stevens, however, did not raise this issue again in the House. Instead, a few weeks later, Hamilton rose and, after some procedural maneuvering with the assistance of Rep. George Boutwell of Massachusetts, read a long resolution calling for the impeachment of Johnson and reconvening of the House managers from the impeachment trial.<sup>64</sup> The Democratic press may have been correct when it attacked Hamilton as “being anxious to signalize himself on his entrance into the House by reviving the impeachment.”<sup>65</sup> Hamilton had

63. *Globe*, 40<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2d sess., 4253. The first time he raised voice in the House, attempting to offer an amendment to a bill regarding the exclusion of formerly rebellious southern states from the electoral college for the upcoming presidential election, Hamilton was called out of order. *Ibid.*, 3980.

64. *Ibid.*, 3792. Stevens, who had been ill, last spoke in the House on 23 July and died on 11 August 1868. Boutwell, a “staunch radical who had a long record of endorsing universal Negro suffrage,” had chaired the committee appointed to report articles of impeachment and served as a House manager during the Johnson trial. William Gillette, *The Right to Vote: Politics and the Passage of the Fifteenth Amendment* (Baltimore, 1965), 50-1. *Globe*, 40<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2d sess., 3980, 4253, 4473-4. Hamilton’s resolutions attacked Johnson for defying and undermining congress’ constitutional authority to conduct reconstruction. On the day of Hamilton’s speech, President Johnson vetoed a bill to extend the educational endeavors of the Freedmen’s Bureau for an additional year.

65. *New York Express* quoted in *New York World*, 22 September 1868 and *Weekly Floridian*, 20 October 1868. The *Express* article also attacked Hamilton for allegedly collecting \$442 in “travel, pay and subsistence” from Florida to Pennsylvania upon his discharge from the Veteran Reserve Corps. According to the author, Hamilton’s residence was Pennsylvania not Florida and, consequently, he could not both represent Florida in Congress and collect this money. *Ibid.* The press portrayed Hamilton’s impeachment proposal as bumbling and even embarrassing to House Republicans who did not wish to be reminded of the recent impeachment debacle. Boston *Advertiser* quoted in “Old Congressmen Ashamed of the Carpet Baggery,” *Tallahassee Weekly Floridian*, 4 August 1868 and “Well Done, Hamilton,” 25 August 1868.

certainly "signalized" his entrance into the House to men like Stevens and Boutwell, leaders he admired.<sup>66</sup>

Two days after Hamilton's first major address, the second session of the Fortieth Congress adjourned until commencement of the lame duck session in December. Hamilton did not have much time to relax and get accustomed to Washington. Like all members of Congress, he had to win back his seat in the 1868 national elections to join the Forty-first Congress in 1869. Florida's Republican Party re-nominated Hamilton at the November convention in Tallahassee. Florida's legislature had already determined that it would appoint presidential electors and, consequently, the state did not participate in the popular presidential election on November 3. Because Governor Reed had selected December 29 as the date of the congressional election, Hamilton did not know his political fate until several weeks after the President and the rest of the Forty-first Congress had been selected. His Democratic opponent in the election was William D. Barnes from Jackson County. William U. Saunders, a leader of the radical Republican faction also campaigned for Florida's at-large seat, thereby encouraging Democrats who hoped for a split in the Republican Party.<sup>67</sup> Hamilton campaigned with "untiring energy" and easily won re-election with 9,749 votes state-wide, surpassing Barnes' total by more than three thousand votes.<sup>68</sup>

With his electoral triumph behind him, Hamilton resumed the course he had chosen the previous July by taking an active part in the Reconstruction issues before Congress. During the lame duck session, Congress debated proposals ensuring universal male suffrage. The final version of these proposals that became the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution provided that the rights of citizens to vote may not be denied or abridged by

66. Shortly after Hamilton's election to Congress, his father wrote to Stevens that his son "has been an interested and gratified observer of your zeal in congress." John Hamilton to Thaddeus Stevens, May 1868, Thaddeus Stevens Papers.

67. See Peter D. Klingman, *Josiah Walls, Florida's Black Congressman of Reconstruction* (Gainesville, 1976), 25, 32. The *Weekly Floridian* tried to stir up dissension within Republican ranks by repeatedly comparing Hamilton unfavorably with Saunders and claiming that the Republicans had given up any hope of Hamilton's prevailing in the election, Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, 1, 15, 22 December 1868.

68. *New York Tribune*, 25 December 1868; Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, 11 May 1869. Saunders received only 877 votes.



the government on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. Hamilton spoke in support of the joint resolution on January 29, 1869.<sup>69</sup>

In the most eloquent and impassioned speech of his Congressional career, Hamilton invoked an impressive array of sources, ranging from seventeenth-century political thinkers to Lincoln, Stevens, and contemporary poets. He opened by stating he would be more than gratified if the memorial he had presented to Congress the previous July, calling for a constitutional amendment, had any role in encouraging the amendment under consideration. Leaving discussion of the legal authority for the “suffrage amendment” to others, Hamilton spoke about the “justice, right, necessity, and obligation” upon which it was founded. The right of suffrage, derived from “natural rights,” was inalienable as declared in the Declaration of Independence. Yet, “fellow-American citizens” had been “unjustly, illegally” deprived of this right. Congressional Reconstruction had already predicated readmission of southern states on their ensuring black suffrage. Hamilton discerned that the primary effect of the Fifteenth Amendment was the extension of black suffrage to the North. Hamilton declared he would “never rest” until universal suffrage has also been forced on northern states, like his native Pennsylvania, which had disenfranchised “that generous, loyal, noble, patriotic people, black though they be, who during the darkest days of the rebellion never faltered in their devotion to the Union.” In conclusion, Hamilton foresaw the spread of republican government’s “benign, enlightening, Christianizing influence to the furthest ends of the globe, until all men shall freely and fully possess and....enjoy the inalienable endowments of Heaven.”<sup>70</sup>

