
Napoleon Broward



and the Great Land Debate

by James Thomas Brooks, Jr.

Land use and development have always been issues of public controversy and concern among the citizens of Florida. One early and very significant example of the continuing debate over land use is the great struggle within the Democratic party that took place in Florida's first statewide gubernatorial primary held in the spring of 1904.

At the time two factions were locked in battle over the control of both the Democratic party and state government. On one side were the more conservative elements of the party, who generally stood for very limited government and unrestricted economic development and investment. This faction enjoyed the support of the state's corporate interests, primarily the railroad companies, and, while often challenged, had controlled the party machinery and state government since the end of Reconstruction. Challenging the entrenched forces in the party was a growing group of reform-minded Democrats who were seeking to liberalize state government through expanded services to citizens, to limit the influence on state government of large corporations, as well as to regulate some of the business activities of these large financial entities. Although strongly supported by farmers throughout the state, this group was led primarily by a

growing number of persons in the state's cities who operated small businesses or who were members of professional groups such as lawyers and editors.¹

The reform Democrats had been steadily growing in strength and had scored their first significant victory with the election four years earlier of Governor William Sherman Jennings. But the 1904 primary proved to be the most significant battle and subsequent victory for the reform faction. Leading the conservative Democrats in the race for governor was a prominent and heavily favored United States congressman, Robert W. Davis. An attorney, Davis had in the past represented Florida's powerful railroad companies, and as a candidate for the gubernatorial party nomination, he enjoyed their support. Representing the reform faction of the party in the primary fight was Napoleon Bonaparte Broward, a state representative, popular local political leader, and businessman from Duval County.²

When the hard-fought battle was over, the reform forces had scored an impressive victory with the nomination of Broward for governor. The impact and historical significance of Broward's victory can be seen in the important legislation that came about

in his subsequent administration and in the two administrations that followed his term in office. During that period, the Florida legislature passed laws that significantly altered the nature and role of state government in Florida. Democratic government was strengthened, state government developed a greater commitment to provide educational and other needed services for the state's citizens, and significant changes were made that provided for state regulation of large business and corporate activities.³ Broward's overall importance in the reform movement was characterized by his biographer as follows: "The role of Napoleon Broward was an all-important one in Florida's liberal movement; he gave it direction, leadership, and a name — 'The Broward Era.'"⁴

Not unlike "progressive" movements in other states at the time, Broward's campaign dealt with such issues as the nature and role of democratic government in providing services and representation to all of its citizens, the merits of the primary system for choosing candidates for the general election, the power and influence of large corporations on state government and party politics, and the extent of corruption in government and ways of controlling or eliminating the abuses which led to the

corruption. Related to these issues, but clearly unique to the Florida "progressive" movement was the question of the ownership and possible development of the vast amount of undeveloped wetlands in the southern part of the state. The land question eventually came to dominate the Broward campaign, with the Duval Democrat becoming a leading spokesperson for drainage and development.

The ownership and development of state lands proved to be the most complex issue that Broward dealt with in the campaign. Interest in draining Florida's overflowed lands was recorded as early as 1848.⁵ In 1851 and 1855, the state legislature passed laws that established both the machinery for developing these lands and for sponsoring the building of transportation systems.⁶ To administer this program, the lawmakers established the Internal Improvement Fund, governed by a board of trustees consisting of the governor, comptroller, treasurer, attorney general, and registrar of state lands.⁷ The legislation also allowed the legislature to grant alternate sections of swamp and overflowed lands, for six miles on either side of the right-of-way, to both railroad and canal companies, providing the projects had the approval of the trustees. The total acres of land from that time until 1904 held by the Internal Improvement Fund amounted to 20,133,837.42 acres.⁸

