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The Strange Tale of Wesley and Florence Garrison: Racial Crosscurrents of the Postwar Florida Republican Party

by Michael D. Bowen

For the first two thirds of the 20th Century, the Republican Party of Florida had a well-deserved reputation for being quiet, weak, and ineffectual. The Democratic Party dominated electoral politics so completely that some counties in the panhandle and north central Florida prided themselves on having no registered Republicans. Yet at the 1952 state Republican convention, held in the sleepy college town of Gainesville, the participants acted as if their meeting mattered. A group of upstarts led by Miami real estate developers Wesley and Florence Garrison, a couple some regarded as reformers and some regarded as rabble-rousers, commandeered the front row of seating and refused to allow the state executive committee to take their positions on stage. After the Alachua County sheriff restored order, the Garrisons and their supporters made their presence known by repeatedly interrupting the opening roll call with chants of “contest” and “communist,” and slamming their chair legs loudly against the tile floor. At issue was the party’s decision to abandon the primary election and select its delegates to the Republican national convention without participation from rank and file party

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members, a choice the Garrisons vehemently opposed. Despite the repeated distractions, however, the state party went on with its agenda and appointed a delegate slate that excluded the Garrisons and their allies.

The 1952 convention was just one incident in the strange tale of Wesley and Florence Garrison and was the midpoint in a decade-long struggle pitting the Garrisons and their south Florida supporters against the established Republican leadership. The Garrisons are rarely discussed in Florida history, but their checkered political careers reveal three specific trends that illustrate the fluctuating nature of postwar America's political and demographic landscape. First, the couple confronted the changing racial dynamic. The Garrisons, who were white, based their party-building efforts in Miami's African-American community at a time when both parties were struggling to cope with an emerging civil rights consciousness. This placed the Garrisons at the forefront of local activism and put them on a collision course with the racially exclusionist practices of the Florida Republican Party. Second, the Garrisons operated at a time when migration from the North was applying pressure to the traditionally Democratic and rural political institutions of the Sunshine State. Their grassroots mobilization of the African-American community was part of a broader struggle to expand the Florida GOP beyond its limited base and unseat its narrowly focused and uninterested leadership. Third, The Garrisons took sides in a factional dispute between candidates at the national level in which two organizations engaged in heated contests for their party's presidential nomination and, in the process, became embroiled in numerous state and local matters. The Garrisons framed their own local battles as part of this larger factional struggle and, at times, played significant roles in the national party. From 1944 through 1956, these three issues combined to dictate the fate of the Republican Party in Florida. The Garrisons' actions reveal much about the complex and often interconnected political networks that shaped Florida, the South, and the nation, as well as the racial tension that permeated all aspects of American politics in the postwar period.

Florence and Wesley Garrison moved to Florida from the Midwest in the early 1930s and began organizing for the Republican Party shortly thereafter, probably around 1934.¹ The

1. Very little is known about Florence and Wesley Garrison's background and early life. Though the couple made their mark on Miami's African-American

Garrisons had a significant amount of wealth which they used to leverage control of the Dade County GOP. By 1944, Wesley Garrison funded most of the local Republican budget and was entrenched as the most powerful party member in Miami, serving on the state committee and as a delegate to the Republican national convention.² Garrison earned his living as Miami's first "blockbuster," the commonly accepted term for a real estate developer who purchases homes in white or transitional neighborhoods and sells them to African Americans, usually at substantial profit. In the 1940s Wesley Garrison operated in the Brownsville neighborhood and his brokering of existing single-family homes and the construction of several apartment buildings turned it from majority white to majority African American by the end of the decade. With the help of elites in the African American religious and business communities, he had no trouble finding tenants and buyers. Garrison's actions drew the ire of other Miami realtors, the Dade County Commission, and the Ku Klux Klan, which burned crosses and harassed black residents in Brownsville. Garrison defended his tenants and financed a legal challenge for fair housing that went all the way to the Florida Supreme Court, which overturned Dade County's racially restrictive zoning ordinance. For his actions, African Americans in Miami regarded him favorably.³

Of course, the process of racial transition was never as cut and dried as its boosters indicated. As Raymond Mohl has pointed out, Miami's demographic changes occurred because African Americans sought new and better housing and a number of real estate developers, including the Garrisons, were willing to sell it to them. This did not mean that the Garrisons were advancing integration, but rather expanding the boundaries of the black neighborhoods. Over the past three decades, numerous historians have explored the block-busting phenomenon in other major metropolitan areas. Most stud-

community and more generally on the state Republican Party, they left no archival records. What is known has been garnered mostly from newspapers accounts and field reports to the presidential candidates.

2. Paul Walter, Letter to Robert A. Taft, 17 July 1947, Copy in Folder (1948 Campaign—Florida—I-L), Box 176, Robert A. Taft Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress, Washington, DC [Hereafter cited as Taft Papers.]
3. Raymond A. Mohl, "Making the Second Ghetto in Metropolitan Miami, 1940-1960," *Journal of Urban History* 21 (March 1995): 410-3.

ies reveal that black expansion into white neighborhoods created an atmosphere of tension that sparked white flight and helped pave the way for a more conservative bent in American politics.⁴ While white flight certainly happened in Miami, the context was different with Garrison as he attempted to employ his tenants and customers in his effort to advance a conservative, anti-New Deal brand of Republicanism. The Garrison's blockbusting practice generated what had to be a sizable profit, but the couple certainly seemed committed to bi-racial politics and the welfare of the African-American community beyond their real estate practices.

In 1944, Wesley Garrison was the top ranking Republican in Miami and his presence in the black community added a unique racial dimension to his public perception. Though Garrison claimed credit for building the Dade County GOP from the ground up, the exact number of members he recruited and their racial identification are uncertain, though anecdotally it appears that most of his following came from the African-American community. Even though the Florida Republican Party was nominally bi-racial, African Americans were often shuttled into auxiliary groups and barred from state conventions due to racism and the prevalence of segregated facilities. In 1944, for example, a group of black women in Orlando organized a Republican club but, because of racial restrictions, were not allowed to affiliate with the statewide organization of Republican women. The National Federation of Republican Women, though, regularly allowed African American clubs to affiliate directly to the national organization, meaning that the Orlando group had standing at the national level but none within their own state.⁵ Despite such backward

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4. See Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Arnold R. Hirsch and Raymond Mohl, eds., *Urban Policy in Twentieth Century America* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993); Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality of Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).
 5. Jane Hamilton, Letter to Marie Gramm, 11 April 1944, Copy in Folder (Florida—affiliated), Box 3, Files of National Federation of Republican Women, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas. [Hereafter cited as NFRW Papers.]

practices, the GOP had a sizable black element in the urban areas of Jacksonville, Orlando, Tampa, and Miami. Garrison's familiarity and working relationship with the black upper class in Miami and his status as a defender of civil rights gave him cachet with these communities and a base of support throughout the state. His financial status and his willingness to donate funds and time to the organization allowed him to bridge the gap between the white and black members of the party, even though Republican leaders from other parts of the state often criticized him for organizing African Americans.