In early 1869, Hamilton could anticipate a bright future. Only twenty-eight-years-old, he had become identified after only a few months in the House as an outspoken stalwart of the radical faction of the national Republican Party. The Jacksonville *Florida Union* reported that Hamilton had earned “a high reputation” in Congress and “stands foremost among the young men who occupy seats in that honorable body, and especially among the

69. Hamilton endorsed the most radical formulation of the amendment prior to voting for Boutwell’s more pragmatic compromise proposal. Gillette, *The Right to Vote*, 54, 69; *Globe*, 40<sup>th</sup> Cong., 3d sess., 1869, p. 744.

70. Appendix to the *Congressional Globe*, 40<sup>th</sup> Cong., 3d sess., 1869, pp. 100-2.

Representatives from the reconstructed States.”<sup>71</sup> Enconced in Washington and focused on national issues, Hamilton avoided becoming entangled in the bitter internecine battles over state patronage appointments and financial policy tearing apart the Florida Republican Party as Governor Reed parried various configurations of Osborn’s “Ring” set on impeaching him.<sup>72</sup> Although Hamilton, unlike Purman, avoided public confrontation with political rivals, also unlike Purman, he failed to forge lasting alliances that extended beyond Jackson County. Ensuing events revealed that not even Jackson County was a secure base.

Hamilton could avoid Tallahassee’s political warfare, but he could not ignore Jackson County’s real bloodshed. On the night of February 26, walking together after a minstrel performance by the local garrison, John Finlayson was shot dead and Purman was wounded in the neck.<sup>73</sup> Purman survived the ambush but left Jackson County and never resided there again. Hamilton was deeply affected by the shootings. He later described Finlayson as “that brave, noble, valuable friend, whom I loved with an almost holy affection.”<sup>74</sup> Emotions engendered by Finlayson’s murder may have prompted Hamilton and Finlayson’s sister, Martha Mary, to decide to marry a month later at St. Stephen’s Parish in Washington, D.C. Hamilton appeared in early March to be sworn into the Forty-first Congress, but illness soon incapacitated him and he had no further accomplishments during Congress’ first session ending on April 11.<sup>75</sup>

The Jackson County violence also had important political ramifications for Hamilton. The attack on the prominent Republicans, Purman and Finlayson, signaled the beginning of the “Jackson County War” — a two-year period of mayhem. As

71. Jacksonville *Florida Union* quoted in *Tallahassee Sentinel*, 14 May 1870.

72. Hamilton did make occasional forays into Florida’s disputes from the safe distance of Washington. For example, Hamilton wrote to the U. S. Adjutant General’s Office to request the recall of Florida’s Adjutant General, George B. Carse, for interfering with Osborn Ring plans against Governor Reed. Jerrell H. Shofner, “A New Jersey Carpetbagger in Reconstruction Florida,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 52 (January 1974), 290.

73. J. Q. Dickinson, letter to Rutland *Daily Herald*, 15 April 1869. Dickinson missed being a target because he was too ill to attend the show that night.

74. C. M. Hamilton to J. Q. Dickinson, 29 December 1870, Private Collection.

75. C. M. Hamilton, Pension File, National Archives. William Purman married Martha and John Finlayson’s sister Leodora in October 1871. W. J. Purman to Dear James, 28 June 1926, Box 51, P. K. Yonge Library. *Tallahassee Sentinel*, 27 August 1870. Meginness, *Biographical Annals of the West Branch Valley*, 157.

organized white groups resorted to terror to crush black and Republican power, Hamilton's base of political support came under siege. Eventually, at least 166 Jackson County residents, mostly black, were murdered. The insurgency ended in 1871 only after the Marianna "regulators," led by James Coker and Marianna attorney James McClellan, achieved their goal of seizing control of the county government.<sup>76</sup>

Jackson County became infamous as the most violent county in the state. Beginning with the Marianna *Courier* in the fall of 1869, the Democratic press conveniently attributed the carnage to the provocations of Hamilton and Purman. The *Weekly Floridian* echoed this refrain declaring that Hamilton "sowed the seed that is now cropping out in a harvest of blood." Only the Republican *Florida Union* challenged the logic of holding Hamilton and Purman responsible by pointing out that wide-spread violence began only after they had both left the county and that the vast majority of victims were their black Republican allies.<sup>77</sup>

Hamilton's response to the eruption of violence was ambiguous. As the death toll mounted in late September and early October 1869, John Q. Dickinson, Purman's successor as Bureau agent and Hamilton's friend, wrote a series of letters seeking Hamilton's advice and help. There is no record of any response or action on Hamilton's part, even after his own friends were victimized by the violence. Fearing for his life, Fortune fled with his family to Jacksonville. In early October, Samuel Fleishman was expelled from Jackson County for allegedly making a statement encouraging blacks to seek vengeance against local whites and murdered upon his return to Marianna a week later.<sup>78</sup> Hamilton did tell a New York newspaper that he feared he would be killed if he visited Marianna. In late October, he returned to Florida to attend the Florida Republican Convention in Tallahassee where he

76. Shofner, *Jackson County*, 293; *House Report No. 22*, pp. 89, 112-3, 147, 150, 155; *New York Daily Tribune*, 23 October 1869 and *New York Evening Post*, 22 October 1869 identifying Coker as "leader of the mob" and "a wealthy and influential man."