From 1868 to 1876, the trustees disposed of several millions of acres of lands, but did not grant any lands other than the alternate sections, as the law stipulated.⁹ Thereafter, many land grants were made that apparently were in violation of the original charter provisions.¹⁰ Although the original law limited grants to transportation companies to 3,849 acres per mile of rail built, grants to railroad companies often contained 8,000 to 20,000 acres

per mile. Moreover, many acres that were given away were not, and never had been, overflowed. These grants were made, not by the board, but by the legislature. However, from Governor William D. Bloxham's first term in 1881 to the end of his second term in 1900, the board honored the legislative grants and deeded over the lands. During this period, approximately ninety land granting acts were passed, totaling more than three million acres over and above the actual number of acres ever held by the state from the beginning. Obviously, all could not be honored, even had all the contract agreements been fulfilled. During that period, the railroad companies were given over eight million acres, and canal companies were given almost three million acres.¹¹

With the close of Bloxham's final administration, several conclusions could be drawn. Much, if not all, of the state lands once held by the Internal Improvement Fund had been given away or promised by grants and contracts; great progress had been made in the building of much needed transportation systems; and little had been done actually to drain overflowed lands. Governor William S. Jennings sparked a new interest in drainage. When a number of railroad companies, led by the powerful Louisville and Nashville Company, brought suits against the state for much of those lands not yet deeded away, Jennings and the other members of the board of trustees of the Fund decided not to honor the legislature grants and to go back to the provisions of the 1855 charter. Jennings wanted to retain the lands for the benefit of the state and to begin serious state efforts to develop them. The railroad companies took their cases to court, where the issue was tied up as the Jennings administration ended. For his part, Jennings had commissioned

studies of the engineering problems involved in drainage and had collected a large amount of data. Armed with Jennings's data that was favorable to drainage, Broward took up the cause and became, in his gubernatorial campaign, the state's foremost champion of drainage and development.¹²

How and why Broward became the leading exponent of drainage is not completely clear. No evidence was found that indicated he even considered the drainage aspect of the land issue in his initial campaign planning. In the way he chose to characterize the nature of the campaign and his general antagonism toward the railroad interests, it was natural for him to oppose the land suits brought by the carriers. Moreover, in that Jennings, as a Broward-supported liberal, had taken a stand against the corporation claims in favor of public retention, Broward would have been expected to take the same position. And, indeed, in the late fall of 1903, Broward made his position clear that he opposed deeding away the remaining lands to the railroad developers. Yet, in those early weeks, no references to drainage were found in his speeches or campaign literature. This remained true of Broward's campaign throughout the first six weeks of 1904.¹³

By late February, however, Broward began to strongly advocate not only retention of the lands but also state-sponsored drainage and development. He began to incorporate into his speeches enormous amounts of statistics and other data from numerous pamphlets and reports relating to drainage and development. Moreover, he carried with him an easel and map to use as a visual aid in explaining his proposal.¹⁴ He often held audiences well past midnight in his detailed discussions of the plans he had for the marsh lands.¹⁵

Why did Broward become an advocate of drainage and devote so much of

Most *Broward Legacy* readers are familiar with Governor Napoleon Bonaparte Broward's Everglades drainage project, and how that project eventually opened much of south Florida to settlement, leading to the creation of the county that bears the governor's name. In the following article, James Thomas Brooks, Jr., addresses the lesser known and somewhat puzzling questions of how Broward, a Jacksonville tugboat captain and politician, became interested in reclaiming south Florida's wetlands, and, even less predictably, how this interest helped him to win the governorship at a time when the vast majority of Florida's voters lived in the northern portion of the state. To answer these questions, Dr. Brooks turns to Broward's own speeches, which reveal the evolution of his thoughts and strategy

during the 1904 gubernatorial campaign.

A native of western North Carolina, Dr. Brooks received his B.S. degree from Appalachian State University, and his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Florida. Although his doctoral work was in speech communication, he has maintained an active interest in American history, particularly the history of the South. This particular article is taken from his unpublished doctoral dissertation entitled *A Rhetorical Study of the Campaign Speaking of Selected Southern Reform Governors during the Progressive Era*. Currently, Dr. Brooks is Professor of Speech Communication and Chairman of the Department of Speech and Theatre at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