The Garrisons' ties with the African-American community meant that their relationship with the entrenched state leadership was at times tenuous, but their most fundamental disagreement arose over party governance, not race. The Garrisons loathed the county-unit system, the preferred method of political control that both parties utilized throughout the South. Under Florida election laws, the state executive committee included one man and one woman from each county even though a number of counties had fewer than ten Republicans. In 1945 Dade County, for example, had 9,364 registered Republicans while Lafayette County had only one. Yet, when conducting party business, Dade and Lafayette were equally represented. Even counties with no registered Republicans received a vote, a curious circumstance that usually resulted in a member of the leadership exercising a proxy vote on behalf of the particular county. State committee members from the north central region, like their "porkchopper" colleagues on the Democratic side, usually pooled their votes to gain control of the party machinery and make decisions that served their own interests to the detriment of the more populous counties in the southern region. Throughout most of the late 1940s and early 1950s, G. Harold Alexander, a state Republican committee member and later state chairman from Ft. Myers, and C. C. Spades, the Republican National Committee (RNC) member from St. Augustine, held the proxy votes of between ten and twenty of the rural counties and used their votes to prop up their less-than-active leadership. Spades and Alexander had virtually no interest in building the party and did little to register new voters or recruit and groom candidates for office. Since the Garrisons oversaw party activities in Dade County, they had more supporters and more interest

in growing the GOP, but the county-unit system kept them from controlling the state party.⁶

From 1945 through the 1950s, controversy over the county-unit system mounted in light of the postwar migration wave. Due to a number of "pull" factors including defense contracts and retirement communities, the urban areas of the state welcomed thousands of new residents. Most of the migrants to the Miami area had affiliation with the Democratic Party, but a significant number of Republicans moved to Florida as well. Though the Tampa Bay region, and most notably Pinellas County, became a Republican stronghold in the mid 1950s, the contours of the migration were not readily apparent to those living in the moment. It certainly appeared to the Garrisons that enough Republicans from the North and Midwest were relocating to Miami to provide a stable base for a revitalized GOP. Corresponding changes were not taking place in rural counties such as Lafayette, Dixie, and Gilchrist, making the county-unit system even more unrepresentative than it had been prior to World War II. The rising tide of migrants contributed to the Garrisons' sense of urgency. If they succeeded in dismantling the county-unit system, they believed, the Republican Party could prosper in the state and they could legitimately claim party leadership and credit for building a two-party system in Florida, advancing their reputations at the national level.⁷

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6. The political calculus favored the Garrisons, even though party registration was a poor indicator of Republican support in any of the Solid South states. With virtually no chance of electing a Republican to state or local office, individuals had to register as Democrats to have a say in the Democratic primary elections. The winners of those contests either ran unopposed or crushed a poorly funded, usually unknown Republican in the general election. The primary contests, in short, were the only elections of any importance. Much more Republican sentiment existed in the state than appeared on the voter rolls, but when making decisions for the state GOP those registration numbers mattered a great deal and were good indicators of the level of disparity between Republican voters in south Florida and their brethren in the northern counties.
 7. In 1948, for example, Republican Presidential nominee Thomas E. Dewey received 194,350 votes even though Republican registration was just a shade under 60,000. See Allen Morris, *The Florida Handbook, 1947-48* (Tallahassee, FL: Peninsular Publishing Co., 1949), 222; Brief of the Grass-Roots Republicans, presented to the Republican National Convention, 7 July 1952, Copy in Box 337, Taft Papers; Peter D. Klingman, *Neither Dies nor Surrenders: A History of the Republican Party in Florida, 1867-1970* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1984), 148.

Between 1944 and 1947, the Garrisons and the state leadership worked well together. Changes in the Florida election law mandated that the Republican Party hold a primary election to determine the state's Republican national convention delegates and Emory Ackerman, the chairman of the state executive committee, made no effort to challenge the law. To the Garrisons, the primary election was the key to defeating the county-unit system. The numerical strength of south Florida, they believed, would discredit the rural-county coalition and give the Garrisons the opportunity to lobby the national party to remove rural-bloc leaders Spades and Alexander. Ackerman went along with the plan and also backed Florence Garrison for a seat on the RNC. The climate certainly looked favorable for overturning county-unit rule in Florida.

Between the time of the initial negotiations and the state convention in March 1948, however, the situation changed dramatically. Alexander, looking to maintain rural superiority, had cut a deal with one of the presidential candidates, New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey, and his campaign manager Herbert Brownell. Alexander and Spades offered to steer the Florida delegation towards Dewey at the Republican national convention in exchange for Dewey's future support for the rural bloc against Ackerman and the Garrisons. Brownell promised that Spades and Alexander would be the patronage brokers for the state for the anticipated Dewey administration, giving them the power to determine who received federal appointments in the Sunshine State. Patronage was the lifeblood of the Southern Republican parties. Party leaders throughout the South kept their organizations small and controllable and maintained the loyalty of their supporters through promises of key appointments in the future. Colonel Rentfro B. Creager, an RNC member from Texas, was the best example of this tactic. Derided in the local press as the "Japanese Gardner" for his propensity to shape the party as one would a Bonsai tree, Creager used the promise of key jobs to followers to defeat challenges to his leadership.⁸ Alexander and Spades behaved in much the same way and hoped to use Brownell's support to prop up their authority. They used their relationship with Brownell to unify the rural counties against Ackerman in exchange for positions from the expected Dewey White House.

8. Interview with Joe Ingraham and H. Jack Porter, conducted 9 November 1972. Copy in Eisenhower Library Oral History Collection, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas.

Brownell's actions illustrate the multifaceted and pragmatic nature of the American political system, as Florida was one state in a region-wide strategy for party control. Since 1944, the Republican Party had fractured into two factions. One group, under Dewey, promoted a moderately conservative platform that acknowledged the importance of the New Deal and espoused policies more friendly to labor unions and minorities in order to build a new majority coalition. A rival organization, led by Ohio Senator Robert A. Taft, believed the only way to regain the White House was through a stronger conservatism that placed primacy on the free market and a strict interpretation of the Constitution. In 1948, the Taft and Dewey groups were roughly equal in size and popularity, meaning neither group could guarantee a majority of delegates before the 1948 national convention. As a result, both national factions became heavily involved in local and state matters in order to recruit convention delegates pledged to their candidate. This tightly contested situation meant that normally minor disputes at the local and state levels could have repercussions at the highest levels of the party. Brownell, hoping to raid Taft's supporters in the South, promised to lavishly reward states and state leaders that backed Dewey in 1948.⁹

The Garrisons, aware of the national climate, reached out to both factions hoping to trade their influence in Florida for assistance with their own party building efforts. In July 1947, a Taft associate reported that Wesley Garrison was the "key man" in the first district of Florida and would control the two state convention representatives from the area. The writer pointed out that Garrison had backed conservative Ohio Senator John Bricker in 1944 and advised someone to keep frequent contact with him and cultivate his support.¹⁰ Garrison, though, was more interested in

9. Brownell recruited and groomed Republicans in a number of southern states to challenge the existing state leadership for control of their national convention delegations. In Alabama, for example, Brownell recruited Claude Vardaman, the state party chairman, and offered him patronage positions if he swung the delegation away from RNC member Lonnie Noojin. See Thomas E. Stephens, Memo to Herbert Brownell, 13 May 1947. Copy in Folder 2 (Alabama), Box 21, Series II, Thomas E. Dewey Papers, Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, University of Rochester Library, Rochester, NY [Hereafter cited as Dewey Papers]; Herbert Brownell, Letter to Claude Vardaman, 13 September 1947. Copy in Folder 2 (Alabama), Box 21, Series II, Dewey Papers.