77. Marianna *Courier*, 7 October 1869 quoted in Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, 19 October 1869; Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, 26 October November 2, 1869; Jacksonville *Florida Union*, 14 October 1869.

78. While the troops Dickinson begged for in his letters to Hamilton did arrive in Marianna in late October, it is unclear whether Hamilton took any action to speed their dispatch. *House Report No. 22*, pp. 289-91; Weinfeld, "Samuel Fleishman," 50, 55-7.



was honored and spoke in favor of the imposition of martial law in Jackson County.<sup>79</sup> Shortly after the convention, Reed appointed Hamilton Major General of the Florida state militia.

Hamilton returned to Washington and Purman joined him in December to attend the Colored National Labor Convention. Hamilton, listed as a delegate from Florida, embraced his radical status when addressing an audience composed of African American activists from across the nation. Echoing earlier proposals of Thaddeus Stevens, Hamilton called for the redistribution of large land holdings in the hands of southern whites. These “vast estates” and the willful, malicious refusal of white owners “to dispose of part of them,” formed a “mountainous obstacle” in the way of “the advancement, the prosperity, the liberty of the millions of laborers in the South.” The “land monopoly” was deliberately preserved by whites to serve the dual “purpose of keeping the laborers dependent upon the land-owners not only for employment but for very existence.”<sup>80</sup>

Much of Hamilton’s time in Congress was devoted to proposing bills related to matters expected of a congressman: protecting local agricultural interests, proposing new mail routes, granting land to railroad companies, aiding the development of canals, seeking federal support for various port related improvements, and even removing the political disabilities of certain former Confederates. His efforts to raise tariffs to protect Florida’s nascent citrus industry were successful.<sup>81</sup> Hamilton also continued to address those issues that resonated with him. He spoke in favor of Cuban independence, declaring that America should aid people “throttled by tyranny.”<sup>82</sup> When a vote was taken to re-admit Georgia, Hamilton

79. *New York Journal of Commerce*, 15 October 1869. He “was treated with marked courtesy by the Convention, and his remarks applauded.” *Tallahassee Weekly Floridian*, 2 November 1869.

80. *Proceedings of the Colored National Labor Convention* (Washington, D.C., 1870), 24, 32-3.

81. Florida’s Republican press praised Hamilton for his “energy and perseverance in bringing the claims of Florida before Congress.” Jacksonville *Florida Union* quoted in *Tallahassee Weekly Floridian*, 24 May 1870; *Tallahassee Sentinel*, 27 August 1870, listing Hamilton’s achievements in promoting federally funded improvement projects in Florida and efforts on behalf of the citrus industry. Even the *Weekly Floridian* acknowledged his efforts on behalf of the state, *Tallahassee Weekly Floridian*, 5 July 1870. See also Hamilton’s eloquent, though florid, speech in defense of tariffs to benefit Florida’s orange crop. *Globe*, 41<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2d sess., 1870, pp. 3468-9.

82. *Globe*, 41<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2d sess., 498.

enthusiastically supported the bill for upholding the friends of the national government in the South, who had been struggling “against the revived rebellion, more hostile, bitter, and relentless than the first.”<sup>83</sup> His work on the District of Columbia committee once again allowed Hamilton to assume the role of defender of African American interests. When debate over a bill to provide aid to indigent blacks in the District degenerated into racially biased rhetoric, Hamilton insisted that because the “summer of their lives was spent in the compulsory service of others, else they had laid up support against this day of want,” the federal government was obliged to provide for impoverished freedmen.<sup>84</sup>

While Hamilton reinvested himself in his Congressional duties, events that sealed his political fate were set in motion. Senator Osborn’s brother, Rev. Abraham C. Osborn of Brooklyn, New York, had proposed building a rail line from the Georgia border down the length of the Florida peninsula. The Osborns recruited nearly all of Florida’s Republican leaders in the scheme, listing them as stockholders in the Great Southern Railway Company’s documents. Purman assigned some of his shares to Hamilton.<sup>85</sup> In January 1870, Senator Osborn introduced Senate bill 438 to grant federal lands along the railroad’s proposed route to the company. Once granted, the lands could then be mortgaged and bonds issued, thereby raising money before any track was laid. Senator Osborn struggled to get his land grant bill through the Senate where he was challenged for “giving away all the lands to railroads.”<sup>86</sup>

By early 1870, the Osborns realized that despite his financial interests in the company’s success, Hamilton was not going to support the land grant bill in the House.<sup>87</sup> The reasons for

83. Appendix to the *Congressional Globe*, 41<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2d sess., 541-2.

84. *Globe*, 41<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2d sess., 986. Meginness wrote that Hamilton “took a special interest in every measure relating to the welfare of the colored race.” Meginness, *Biographical Annals of the West Branch Valley*, 157.

85. Washington *Capital*, April 9, 1871.

86. Osborn persisted, admitting he was “very anxious that it should be passed,” but did not mention on the Senate floor his personal stake in the company. *Globe*, 41<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2d sess., 4307, 4448-9; A. C. Osborn to C. M. Hamilton, 14 February 1870 quoted in Washington *Capital*, 9 April 1871.