10. Paul Walter, Letter to Robert A. Taft, 17 July 1947. Copy in Folder (1948 Campaign—Florida—I-L), Box 176, Taft Papers.

controlling the Florida party than choosing a candidate on the basis of principle or past alliance and sought to trade his delegate votes to the faction most likely to advance his political career. In October 1947, Garrison wrote to Dewey announcing the creation of the Miami Republican Headquarters Club at 1947 W. Flagler Street, four miles south of the heart of the Brownsville neighborhood he had developed. In a letter that read more like a real estate advertisement than a bid for support, Garrison explained that he had bought the building and paid for its operation with his own funds, and, in just a matter of weeks, made it the most important GOP institution in south Florida. He claimed that the club's members, most likely his tenants and the Brownsville African-American leadership, would all back Dewey in the 1948 Republican primary and that their sheer numbers would enable Dewey to overpower the small group of Republicans in the state's northern regions. Garrison strongly implied that, if Dewey helped Garrison advance within the state party, he and Florence could influence the Florida delegation to vote for Dewey at the national convention. In a party long controlled by a few individuals Garrison believed that his Headquarters Club gave him the popular support to defeat the rural counties in the upcoming primary.¹¹

Garrison's sales pitch and his work outside the regular organization were indicative of both the disenfranchisement of African-Americans in Florida and the rural control of the state party, two local factors that influenced Brownell's decision to back Spades and Alexander. During the postwar period political clubs, groupings of like-minded individuals who generally supported one of the two major parties while functioning outside the official apparatus, experienced a renaissance. Political clubs mobilized disenfranchised or marginalized populations to challenge state and local party leaders in the hopes of gaining a voice in the system or advocating reform. One of the most notable examples, the East Bay Democratic Club of Oakland, California, acted on behalf of the local African-American community and helped break the stranglehold of the conservative downtown establishment on local politics.¹² Following the 1948 presidential election, the National

11. Wesley Garrison, Letter to Thomas Stephens, 28 October 1947, Copy in Folder (Florida), Box 22, Dewey Papers.

12. For more on the East Bay Democratic Club, see Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

Republican Round-Up Club, an organization centered in Chicago with a sizable membership and wealthy financial backers, advocated a strong conservative platform and helped push the GOP to the right in the 1950 congressional elections.¹³ The club structure was useful because it allowed individuals to cultivate grassroots support specifically to challenge the ruling party oligarchy at the polls. Garrison hoped to use the club to swarm the small parties of the northern counties in the 1948 primary elections. Though he was a member of the state executive committee himself, building a broad base among the voters outside the regular party would enable him to outflank the existing GOP leadership and seize the reins of the state committee.

In his letter to Dewey, Garrison cast himself as a party reformer, someone who wanted to build a two-party system in the South. The keys to his strategy were the preferential primary election and Florence's ascendancy to the RNC, but the backing of a national candidate who would determine the state's patronage arrangements would also be beneficial. Unfortunately for the Garrisons, the Dewey faction was not interested. Brownell believed that the support of the rural county organization would provide the most delegates. His decision, made solely with the goal of winning the presidential nomination in 1948, helped entrench the county-unit system in Florida and weakened the bi-racial coalition the Garrisons had built in Miami.

At the 1948 state convention, Alexander used the proxy votes from the smaller counties and his alliances in the northern part of the state to defeat Florence's bid to the RNC and elect one of his associates, much to the chagrin of Ackerman. This turn of events stunned the Garrisons, who interpreted the loss as a sign that the rural counties could not be trusted and would impede future party development as well as their own political fortunes.¹⁴ Ironically, many regarded the Dewey camp as the Republican organization with the most forward-looking policies on race. Dewey had lobbied the New York legislature for the creation of the first state Fair

13. For more on the NRRC, see Report of the Committee on Republican Fundamental Principles of the National Republican Roundup Committee, Chicago, Ill., 10-11 November 1949. Copy in Folder (Republican Strategy Committee (2)), Box 7, Arthur Summerfield Papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas.

14. Wesley Garrison, Letter to Clarence Brown, 16 July 1948, Copy in Folder (1948 Campaign—Florida—G-H), Box 176, Taft Papers.

Employment Practices Committee and had sought to make the national GOP more inclusive for minorities. Yet here Brownell, Dewey's closest adviser, backed a racially intolerant faction over an organization built ostensibly on bi-racial unity.

Immediately before the Republican National Convention, with Alexander aligned with Dewey, Garrison pledged his allegiance to the Taft faction. In a field report to the Taft campaign, an observer noted that "Garrison will not be against Bob [Taft], but he is most interested in doing anything he can to push his wife as National Committeewoman. However, if we sit down on him he is going to have trouble in not voting for Bob." The correspondent went on to observe that Garrison's challenger for the delegate seat was "a much better citizen than Garrison," a contention that most likely had racial overtones arising from Garrison's poor standing within the Miami real estate community for his blockbusting.¹⁵ Another report, written ten days prior, claimed that Garrison had the Miami delegate race sewn up and that no candidate, regardless of his or her reputation or following, could defeat him.¹⁶ Clarence Brown, a congressman from Ohio and Taft's campaign manager, counted Garrison as one of the six committed Taft delegates from the Sunshine State.¹⁷ He was also evidently critical to Taft's nomination plans; as Garrison was among a handful of individuals whom Taft's advisors encouraged him to call in the days before the convention in order to discuss parliamentary strategy.¹⁸

Taft, however, could not stop the Dewey bandwagon. The 1944 candidate once again won his party's nomination, becoming the first individual in Republican history to lead the ticket a second time after losing a general election. Taft received six votes, including Garrison's, out of Florida's eighteen. Garrison, however, took Taft's loss as an opportunity to continue his local organizing. Shortly after the convention Garrison wrote to Brown, saying "What I would appreciate your doing for me, is to write Gov. Dewey and explain my position, that by advocating an active primary sys-

15. Jack McKay, Letter to John Marshall, 12 March 1948, Copy in Florida (1948 Campaign Miscellany—John Marshall—1947-8), Box 233, Taft Papers.

16. Unsigned memo, 2 March 1948, Copy in Folder (1948 Campaign—Florida—A-B), Box 175, Taft Papers.

17. Clarence Brown, Letter to Henry Gibson, 26 May 1948, Copy in Folder (1948 Campaign—Florida—G-H), Box 176, Taft Papers.