87. A. C. Osborn to C. M. Hamilton, 14 February 1870 quoted in Washington *Capital*, 9 April 1871; E. M. Cheney to C. M. Hamilton, 24 January 1870, Records of the Attorney General’s Office, Letters Received from Florida, RG 60, NARA, confirming that Hamilton and Purman had broken with Osborn and embraced Reed by the beginning of 1870. See Shofner, *Nor is it Over Yet*, 211.

Hamilton's opposition are subject to speculation. Perhaps more concerned about being re-nominated for Congress than with any profit to be gained by Osborn's dubious venture, Hamilton may have calculated that he had little to lose, and even something to gain, by antagonizing Osborn and allying with Osborn's enemy, Governor Reed, who was purportedly popular with black voters. Reed and Osborn were then in the midst of a brutal battle centering on various railroad interests seeking state support.<sup>88</sup> Hamilton needed the support of black delegates to be nominated for Congress at Florida's Republican Party at its August 1870 convention. Black Republicans, however, frustrated by the Osborn-led moderates' refusal to appoint blacks to prominent positions, were discussing putting forth a black candidate to contest Hamilton's seat. Despite his radical rhetoric in Washington, Hamilton probably recognized that he could not take black support outside of Jackson County for granted. Hamilton may have seen an alliance with Reed as a means of shoring up black support.<sup>89</sup>

Hamilton also probably opposed Osborn's scheme for ethical reasons. Hamilton had a reputation for "integrity and incorruptibility" that even his antagonists in the Democratic press conceded to be unassailable.<sup>90</sup> He may have been the only prominent figure in Florida Reconstruction politics who could claim such an impeccable reputation. Examination of his writings and record does not uncover any evidence to challenge this image. Hamilton later publicly deemed the Great Southern affair a swindle and was undoubtedly correct.

Concerned by the lack of support from Hamilton in Congress and Purman in the Florida Senate and their influence

88. For financial dealings and disputes between Reed and Osborn and corruption allegations, see Peter Klingman, *Neither Dies nor Surrenders: A History of the Republican Party in Florida, 1867-1970*, (Gainesville, 1984), 30-1, 39-40, and Brown, "Carpetbagger Intrigues, Black Leadership, and a Southern Loyalist Triumph," 279, 282-3. For the vagaries of Reed's relationship with black Republicans, see, Brown, *Florida's Black Public Officials*, 16-20.

89. The alliance with Reed was presaged by Hamilton's dining with the governor in New York City during the previous summer. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, 21 August 1869.

90. *Tallahassee Sentinel*, 27 August 1870; Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, 18 April 1871; Ocala *Banner* quoted in Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, 7 May 1871. According to the Jacksonville *Union*, Hamilton's course has not "pleased the selfish and scheming politicians whose only end is personal gain," quoted in *Tallahassee Sentinel*, 25 March 1871.



over Governor Reed, the Osborns lobbied on behalf of their railroad venture. When Purman proposed changing the railroad's state charter, the Osborns were delighted by the apparent willingness of Purman and Hamilton to strike a deal. With Hamilton and Purman's support, and the generous distribution of stock to various Florida politicians, the Osborns believed they could prevail over any opposition from Reed. In fact, Purman introduced a bill incorporating the company in the Florida senate in February. A. C. Osborn offered to give Hamilton shares equivalent to Senator Osborn's interest and to place him on the company's Board of Directors. As indicated by A. C. Osborn's repetition of this offer in May, Hamilton did not accept these entreaties.<sup>91</sup>

The U.S. Senate passed the land grant bill and sent it to the House on June 15, 1870. As Congress drew closer to a five-month recess to begin in July, the bill languished without the endorsement of Florida's sole congressman. At the end of June, A. C. Osborn threatened that if Hamilton did not support the bill, the Osborns would ensure that he would not be re-nominated at the August convention. A. C. Osborn advised Hamilton that the friends of the Great Southern would "unite with the colored vote and put forward a colored man, or any available man to defeat you." Osborn reminded Hamilton of his financial interest in the venture and of the Osborns' offer to re-adjust federal patronage to his satisfaction, push through the Senate any measure he might approve, and hire Hamilton as attorney for the Great Southern "at a salary you name." Furthermore, Osborn promised, should Hamilton support the bill, the Great Southern would "give its influence in your favor, both in the convention and in the canvass." After the bill was blocked in the House at the end of June, Morris H. Alberger, Great Southern's secretary and lobbyist, visited Hamilton at his residence and offered him twenty thousand dollars. Hamilton refused this bribe and the

91. M.L. Stearns, speaker of Florida's House of Assembly and future governor, was entrusted by the Osborns with distributing company shares at his discretion to ease passage of state legislation in support of the company. *Washington Capital*, 9 April 1871. Hamilton and Purman, as well as Reed, Walls, Senator Osborn and A. C. Osborn, were listed as incorporators in the Florida legislation. *Tallahassee Weekly Floridian*, 18 April 1871. Hamilton, however, wrote to the Jacksonville *Florida Union* that his name had been included as an incorporator on a number of railroad and other charter companies without his authority. *Tallahassee Sentinel*, 14 May 1870.

bill was defeated once more in the House before the close of the second session on July 15.<sup>92</sup>