18. Dewitt Sage, Letter to Robert A. Taft, 2 June 1948, Copy in Folder (1948 Campaign Miscellany—Correspondence—T-W), Box 230, Taft Papers.

tem not only here in Florida, but all thru the south, the greatest progress will result in our efforts to firmly establish an active Republican party here. Contrary, to the beliefs of most of our so-called republican [sic] leaders here, votes come before patronage."¹⁹ Brown passed Garrison's message on to Brownell, who promptly dismissed it with no response.²⁰

In the month following the national convention, Brownell designated Alexander to oversee the party's south Florida efforts. Ackerman, still chairman of the Florida Republican executive committee, rightly saw such an arrangement as a threat to his leadership and asked Brownell to follow the "law and custom" in Florida by naming him as state campaign manager. Race played a factor in this decision as well, as Ackerman noted that Alexander was known as a "lilywhite" and his leadership would repulse many African American voters. Ackerman also pointed out that Alexander was tied to the "small county" group and had no experience in mobilizing voters.²¹ Brownell, unwilling to break his deal with Spades and Alexander, refused to remove Alexander from his leadership position. As predicted, Alexander was an ineffective campaign manager and his get out the vote efforts failed miserably. He was, however, a competent backroom politician and parlayed his official position in the Dewey campaign and his ties with Spades to become state party chairman by a vote of 80-18 the following year.²²

Following the 1948 election, with Spades and Alexander now firmly in control of the party machinery, the Garrisons resumed their strategy of organizing at the grassroots to challenge to the rural leadership. In 1950, Florence Garrison played a key role in the chartering of the Florida Federation of Women's Republican Clubs (FFWR). Under national party rules, a state with a certain number of women's clubs could form its own state federation, an

19. Wesley Garrison, Letter to Clarence Brown, 16 July 1948, Copy in Folder (1948 Campaign—Florida—G-H), Box 176, Taft Papers.

20. Herbert Brownell, Letter to Wesley Garrison, 2 August 1948, Copy in Folder (Garrison, Wesley), Box 137, Herbert Brownell Papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas. [Hereafter cited as Brownell Papers.]

21. Emory Ackerman, Letter to Herbert Brownell, 3 August 1948, Copy in Folder (Ackerman, Emory), Box 133, Brownell Papers.

22. Emory Ackerman, Letter to Herbert Brownell, 11 October 1946, Copy in Folder (Ackerman, Emory), Box 133, Brownell Papers; "Brief of the Alexander-Spades State Committee Delegation," 7 July 1952, Copy in Folder (1952 Convention Delegate Contests—Florida), Box 129, Brownell Papers.

umbrella group that coordinated club activity and acted as a liaison with the national GOP. Florence Garrison worked with Ethel Parks, the RNC member from Florida and an ally of Spades, to organize the requisite number and, in the summer of 1950, Garrison formally received recognition from the National Federation of Republican Women's Clubs. Garrison was elected president of the state federation.²³ The GOP of this period used clubwomen for voter mobilization and precinct work, but rarely expected them to have any impact on party policy.²⁴ This tradition likely explains why Parks and Garrison worked together, as the Alexander group did not see the FFWR as a threat. Florence's position as FFWR president gave the Garrisons another official title within the state organization and further bolstered their reputation in both state and national circles.

The creation of FFWR, while beneficial to the party, was another strategic maneuver to break the county-unit system and reduce the power of the rural county bloc. For example, in late 1950 the Garrisons used the FFWR in a transparent and ill-advised effort to weaken the standing of Florida's RNC members. Florence Garrison wrote to Bertha Adkins, director of the RNC Women's Division, asking for more power in approving the speakers assigned to the various Lincoln Day fund-raising dinners throughout the state, a task traditionally given to the RNC members. Her rationale was that many counties had such little Republican affiliation and, in her estimation, often the county woman's club was the only organized GOP group. She contended that the current state of affairs was indicative of poor party leadership, saying "I do not intend to mention any names, but in past years great confusion has resulted and many people were discouraged in assisting the Republican Party."²⁵ Adkins summarily rejected her request. Once again, the Garrisons believed that acting as a conduit between Florida and the national party and building alliances that could reward supporters with patronage jobs was the surest way to assume leadership at the state level.

23. Ethel Parks, Letter to Mrs. Joseph Farrington, 18 November 1950, Copy in Folder Florida (2), Box 23, NFRW Papers.

24. Catherine E. Rymph, *Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage through the Rise of the New Right* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

25. Florence Garrison, Letter to Bertha Adkins, 9 December 1950, Copy in Folder (Florida- General "1"), Box 17, NFRW Papers.

As the Garrisons gained power, they left in their wake a trail of enemies throughout the state. The couple adopted an aggressive political style that alienated many. According to the numerous letters of complaint they generated over their two decade career, the Garrisons would quickly denounce and ostracize, in the most explicit terms possible, those who disagreed with them. Florence Garrison, especially, had a tendency to red-bait her opponents.²⁶ Mrs. Frederick Gramm, the chairman of the Orange County Council of Republican Women, informed the National Federation director that "I am working along with Florence Garrison and doing everything I can to help her, but Oh! Betty—why do the Garrisons always have to FIGHT someone! [Sic] Every time someone in this state looms to the stature of real leadership—the Garrisons find something to fight him or her about."²⁷ This sentiment was repeated throughout the state as the Garrisons rose to prominence. The animosity they created complicated their role and their standing within the party. Critics often linked their destructive personalities and their ties to the black community in their complaints. A 1954 memo to the RNC, written as a neutral field report, claimed that the Garrisons "are people of large means derived from the purchase of delinquent tax certificates and the sale of negro properties. They are utterly lacking in tact and are completely irreconcilable with the opinions of others who differ with them, however slightly. They have attempted but have failed, to build up the party on the basis of negro registration."²⁸ The racial aspects of the Garrisons' activity were usually connected with their controversial political style and both deemed as distasteful to many Florida Republicans.

Despite their abrasive personalities, going into the 1952 election cycle the Garrisons retained their influence in Miami. Though Wesley had ceded the Dade County chairmanship to an ally, he

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26. For example, in a letter to RNC Chairman Leonard Hall, Florence asked rhetorically "are we in Florida in an atomic age operating under archaic regulations, or perhaps modern iron curtain methods" when referring to Spades and Alexander. Florence Garrison, Letter to Leonard Hall, 22 July 1953, Copy in Folder (Florida Situation (2)), Box 172, Leonard Hall Papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas. [Hereafter cited as Hall Papers.]
27. Mrs. Frederick R. Gramm, Letter to Mrs. Joseph Farrington, 19 August 1951, Copy in Folder Florida (1), Box 23, NFRW Papers.
28. "The Republican Party in Florida," unsigned and undated, Copy in Folder (Florida Situation 1954), Box 178, Hall Papers.

remained on the state executive committee while Florence continued to lead the FFWR. Their positions made them once again critically important in the run up to the national convention. Among presidential candidates, the GOP remained divided into two major factions, one for Dewey and one for Taft, with a host of minor figures such as Harold Stassen and Earl Warren trying to mount regional dark horse candidacies. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who in late 1951 entered the presidential picture, ran with the backing of the Dewey group. Though he went on to win landslide victories over Democrat Adlai Stevenson in both 1952 and 1956, Eisenhower had a tough road to the Republican nomination. Taft had won the hearts of the more conservative members of the party and, until the first ballot of the national convention, was a plausible contender. With the nomination battle looking increasingly tight yet again, every delegate mattered. As in 1948, candidate organizations had to wade into purely local and state matters to bargain for support or risk losing critical votes at the national convention, when popularity and support mattered most. This meant that the national leaders would have to deal with the Garrisons.