At the end of July, Hamilton returned to Florida for the nominating convention and the inevitable showdown with the Osborns. Before traveling to Gainesville, however, Hamilton and Purman narrowly avoided tragedy in Marianna. Their first appearance in Jackson County since Purman's shooting a year-and-a-half earlier was aimed at rallying Republicans and organizing delegates prior to the upcoming convention.<sup>93</sup> African American politician and Congressional aspirant J. C. Gibbs traveled to Marianna at the same time to challenge Hamilton's hold over black voters. Hamilton and Purman's appearance in Marianna "produced quite a consternation at once" among their white former neighbors. The two men learned of a planned assault on the house where they were staying but paid little attention to such threats until, the next morning, they found their guard dogs poisoned. They stayed on for another day or two despite the ominous signs and unenthusiastic reception at a political rally they cut short. They then learned that the roads leading out of Marianna had been blocked by armed men. Realizing their desperate situation, they convened a meeting of some older, prominent citizens of the county. After negotiations, ten Marianna men agreed to accompany Hamilton and Purman "in the form of hostages, and as an escort out of the county." The delegation of Marianna men led them over an unfrequented road to Bainbridge, Georgia, where Hamilton and Purman treated their escort to champagne to express their appreciation.<sup>94</sup>

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92. Washington *Capital*, 9 April 1871. A. C. Osborn pointed out that Hamilton had also made enemies by standing in the way of the Jacksonville, Pensacola & Mobile Railroad. The J.P.& M. Railroad was a central component of the Swebson-Littlefield fraud. The plans for the Great Southern, including obtaining state subsidies, seemed to have been modeled on the J.P.& M. Railroad. See Paul E. Fenlon, "The Notorious Swebson-Littlefield Fraud: Railroad Financing in Florida, 1868-1871," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 32 (April 1954), 232-62.

93. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, 16 August 1870.

94. The Marianna *Courier* decried the cooperation of the escort as "humbling beggary, such degrading action, such humiliating resorts." House *Report No.* 22, pp. 145-6, 152, 194. The *Courier* and *Weekly Floridian* claimed that Hamilton and Purman exaggerated the threats which, in any event, justifiably ensued from their provocations. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, 16 August, 6 September 1870, 18 April 1871.

Although trapped in Marianna for several more days than anticipated, Hamilton and Purman arrived in Gainesville in time for the mid-August convention. As the proceedings began, Osborn Ring delegates confirmed that they were determined to defeat Hamilton. In the convention's first ballot for the Republican nominee for Congress, Hamilton received eighteen votes, having retained the support of Purman and his followers, including the Jackson County delegation, despite J. C. Gibbs' efforts in Marianna. Hamilton, however, was far short of the fifty votes necessary for the nomination. The Osborn group organized behind Robert Meacham, a black politician from Leon County. Gibbs and other black delegates, including Josiah Walls from Alachua County, also received votes. Gibbs later confirmed that "the colored men of this State have fully determined to send a colored man to Congress, believing it would strengthen the Republican Party here & in Washington, was an act of justice to our race & a strong pledge for the future." Hamilton's opponents, however, had not yet settled upon any particular candidate to replace him.<sup>95</sup>

On the tenth ballot, Hamilton held his ground while Osborn's faction pushed Meacham within two votes of the nomination. At the same time, however, the black delegates not affiliated with either the Osborn or Hamilton-Purman camps began to coalesce behind Walls. The expected chicanery ensued with both Purman and Osborn accused of improper conduct. As the support behind Walls grew, many of Hamilton's supporters switched over and Walls prevailed on the next ballot. Congratulating Walls, Hamilton told the convention "that though he might be disappointed, he was not disheartened." He called on the party to support the new nominee and said he "had the least possible reason to regret his own defeat." Purman, too, pledged his support to Walls. Osborn had wrecked his vengeance and the black delegates had achieved their goal. Hamilton now faced nearly seven months as a lame duck in the House.<sup>96</sup>

95. Hamilton also enjoyed the endorsement of embattled Governor Reed, which confirmed their alliance but had no practical benefit on the convention floor. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, 23 August 1870; J. C. Gibbs to Charles Sumner, 24 August 1870, Charles Sumner Papers, Reel 51, #415, microfilm, (Columbia University Butler Library).

96. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, 23 August 1870; *Tallahassee Sentinel*, 20 August 1870.



Historians writing about the 1870 Gainesville convention have attributed Hamilton's defeat to the moderate Republican leadership's acquiescence to the demands of their black electorate to send a black candidate to Congress. The party leadership, they inferred, threatened by growing Democrat strength, recognized that the black voting base had to be rewarded if Republicans were to maintain their hold over state government.<sup>97</sup> This analysis relied on contemporary newspapers which promoted this interpretation. John Wallace came to the same conclusion and erroneously asserted that the black delegates had triumphed despite the fact that "the Osborn Ring strove hard to re-nominate Charles Hamilton."<sup>98</sup>

This traditional interpretation of the Gainesville convention fails, however, to take into consideration A. C. Osborn's letters, published nearly a year after the convention. Undoubtedly, had Hamilton guided the Great Southern bill through the House, the Osborn Ring would have joined forces with Purman and his followers at the convention to ensure Hamilton's re-nomination. Even with the moderates divided, Osborn still was able to summon 48 of the 50 necessary ballots for the relatively obscure Meacham. Those delegates who were determined to put forth a black candidate adeptly exploited the fatal break between the Osborn and Hamilton-Purman camps, both of which eventually collapsed in the face of stalemate and conceded the nomination to Walls. Hamilton's split with Osborn over the Great Southern, and not new-found sensitivity of the moderates to black political aspirations, was the deciding factor behind Hamilton's failure to be re-nominated.

After the convention debacle, Hamilton returned to Washington. When the third, and final, session of the Forty-first Congress convened on December 6, he resumed the level of legislative activity he had established in the first half of the year. During his last three months in the House, he continued to propose bills and present petitions for internal improvement to benefit Florida. In December he rose to denounce a bill offering amnesty to "all persons engaged" in the war of rebellion. Hamilton's time in Congress had not softened his stance toward

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97. Klingman, *Josiah Walls*, 32, 35; Klingman, *Neither Dies nor Surrenders*, 41; Richardson, *The Negro in Reconstruction Florida*, 178; Canter Brown, Jr., "Where are the hopes I cherished" – The Life and Times of Robert Meacham," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 69 (July 1990), 16.

98. *Tallahassee Sentinel*, 20 August 1870; *Tallahassee Weekly Floridian*, 23 August 1870; Wallace, *Carpetbag Rule in Florida*, 126.

former Confederates. Drawing upon “an observation and an experience of ten years in the South,” Hamilton argued against amnesty for “that rebellious, vindictive, impenitent and blood-thirsty class.” Forgiveness had a “baneful effect” on both Congressional legislation toward the South and the Reconstruction state governments. Hamilton concluded that “while it becomes a great and victorious nation to be generous, it behooves it far more to be just.”<sup>99</sup>

During his lame duck months, Hamilton took time to reflect on his experience in Jackson County. Hamilton’s ambivalence about the two years he lived in Marianna was captured in his December 1870 letter to J. Q. Dickinson. Hamilton recalled “people there whom I love almost as a father loves his children” and “all the good friends who comforted me, a stranger in a strange land.” He asked “[w]ho can tell what thoughts, what feelings, the name ‘Marianna’ excites within me. I cannot describe them.” He could not determine, however, “whether the emotion partakes more of the pleasant or unpleasant.”<sup>100</sup>

On March 3, Hamilton delivered his last speech in Congress when he attacked the minority report from his Committee on Education and Labor’s investigation of corruption allegations against General Howard. Hamilton decried the partisan agenda of those Congressmen who had turned the investigation into a prosecution and defended his former superior officer. He also objected once more to the Great Southern bill, which had been raised in the House again, killing it finally for the Forty-first Congress. On March 4, after Speaker James Blaine thanked his colleagues in the House for their service, Hamilton’s congressional career ended.<sup>101</sup> Hamilton’s thwarting Osborn proved pyrrhic when Josiah Walls re-introduced the Great Southern assistance bill upon his debut in the House in mid-March shortly after the Forty-second Congress convened.<sup>102</sup>

99. *Globe*, 41<sup>st</sup> Cong., 3d sess., 1870, p. 208. The *Weekly Floridian* responded to Hamilton’s speech with a vicious attack, wishing him “God speed to Alaska.” Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, 27 December 1870. With respect to Hamilton’s opposition to the amnesty proposal, the *Weekly Floridian* later wrote described him as “a notorious malignant incapable of any feeling except of bitter hatred against the Conservative people of this State.” Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, 18 April 1871.

100. C. M. Hamilton to J. Q. Dickinson, 29 December 1870, Private Collection.

101. Appendix to the *Congressional Globe*, 41<sup>st</sup> Cong., 3d sess., 1871, p. 236-37.

102. H.R. 130, 42<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1871. Osborn re-introduced the bill in the Senate on March 7, almost immediately after the Forty-second Congress was

During the winter of 1871, Hamilton began to plan his post-congressional life. His name had been mentioned in connection with a judicial appointment. He also let it become known that he was particularly interested in serving as the United States Marshal for the Northern District of Florida. Any federal government patronage position, however, would have to receive Senator Osborn's approval.

Aware that Hamilton possessed damaging information regarding the Great Southern venture, the Osborns were determined to prevent Hamilton's appointment as the leading federal law enforcement official in Florida. Within a week of Hamilton's departure from Congress, President Grant submitted his nomination as United States Marshal to the Senate for confirmation. From Brooklyn, A. C. Osborn urged Alberger to lobby against the appointment. Osborn prepared an affidavit in which he alleged that Hamilton had privately met with him in February and had offered to wield his influence on behalf of the Great Southern land grant bill in exchange for Great Southern stock, employment as Great Southern's attorney at an annual salary of \$5,000, and confirmation as United States Marshal. Osborn averred that he had rejected such demands. On the same day in March that Hamilton's nomination was referred by the Senate to the Judiciary Committee, Alberger sent Senator Osborn a copy of A. C. Osborn's letter and affidavit and urged the Senator to protest Hamilton's appointment.<sup>103</sup> Alberger or Senator Osborn filed the affidavit with the Attorney General's office. President Grant withdrew Hamilton's name in favor of Sherman Conant, an Osborn ally, who was confirmed as Marshal shortly thereafter.

Frozen out of federal patronage and his reputation besmirched by the Osborns, Hamilton counterattacked in the April 9, 1871, edition of Washington's new newspaper, *The Capital*. Hamilton rejected A. C. Osborn's accusation of influence peddling and instead asserted that the Osborns and Alberger had repeatedly "lobbied, annoyed, promised, threatened" and offered bribes to

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seated. Walls' biographer, Peter Klingman, found it "incredible that Walls should not have known" that the Great Southern bill was a "fraud." Klingman, *Josiah Walls*, 82.