In their quest for convention delegates, Taft's campaign officers kept tabs on the Miami and Florida situations. In late 1951, David Ingalls, a former undersecretary of the Navy and Taft's cousin, approached Garrison for support and issued a sobering report of their meeting. "[T]here's going to be a hell of a fight down in Florida, and we are going to have to decide what to do about it," Ingalls noted to Taft's executive assistant I. Jack Martin. "I don't think there is going to be any chance of getting the two sides together in Florida, under any circumstances."²⁹ Garrison was completely focused on the state situation, as Ingalls believed that Garrison would swing the Miami delegates for Taft if, and only if, the Taftites cut their ties with the regular delegation. B. Carroll Reece, acting in his role as Taft's Southern regional campaign manager, advised Martin to align their camp with the Alexander-Spades faction. Reece, himself the leader of the small, ineffectual Tennessee state party, understood that Garrison's calls for a primary had little bearing on the national convention delegation and was purely a local matter. He told Martin that "One thing is for certain, [the Taft faction] cannot hold the State organization and play

29. David Ingalls, Letter to I. Jack Martin, 1 September 1951, Copy in Folder (1952—Campaign Miscellany—David Ingalls (2)), Box 454, Taft Papers.

with Garrison. The two are incompatible. Again, my opinion is, the best chance for getting the delegation is to work with Mr. Alexander and the State Committee."³⁰ Alexander, who had grown weary of Dewey and his approval of New York's Fair Employment Practices law, signed on with the Taft faction and planned to select a delegation that would overwhelmingly endorse the Ohio senator.

In 1952, holding a delegation for a particular candidate would be easier than in 1948 as changes to the Florida election laws had removed the requirement for a primary election. Alexander, well aware of the implications of direct elections, dropped the primary and made it known that the state committee would handpick national convention delegates at the state convention in Gainesville. During the legislative session of 1951, the legislature rejected a petition to require a primary contest. Later that year the Garrisons and their ally, Dade County Chairman John Booth, filed a lawsuit to force the state party to restore the primary contests. According to Florence, who defended her actions to the FFRW members, "In 1949 the election laws were deliberately changed to disenfranchise Republican voters by Republican leader [sic] intervention."³¹ The case went to the Florida Supreme Court, which ruled that the law as written did not mandate a primary and was constitutional. Alexander, ecstatic at the decision, wrote Taft campaign manager Clarence Brown saying "Wired you a few minutes ago relative to the decision of the Supreme Court. It apparently gives us permission to do everything but shoot Garrison and I would assume that this is not a legal question but a matter of civic duty."³² Alexander, with the help of the Democratic state legislature, had tightened his control of the Florida GOP and thwarted the Garrisons' attempt to break the county-unit system.

Changes in the national picture also complicated matters in Florida. Brownell, still Dewey's chief ally and political strategist, took charge of the pre-convention campaign of Dwight D.

30. B. Carroll Reece, memo to I. Jack Martin, 6 December 1951, Copy in Folder (1952 Campaign—Florida—H), Box 337, Taft Papers.

31. Florence Garrison, "Open Letter to the Club Presidents of the Florida Federation of Women's Republican Clubs," 13 December 1951, Copy in Folder (Florida (1)), Box 23, NFRW Papers.

32. G.H. Alexander, Letter to Clarence Brown, 5 February 1952. Copy in Folder (A), Box 18, Clarence Brown Papers, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio.



Eisenhower's Miami campaign team included a number of Democrats, including Mayor William Wolfarth (second from left). Kirk Landon (first from left) and Paul Helliwell (second from right) managed the campaign with Helliwell becoming the top Republican in Miami during the Eisenhower administration, greatly diminishing the importance of the Garrisons. *Image courtesy of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas.*

Eisenhower. As in 1948, he believed that raiding Taft's delegate support in the South remained the surest way to the nomination and offered patronage considerations for delegate support throughout the Old Confederacy. Alexander and Spades, unsure of Eisenhower's stance on civil rights, pledged themselves to the Taft faction. Rather than working with the Garrisons in their quest for a Republican primary to unlock the rural dominance of the Spades-Alexander group, however, Brownell recruited Miami attorneys Kirk Landon and Paul Helliwell and created a new state faction to challenge the state chairman. Both men were recent migrants and experienced Republican operatives. Helliwell held national offices in the Young Republicans and Landon had managed Wendell Willkie's 1940 campaign in Maryland. While his background initially won Landon no friends among the Dewey camp who to a man regretted Willkie's ascension, he did have

knowledge of Republican procedures and enough contacts to assemble a viable slate of delegates pledged to Eisenhower. Brownell and the Eisenhower managers appointed Landon as head of the Florida Citizens for Eisenhower, an ostensibly non-partisan organization that organized at the grassroots, much like Garrison's Republican Headquarters Club. Garrison initially approached Landon, looking to work together against the rural leadership but Landon, well aware of Garrison's poisonous reputation, rejected his overtures.

Throughout 1952 the Garrisons continued to decry the state party's refusal to hold a primary election and ultimately challenged Spades and Alexander at the state convention at Gainesville. Their tactics caused a great deal of controversy, but did help the Eisenhower forces gain a foothold in the state. Garrison had control of the Miami GOP while Helliwell and Landon had no standing within the state organization. Landon, aware of Alexander's frustration with Garrison, approached the state chairman and offered to work with him and Spades against Garrison in exchange for one pro-Eisenhower delegate to the national convention. Both Alexander and the Taft leadership knew that Landon planned to "convert" delegates once he received a seat, but they viewed it as worth the risk in order to quiet Garrison. The latter was, of course, impossible. Garrison immediately declared his intention to challenge the seating of the Florida delegation at the national convention on the grounds that the absence of a primary had disenfranchised the voters of south Florida. Brownell and the Eisenhower organization endorsed Landon's strategy and did not weigh in on Garrison's challenge before the RNC credentials committee, primarily because the double-dealing Florida leadership had sent an exploratory message to former RNC Chairman and Eisenhower backer Hugh Scott asking for favorable consideration from the Eisenhower group. Spades, though publicly committed to Taft, assured Scott that he would be "perfectly satisfied with the number of votes for Eisenhower." The Eisenhower group did not make Florida an issue and the Spades group was seated by a unanimous vote of the Credentials Committee.³³

33. C. C. Spades, Letter to Hugh Scott, 24 March 1952. Copy in Folder (1952 Convention Delegate Contests—Florida), Box 129, Brownell Papers.