103. Washington *Capital*, April 9, 1871. Alberger described Hamilton's proposed appointment as "an insult and outrage" to the Florida Republican Party. M. H. Alberger to T. W. Osborn, March 10, 1871 quoted in *Globe*, 42<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1871, p. 711.



secure his cooperation in passing the Great Southern bill during his term in Congress. Hamilton convincingly supported his argument by appending three devastating letters he had received from A. C. Osborn in 1870.<sup>104</sup>

Senator Osborn jumped into the fray to assail Hamilton. Taking the Senate floor to “make an explanation,” Osborn read various letters into the record including statements prepared by Alberger rejecting Hamilton’s claims and alleging that Hamilton was frustrated because his attempt at gaining control of the company had failed. Senator Osborn dismissed his brother’s letter, in which he threatened to throw the Gainesville convention to another nominee unless Hamilton supported the bill, as a “political letter” and ignored other damaging documents altogether. Comparison between the Congressional record and the Washington *Capital* account clearly shows that Osborn had edited the letters he presented to the Senate, excising damaging information.<sup>105</sup>

With Osborn’s public response, the national press took notice of the affair. *The Capital* editorialized that the Osborns were “candidates for the penitentiary” and printed a letter from Hamilton daring Senator Osborn to convene an investigation. The *New York Times* and *New York Tribune* covered Osborn’s rebuttal without scrutiny, leaving the Senator with the final word in the dispute. The *Nation* magazine, however, sympathized with Hamilton, accepting his account of the matter. Thoroughly enjoying the embarrassment of the Florida Republican Party, the *Weekly Floridian* printed all the key documents, analyzed the issues and even published a farcical, mock interview with Hamilton with a fictional rejoinder from Osborn. Ironically, the *Weekly Floridian*, Hamilton’s long-time antagonist, was his strongest defender, deftly dissecting and parrying the Osborns’

104. Washington *Capital*, 9 April 1871. The *Tallahassee Sentinel* reprinted the entire lengthy *Capital* article on its first page on 15 April and the *Weekly Floridian* followed suit on 18 April 1871. Hamilton also sent a personal note to A. C. Osborn in which, at least in the sentence excerpted by Osborn, he seemed to concede by implication the substance of Osborn’s allegation regarding their private meeting in February. Hamilton wrote that he had never “seriously” offered his influence or services on behalf of the bill and “pitied” Osborn’s “simplicity” for believing otherwise.

105. *Globe*, 42nd Cong., 1st sess., 710-11. Osborn pounced upon Hamilton’s “seriously” language as an admission. *Ibid.*

attacks and praising Hamilton's character. After this initial flurry of interest, however, even *The Capital* and the *Weekly Floridian* dropped the story.<sup>106</sup>

Hamilton remained in Washington and advertised the opening of the law firm of Hamilton & Purman, devoted to prosecuting claims arising from war-related losses brought by loyal southerners before the Southern Claims Commission. Perhaps in need of funds, he filed for a government pension based on his war injuries. During the summer, he finally received a patronage position when President Grant appointed him postmaster at Jacksonville to fill a vacancy through the remainder of the year. In August, Hamilton returned to Florida.<sup>107</sup>

The House Joint Select Committee investigating the violence sweeping the South and the role of the Ku Klux Klan convened in Jacksonville in November 1871. Hamilton, one of the last witnesses scheduled to appear in Florida, was subjected to rigorous questioning about his conduct as Jackson County's Bureau assistant sub-commissioner. He responded to allegations regarding his management of contracts between planters and laborers and certain incidents notorious among the white population. Hamilton came prepared with excerpts from the *Marianna Courier* to illustrate the outrageousness of conservative white opinion. Appearing in the shadow of two years of violence in Jackson County, he defended himself against the accusations that

106. The *Weekly Floridian* conceded that "amid all the rascally plundering which has characterized carpet bag rule in this State, there has been no proof of complicity on the part of Hamilton therein." Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, 18 April 1871; Washington *Capital*, 16 and 23 April 1871; *New York Times*, 15 and 18 April 1871; *New York Tribune*, 17 April 1871; *The Nation*, 20 April 1871; Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, 25 April, 9 May 1871. The Tallahassee *Sentinel* turned Against Hamilton for the first time in the wake of his exposure of the scandal, Accepting the Osborns' rebuttal without question and even editorializing in their defense. *Tallahassee Sentinel*, 22 April, 6 May 1871. The reporting of the Great Southern scandal coincided with extensive coverage in the Florida press of the assassination of J.Q. Dickinson in Marianna on 3 April 1871.

107. Washington *Capital*, 16 July, 13 August 1871. Charles M. Hamilton, Military Pension File, National Archives. The Tallahassee newspapers speculated that Hamilton was being dispatched to Florida as an agent of the Grant administration to watch over Osborn and his allies. Osborn had broken with Grant, supporting Ben Butler's bid for the Republican national nomination. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, 8 August 1871.

he had provoked the bloodshed.<sup>108</sup> He bitterly told the committee that “the people of the South, have been so perverted by the institution of slavery, and the teachings of their leaders, that as a general thing, they lack many of the finer sensibilities that belong to honorable manhood.” After nearly six frustrating years of confrontation with white recalcitrance, Hamilton admitted that “we have failed to accomplish anything by appealing to their reason.” The only way to achieve peace was to take “a pretty vigorous hold” and repress “this spirit of rebellion, which, since the war, has become intensified ten times over what it was during the war.”<sup>109</sup>

With Osborn still seated in the Senate, Hamilton’s reappointment as Jacksonville postmaster for 1872 was quashed.<sup>110</sup> Purman’s election in November to the Forty-third Congress to convene in March 1873, however, gave Hamilton a chance at political redemption and he took the initiative of applying to fill various vacancies. Visiting Washington in the fall 1872 for medical treatment, Hamilton twice asked President Grant to name him Customs Collector in Key West.<sup>111</sup> Fortunately, Florida’s Republican Party nominated Simon Conover, a