Once Eisenhower took the White House, the Republicans found themselves in the majority for the first time in over two decades. Although the new president faced numerous challenges at home and abroad, patronage was the most pressing problem for the party. Because of the long period between the Hoover and Eisenhower administrations, there was no ready-made group of office seekers with which to staff the executive branch, making the transition period fairly chaotic. With so many individuals claiming credit for the victory through their work with the Republican Party, including the non-partisan Citizens for Eisenhower and the Democrats for Eisenhower, patronage distribution quickly became another point of intense controversy between the Garrisons, the Alexander-Spades group, and the Helliwell-Landon contingent. Leonard Hall, a former congressman from Long Island, New York, who chaired the RNC during Eisenhower's first six years in office, collaborated with the White House on patronage distribution. A confidential survey of the Florida situation, taken sometime around May 1953, revealed the obstacles associated with building a stable base in the Sunshine State. The report immediately acknowledged that Eisenhower won his 100,000-plus majority because of his popularity and gave no thanks to the Spades-Alexander leadership, which it referred to as "reactionary." Sounding reminiscent of a Wesley Garrison mass-mailing, the author of this document concluded that the county-unit system had effectively disenfranchised the Republicans from Tampa southward and if voters had selected their delegates via primary all 18 of them would have voted for Ike on the first ballot. "Denying Florida Republicans the opportunity to elect Convention delegates by primary certainly has not helped to build the party," the report said, "and it will not strengthen the national administration during the next four years. No amount of patronage fertilizer will green grass barren of roots and G.O.P. roots in Florida are almost barren over wide areas."³⁴

Rather than endorsing Garrison, the most vocal proponent of the primary election and the development of the two-party system, the report advised the Citizens for Eisenhower group to handle patronage matters and credited Landon, who had passed away

34. Memo, "Florida Politics," undated, Copy in Folder (109-A-7 (2)), Box 543, Presidential Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower, General File Series, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas. [Hereafter cited as General File.]

since the election, and Helliwell, for Florida going into the Republican column.³⁵ A state advisory committee, set up by Alexander with input from the Citizens groups, approved patronage appointments for all counties except for Dade. As Alexander phrased it, "Due to internal dissension, Dade was excepted for the present from the regular county procedure to insure that Party matters will be handled on a fair and impartial basis. It was the consensus of opinion that it is doubtful that Party affairs can be properly evaluated where Party officials cannot agree." Alexander put together a four-person committee to approve nominees from Dade County and did not include the Garrisons or their associates.³⁶

Despite an awareness of the county-unit system's flaws, no one in Washington would lift a finger to help the Garrisons. Instead, attention shifted to the St. Petersburg area where Bill Cramer, the 1952 Republican candidate for Florida's first congressional district, appeared to have the best chance of building the party. Pinellas County had elected a slew of Republicans to local offices in 1950 and sent Cramer to the state House of Representatives. In 1952 Cramer lost an open seat election to Democrat Courtney Campbell by just under 1,900 votes. The RNC regarded the Pinellas County organization as the strongest group in the state and made it a point to give them adequate financing and attention.³⁷ In 1954 Cramer would win the Congressional seat by just over 1,500 votes. It was the Pinellas organization, rather than the Garrisons in Miami, who made the most compelling case against Alexander's leadership and the grassroots mobilization of Florida Republicans.

In May 1953 Fred Petersen, a Republican who held Cramer's old seat in the state House, introduced a bill that would limit representation on the state political parties to counties with at least two percent of its populations registered with that party. If passed, of course, this measure would take away the monopoly of the smaller northern counties and shift the balance of power to the Tampa-Sarasota-Miami axis. Alexander, in a bizarre incident that seemed reminiscent of a bad television show, apparently tried to blackmail

35. *Ibid.*

36. G.H. Alexander, Memo to Republican Officials, 20 March 1953, Folder (Florida Situation 1953 (1)), Box 172, Hall Papers.

37. Memo, "Florida Politics," undated, Copy in Folder (109-A-7(2)), Box 543, General File.

Petersen into withdrawing the bill when he turned up in Petersen's office with copies of letters from Petersen's ex-wife concerning their especially nasty divorce proceedings. Rather than accede to Alexander's demands, Petersen called a press conference and announced the presence of the letters and decried this "brazen attempt to control my future actions." The bill ultimately failed in committee, but it put the state leadership on notice that the small county domination would not likely continue for very long.³⁸ Another line of attack on Petersen was to malign him in the press as a supporter of the Garrisons, a tactic which Petersen called "conclusive evidence of the desperateness and insecurity of your position."³⁹

The Garrisons did try to get involved with the Petersen legislation as part of their continued advocacy for a permanent primary system but failed. In July, the Garrisons and a number of allies met in Orlando and issued an open letter to Eisenhower, Hall, and the Florida Republican leadership asking for a national investigation of the county-unit system and its implications. Calling themselves the "Republican Committee for Good Government," the group decried the current system which allowed Alexander and Spades to "control the political pie-counter and distribute patronage as they see fit." The Garrisons argued that such tactics kept the party small and functionally useless. Spades and Alexander, for their part, dismissed the Garrisons as little more than attention seekers. Officially, Hall responded to Florence with a terse note saying: "As you know, I cannot, as the National Chairman, become involved in State factional fights and I cannot, in particular, become involved in county fights. Since there are over 3000 counties in this country, you can imagine the problems involved."⁴⁰ Though they agreed in principle, the national organization gave the Garrisons no support.

The shunning of the Garrisons was partly due to their tendency to engage in counterproductive infighting and partly due to the racial dimension of their politics. In fact, their advocacy of civil rights, at the time an emergent political issue in the South, continually repelled potential allies. Racial undertones are evident in much of the correspondence regarding the Garrisons and

38. St. Petersburg *Times*, 22 May 1953.

39. Fred Petersen, Letter to G. H. Alexander, 15 May 1953, Copy in (GF 109-A-2 Florida 1952-1953 (1)), Box 496, General File.

40. Leonard Hall, Letter to Florence Garrison, 3 September 1953, Copy in Folder (Florida Situation 1953 (2)), Box 172, Hall Papers.

Republican politics in general. Kent McKinley, the chairman of the Sarasota County Republican Executive Committee and a former GOP candidate for Congress informed White House chief of staff Sherman Adams that "The [Fair Employment Practices Committee] is not for the South, and never can be unless you want to mongrelize the white race. Sounds funny, but is dead serious. I do subscribe to that thinking 100%." McKinley goes on in his letter to argue for Pinellas and Sarasota Counties as patronage overseers, since they have a larger percentage of the registered Republicans than their neighbors to the north. Populous counties were the key to expanding the two-party system in McKinley's mind, but only if the party membership remained white.⁴¹

Race remained the key stumbling block to the Garrisons' success though, to their credit, they continued to organize in a bi-racial fashion. The racial aspects of the Miami Republican split came into full focus during the Lincoln Day dinner fiasco of 1955. Unwilling to work with each other, the Garrison and Helliwell factions each hosted their own Lincoln Day dinners, traditionally the high point of Republican fund raising drives. The Helliwell group held their dinner on Friday, February 11, with Utah Senator Arthur Watkins delivering the keynote address. The Garrisons scheduled theirs for Saturday, February 12 at the Urmey Hotel in downtown Miami with the RNC dispatching Indiana Congresswoman Cecil B. Harden to address the crowd. It was not unusual for multiple organizations within one county or municipality to sponsor their own Lincoln Day gatherings and the presence of Watkins and Harden shows that both events had sanction from the state and national parties. The differences between the festivities, though, were in sharp relief in typical Garrison fashion.

The Helliwell event went on without a hitch. But shortly after events began at the Urmey, the hotel's owner, E. N. Claughton, stormed into the banquet hall and demanded that the twenty-four African Americans in attendance leave the segregated facility immediately. According to the reporter for the *Miami Herald*, a "near riot broke out" between white members of the Dade County Executive Committee, outraged by the demands, and Claughton and his associates. As the two groups shouted at each other, Claughton threatened to switch off the electricity and end the

41. Kent McKinley, Letter to Sherman Adams, 8 March 1953, Copy in Folder (GF 109-A-2 Florida 1952-1953 (1)), Box 496, General File.

event all together, a statement which prompted the black audience members to rise to their feet. In a bit of delicious symbolism not lost on the *Herald* reporter, a black clergyman with "a large gold cross hanging from his neck," led them out of the hall and into the lobby. Garrison, highlighting the irony of the situation, took the microphone and declared that he would not be party to an event named in honor of Abraham Lincoln that was not open to all citizens. He and Florence then walked out, along with an estimated 130 whites, leaving some 120 attendees in the room with a distressed Harden at the head table. When order was restored, Harden spoke to the remaining attendees, after briefly noting the "unfortunate occurrence," on the impending decline of the Solid South.⁴²

Over the next four days, the *Herald* reported on the charges and counter-charges between Claughton and Garrison. Claughton contended that he was not told in advance that African Americans would be in attendance and blamed Garrison for purposely hosting an integrated event in a segregated facility in order to draw publicity and "exploit the colored people." In the time of Massive Resistance, many in the South appreciated this, with the Georgia state House of Representatives passing a resolution praising Claughton for his action. The mayor of Miami countered with a statement labeling Claughton's racial views unrepresentative of the city's population. Garrison denied that the event was purposeful but did threaten a number of lawsuits. The editors of the *Herald* came down somewhere in the middle, noting the shocking and belligerent behavior of hotel management while contending that Garrison or one of his supporters had to have known what would transpire. Neither group was absolved, but the paper believed that the situation would have been easily avoidable. In actuality, it seems highly likely that the Garrisons staged the event to advance his standing in the GOP. At the time, a number of Florida legislators had introduced bills to uphold segregated schools and nullify the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. The Lincoln Day activities, as they transpired in the press, illustrated that the Florida GOP continued to hold firm to the color line despite the Garrisons' public efforts to the contrary.⁴³

42. Miami *Herald*, 12 February 1955.

43. Miami *Herald*, 13 February, 14 February, and 15 February 1955.

Almost immediately Garrison sought to capitalize on the publicity and advance his fight against the state leadership. He wrote to Eisenhower pleading with the President to issue a statement decrying the events at the Urmev Hotel. He took credit for registering the African-American members who had been removed from the dinner, a claim very likely true, and hoped for a forthright stance from Washington favoring racial equality. Administration staff shuttled the letter back and forth among themselves while deciding on a response. Ultimately Val Washington, an African American and head of the "Negro Division" of the RNC, told Adams to ignore Garrison. In a memo to Eisenhower attached to Garrison's letter, Adams directed the president that "if you must reply, have to be blunt and tell Pres can't interfere—local—appears Mr. Garrison fomented difficulty." There is no record of a response from the White House, but it is clear that Len Hall once again shunned Garrison. One month after the events at the Urmev, Hall was the keynote speaker at a hastily arranged fund-raiser for the state party with notable attendees including Spades, Alexander, and four African Americans: the Garrisons were conspicuously absent.⁴⁴ Though the Garrisons continued to complain loudly, neither the RNC nor the White House would give them any assistance.

While the Garrisons sustained their advocacy for a bi-racial, expanded two party system in Florida, the larger factional dispute continued at the national level. Despite Taft's death in 1953, ideological conservatives continued to operate throughout the Eisenhower administration to the point that, by 1956, former Taft supporters were preparing to nominate one of their own should Eisenhower refuse to run for a second term. Garrison, ever the political opportunist, threw himself in to these proceedings with an eye on making Florence the national committeewoman for Florida. The right-wing Republicans pinned their hopes on Senate Majority Leader William F. Knowland of California. After Taft's death, Knowland seemed the most likely to spearhead the burgeoning conservative movement within the GOP. He was not as skilled a politician as Taft and was more focused on foreign policy, especially American involvement in Asia, so this transition of leadership was not as smooth as either Knowland or the remnants of

44. *Miami Times*, 26 March 1955.

the Taft faction would have liked. He was, however the only conservative with enough national stature to lead the old Taft faction.

Under normal circumstances, a dissident group or minority faction would dare not challenge the incumbent president and his organization, but 1956 was not a normal election cycle. In 1955 Eisenhower suffered a heart attack and his health was a matter of doubt for both the public and the party. Knowland, seeing his opportunity to take back the party for the conservatives, began quietly assembling Republican delegate slates under the banner of "Ike-First-Knowland," meaning that delegates pledged to his cause would support Eisenhower first but, if the president did not run for re-election, would back Knowland. Because of the political dangers associated with bucking one's party leadership, Knowland sought support from nominally Republican groups and clubs who backed the party but did not have a stake in the regular organization.

Sometime in late 1955, Knowland and his associates reached out to Garrison's Republican Headquarters Club and asked for help in organizing a delegate slate. Their efforts, though, were short-lived and futile. By March 1956 Eisenhower had announced his candidacy and Knowland had dropped his nomination bid. Knowland was not a political neophyte and clearly understood the ramifications of working with dissident Republican groups throughout the nation. Though some of these individuals might have political tact and savvy, the chances of this motley crew overseeing a successful general election campaign were very slight. Knowland told an associate early on in the process that he was prepared to accept outlying support to get his name on the ballot in a number of states, including Florida, but "planned to do everything in [his] power once the election and nomination is settled to unite the party and to make full use of the official organizations."⁴⁵ Knowland was not at all interested in the Garrisons or their continual campaign for control of the Republican apparatus and abandoned them as quickly as he had asked them for help.

This rejection, however, did not stop the Garrisons. Joe Miller, an associate of the couple, began a fund-raising drive that capitalized

45. William F. Knowland, Letter to William LaVarre, 17 February 1956, Copy in Folder (Florida), Box 96, William F. Knowland Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California. [Hereafter cited as Knowland Papers.]

on Knowland's name recognition and promised success far beyond 1956. In a letter to notoriously right-wing oil tycoon H.R. Cullen, Miller asked for financial support to get Ike-First-Knowland delegates on the ballot and help bolster the two-party system in the South. The letter implied that this quest would not end with Knowland, so it appears that the Garrison group was using Knowland's long shot candidacy as a pretext for filling the coffers of their own organization. Cullen forwarded the letter to Knowland pledging to fulfill this unorthodox request if Knowland wanted. Knowland advised Cullen not to help, saying "I believe that those sponsoring this program in Florida should handle their own problem and not solicit outside assistance. They called you without my knowledge or approval."⁴⁶ The Garrisons, however, continued to invoke Knowland's name in their unsuccessful efforts to get Florence Garrison elected to the RNC and to break the control of the rural northern counties over the state party. One especially inflammatory circular, titled "Patriots—Beware!" explicitly linked Knowland with the Garrison's tireless battle for open primary elections.⁴⁷

Even while claiming to have Knowland's support, the racial undertones of the Garrisons' political activity continued to undercut their chances for success among Florida Republicans. William LaVarre, a Republican from Nokomis, Florida, with personal ties to Knowland assessed Garrison's importance as minimal, telling Knowland that he "controls mainly the Negro vote of Dade and the surrounding counties."⁴⁸ In February 1956 an observer from St. Petersburg wrote to Knowland urging him to disavow all ties with the Garrisons. In their estimation, the 1955 Lincoln Day incident still weighed heavily on people's minds, with Wesley Garrison blamed for violating the racial status quo when he "tried to force an integrated crowd in a hotel where Negroes are not allowed." The writer went on to add further evidence that "it is reliably reported that his wife is Jewish which hurts like everything in most parts of the State. These factors may be a distinct disadvantage."⁴⁹

46. H.R. Cullen, Letter to William F. Knowland, 8 March 1956, Copy in Folder (Florida), Box 96, Knowland Papers; William F. Knowland, Letter to H.R. Cullen, 14 March 1956, Copy in Folder (Florida), Box 96, Knowland Papers.