108. The Committee had already heard the claim of Leon County planter John Williams that Hamilton and Purman had provoked the violence. Williams alleged that Hamilton’s abrogation of the contracts “started all the trouble in that county.” *House Report No. 22*, p. 232, 237. Hamilton believed that such accusations impeded his post-Congressional career, culminating in the Florida Senate’s failure to confirm him as Clerk of the Circuit Court in early 1872. In his application to President Grant for Customs Collector in late 1872, Hamilton stressed that during his time in Jackson County “there was not a single outrage perpetrated.” C. M. Hamilton to President Grant, 3 December 1872, Applications for Appointments as Customs Service Officers, RG 56, NARA. Writing fifteen years after Hamilton left Florida, John Wallace held Hamilton and Purman entirely responsible for the violence that engulfed Jackson County. Wallace, *Carpetbag Rule in Florida*, 111.

109. *House Report No. 22*, pp. 281-9.

110. The Florida delegation in Washington, including Walls, opposed Hamilton’s confirmation. One senator declared that in light of Hamilton’s accusations against Osborn, Hamilton’s confirmation would require Osborn’s removal from the Senate. In a preliminary vote, Hamilton received the support of all the Democrats in the Senate but only two or three Republicans, who constituted a two-thirds majority in the chamber. *New York Tribune* quoted in *Tallahassee Sentinel*, 10 February 1872.

111. Hamilton had learned that Grant was considering removing Sherman Conant as Marshal and applied for that position, but Grant ultimately decided not to make the change. John Y. Simon, ed., *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* (Carbondale, IL, 1967), 23:260 and 24:96-97. Hamilton had been undergoing “rigorous medical treatment” for a severe cough and “acute inflammation of



Purman ally, for Osborn's Senate seat in February 1873, thereby finally breaking the Osborn Ring. Within a week of Osborn's defeat, Hamilton was confirmed by the Senate as Customs Collector. Further vindication came with news of the arrest of Morris Alberger in connection with an election-related robbery at the Jacksonville post office. Hamilton's rehabilitation, however, was short lived. By August 1873, his health had deteriorated so drastically that he resigned his post at Key West and returned to his Pennsylvania birthplace. He lived under his father's care until his death on October 22, 1875, shortly before his thirty-fifth birthday.<sup>112</sup>

Hamilton's career in Florida reflects the struggles of the first years of the Reconstruction period. As Congress battled President Johnson for control of Reconstruction policy, freed slaves, former rebels, carpetbaggers and their local allies contended in the towns and rural areas over the future of the South. Embattled Bureau agents like Hamilton staved off former rebels who sought to restore the ante-bellum social order. When the states prepared for readmission to the Union, Bureau veterans provided a source of leadership for the emerging state Republican parties with their largely freedman constituency.

Hamilton, however, stood out from other Florida carpetbaggers. His background, experience in the war, and observation of the plight of freedmen in Marianna led him to champion the rights of African Americans in his district. As a Bureau agent, he persevered in his struggle on behalf of the freedmen despite the

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the throat" contracted years earlier. His physician had "recommended a mild climate to effect a cure." Hamilton insisted, however, that he sought the post not solely for "personal consideration," but because it would place him "in a position where much good may be done for the State, the Customs Department... and the party of the Union." C. M. Hamilton to President Grant, 3 December 1872, RG 56, NARA. Purman's election allowed him to reciprocate for the federal appointment as Florida's tax assessor he had received during Hamilton's term in Congress.

112. Hamilton "could not conceive" the basis of rumors that he was to be removed from the Key West Customs post and stressed his commitment to the Customs post and to organizing the Republican Party in south Florida. C. M. Hamilton to U. S. Grant, 16 June 1873, Applications for Appointments, RG 56, NARA. He resigned his post two months later. Martha Hamilton never remarried and lived the remainder of her long life with her sister's family as a beloved member of the Purman household. "Aunt Mattie" moved with the family to Boston and then to Washington, D.C. where Leodora and William Purman and their six children settled permanently. Martha Finlayson died in 1922. Charles M. Hamilton Pension File. Purman died aged 88 in 1928.

hostility of southern whites, and he was rewarded with the loyalty of Jackson County's black citizens. As a congressman he continued to promote his principles by allying with the Radical Republicans, despite little support from Florida's moderate Republicans and, eventually, challenges from Florida's black political leadership. His ideological development culminated in his passionate speech in support of the Fifteenth Amendment.

Hamilton's adherence to principle and political naiveté undermined a promising career and precipitated his fall from prominence in Florida. He could not possibly satisfy Florida's moderate Republicans, black radicals, financial speculators and white southerners, all of whom eventually turned against him. Shortly after meeting him, a *Chicago Tribune* reporter described Hamilton as "a fine type of an impulsive Northern young man, too independent to be pulled into rings, and yet not discreet enough to take care of his own interests." The reporter concluded that Hamilton possessed "more courage than discretion."<sup>113</sup> Regrettably, John Wallace's dismissive treatment of Hamilton in his political history of Florida during Reconstruction consigned Hamilton to historical oblivion. Idealistic and incorruptible, Hamilton, nevertheless, established a legacy of courageous struggle on behalf of the Union and its newly freed citizens worthy of reexamination and admiration.

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113. *Chicago Tribune*, 21 April 1871.