47. Charles Batchelder, Memo to Paul Manolis, undated, Copy in Folder (Florida), Box 96, Knowland Papers.

48. William LaVarre to William F. Knowland, 26 January 1956, Copy in Folder (Florida), Box 96, Knowland Papers.

49. A.B. Whitford, Letter to William F. Knowland, 5 February 1956, Copy in Folder (Florida), Box 96, Knowland Papers.

Many conservatives, who likely conflated the Garrisons with the Dewey faction because of the latter's support of the FEPC, also urged Knowland to ignore Garrison. Marie Gramm, who Florence had ostracized from the FFRW shortly after its founding, wrote to Knowland using the stationery of the far right group "For America." She proclaimed that affiliation with Garrison would hurt Knowland's chances of carrying a majority of state delegates in Florida, more than likely because of their openness to black Republicans.⁵⁰

Organizing the Republican Party in a bi-racial fashion in a conservative Southern state did not pay dividends, no matter how populous the southern counties were in comparison to the northern ones. This fact was especially true in 1956, as racial tension stemming from the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision still was a concern to many Florida Republicans and eroded some of Eisenhower's support. A small business owner in Jacksonville who had voted for Ike in 1952 refused to donate to the state GOP because of the *Brown* decision and the overall pro-civil rights tone of the Eisenhower administration. He went on to claim that the Republicans were making the Constitution into a "scrap of paper," but noted that he might have to vote for Eisenhower because "it looks like the Stevenson-Kefauver-Eleanor Roosevelt-Walter Reuther team would be worse rather than better, I am still hoping for a Democratic Congress so that we can have some champion for protecting the Constitution."⁵¹ The heightened racial awareness in the aftermath of *Brown* did the Garrisons no favors.

The Knowland campaign was the last ditch effort of the Garrisons to take over the Florida GOP. With its end the couple faded into obscurity. Their role in the party was now so minimal that they did not even factor in the national committeewoman's post-election report to the RNC.⁵² This is quite ironic, as during the 1956 election cycle and beyond, the changes that the Garrisons had tried to implement for the better part of two decades were

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50. Marie Gramm, Letter to William F. Knowland, 11 February 1956, Copy in Folder (Florida), Box 96, Knowland Papers.
 51. W.T.S. Montgomery, Letter to Earl Smith, 27 September 1956, Copy in Folder (OF-109-A-2 1956 (3)), Box 496, Presidential Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower, Official File Series, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas. [Hereafter cited as Official File.]
 52. Mrs. Frank E. Williams, Letter to Leonard Hall, 12 November 1956, Copy in Folder (OF-109-A-2 1956 (4)), Box 496, Official File.

finally being realized. More than anything else this turn of events makes the tale of Wesley and Florence Garrison a strange one. Here were local political leaders operating in the state's most populous county during a time of staggering inbound migration. They challenged an organization that effectively disenfranchised the majority of the state's Republican voters. When national Republican leaders, including President Dwight D. Eisenhower, made the two-party South a priority for their party-building goals and finally tore the county-unit system down, the Garrisons were nowhere to be found.

The tale of the Garrisons is indeed unusual because, despite the overwhelming factors that favored their political goals, the Garrisons were rejected, despised, and ostracized by local, state, and national Republicans. The reasons for this are twofold and inextricably linked. First, the Garrisons attempted to use their contacts with African-American voters, most notably in the Brownsville section of town, as the cornerstone of their party-building efforts. This prompted outrage among state Republicans, especially those from the rural areas which dominated the state party. Second, the Garrisons had virtually no political or social tact. At times, their letter writing campaigns and publicity-seeking maneuvers seemed to border on the obsessive. While the couple sought a worthwhile outcome while shamelessly promoting themselves as the solution, their single-minded quest annoyed any and every operative that they encountered. These two issues were conflated because their critics often held their African American followers as evidence that the Garrisons were simply power-hungry people who would do anything, even engaging in the extreme measure of violating Southern racial mores, to realize their selfish ambitions. At times the Garrisons' motives do appear less than altruistic, justifying some amount of criticism, but racial undertones permeate the writings of their most strident detractors more than one would expect. The leadership of the rural county bloc, which Cramer and the Pinellas group ultimately supplanted in 1964, met its demise, just as the Garrisons said it would. They were, however, on the wrong side of the racial divide to bring about the change.

The Garrisons and their activities also highlight the interconnected nature of American politics. While Tip O'Neil has claimed that all politics are local, state and national actors influence them as well. For example, had Brownell thrown in with the Garrisons in 1947 the Miami faction would likely have kept Alexander and the

rural bloc from dominating state proceedings. Had Eisenhower refused to run in 1956 and had Knowland gone on to win the nomination, the Garrisons might have retained some influence in the party despite the hostility against them. Counter-factual examples are generally unproductive exercises, but here they reveal how the major events of the period, including the Taft-Dewey split, the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, and Eisenhower's health shaped the political possibilities for operatives in Florida. The Garrisons, above all else, illustrate how the dynamic postwar political system impacted operatives, both inside and outside of the party, in unexpected and unavoidable ways.

The strange tale of Wesley and Florence Garrison is also one heavily affected by race and the exclusionary politics of the Solid South. In a way, the Garrisons were ahead of their time. Their call for ending both the county-unit system and the white-only composition of the Florida GOP began roughly a decade before the Civil Rights Movement picked up in earnest and is reflective of their northern roots. Though their real estate activities in Miami are questionable, their mission to revitalize the Republican Party as a bi-racial, truly democratic organization breaks the established stereotypes of postwar blockbusters, many of whom engendered a reactionary politics that contributed to the conservative shift in the latter third of the 20th Century. The Garrisons seemingly cared for their tenants and their clients and incorporated them into the political process, making the couple either truly egalitarian or truly opportunistic. The truth lies likely somewhere in between. Some of their organizing, such as Florence's work in the Florida Federation of Republican Women, no doubt contributed to the growing strength of the party in Florida, but the incessant squabbling between the Garrisons and the Spades-Alexander group doubtlessly harmed the GOP. Though other Republicans soon supplanted them, the Garrisons pushed the state party to break out of its exclusionary, rural-based procedures. While their legacy remains ambivalent, it seems clear that the Garrisons helped question the racial status quo and played a critical role in the transformation of Florida politics in the postwar period.