

# MURPHREE FOR PRESIDENT!

## **The Curious Case of UF President Albert A. Murphree's Nomination for the Presidency of the United States**

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BOYD MURPHREE, PHD / POLITICAL PAPERS ARCHIVIST



The current presidential election year marks the centennial of the University of Florida's role in one of the more curious incidents in the history of presidential nominations. At the 1924 Democratic National Convention, William Jennings Bryan nominated University of Florida president Alfred A. Murphree for the presidency of the United States. Although the media feeding frenzy that followed resulted in massive ridicule of Bryan for nominating Murphree, an unknown political outsider, the incident brought national attention to UF, which was then an obscure southern university.



Fig. 1: Portrait of UF President + Albert A. Murphree. (UFDC): <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00031409/00001/images>.

If Bryan is remembered today, it is probably for his role in the Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925. However, the national controversy that was the Scopes Trial came at the end of Bryan's long public career. A three-time unsuccessful Democratic presidential nominee, Bryan burst onto the national political scene in 1896, the year of his first nomination, with his spellbinding acceptance address that became known as the Cross of Gold speech for its denunciation of the monetary gold standard as a tool for the wealthy to dominate the laboring masses. His fight for the economic rights of working people earned Bryan the moniker of "The Great Commoner."



Fig. 2: The Florida Alligator, January 19, 1924 (UFDC): <https://newspapers.uflib.ufl.edu/UF00028291/00682>.

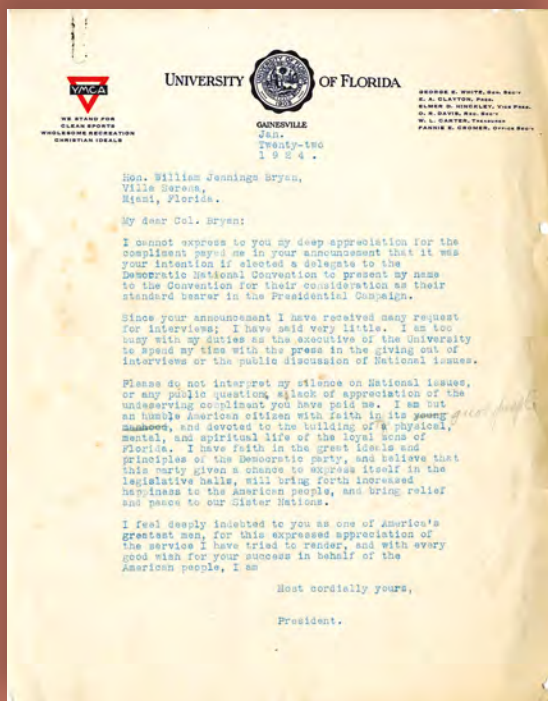
Since 1913, the Bryans had owned a winter home in Miami. Bryan became a permanent resident of Florida in 1921. Although he maintained his interest in politics, Bryan devoted most of his time to his Christian faith, leading large Bible study classes and spreading the gospel through speeches and publications. It was their mutual devotion to practicing an active Bible-based, evangelical Christianity that cemented the friendship between Bryan and President Murphree from the time Bryan first spoke in Gainesville in 1916. Bryan endorsed Murphree's vision of UF as an institution that promoted the development of young white men—by state law the student body was white and male only—in a Christian environment that included twice weekly chapel attendance and no tolerance for alcohol and gambling.

Bryan's admiration for Murphree culminated in his announcement on January 14, 1924, that if elected as a delegate from Florida to the Democratic National Convention, he would nominate Dr. Albert A. Murphree for President of the United States. The *Florida Alligator* of January 19 published Bryan's statement on Murphree, which praised the university president as "a rare combination of intellect and heart," a "splendid executive" who was "dry [for prohibition] and progressive and sound on economic questions."

Bryan's prominence in American life ensured that his announcement received immediate national press attention.

President Murphree was bowled over on hearing the news of Bryan's announcement; however, he did not immediately reject Bryan's intention to nominate him. He told the *Gainesville Sun* that he was flattered by Bryan's confidence in his abilities, and that he was, as Bryan said, "a dry, progressive Democrat." Murphree wrote to Bryan thanking him for his consideration and declaring himself as a "humble American citizen with faith in its great people" who believed in the "great ideals and principles of the Democratic party."

The press, however, did not take his "nomination" seriously. Except for a smattering of Florida newspapers, the national press mostly ridiculed Bryan's choice of Murphree as preposterous and questioned the Great Commoner's motives. The *Cincinnati Enquirer* ran a comical photograph of Murphree holding a small alligator wearing a Florida pennant under the title of "Choice of W. J. Bryan." Newspapers claimed that Bryan's support for Murphree was a cynical ploy to get himself elected as a delegate to the Democratic National Convention, where he hoped to produce enough pro-Murphree dry, southern delegates to



**Fig. 3:** Draft of a letter from Albert A. Murphree to William Jennings Bryan, January 22, 1924, thanking Bryan for the honor of Bryan's intention to nominate Murphree for President of the United States. President Albert A. Murphree Administrative Policy Records, Series P4, Box 25, University of Florida Archives Presidents' Collections.

**Fig. 4:** Much of the national press ridiculed Bryan's nomination of Murphree. In this photo, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* pokes fun at the "Choice of W. J. Bryan." *Cincinnati Enquirer*, January 17, 1924. Newspapers.com.

derail the possible nomination of Alabama senator Oscar Underwood, who was opposed to federal prohibition.

Murphree understood that Bryan probably did see his nomination as a move to undercut Underwood. Even if that was true, he explained to a friend, he did not believe that any southerner could obtain the Democratic nomination, “much less a Floridian.” Murphree soon realized that his reputation as a serious academic and administrator was being damaged by the nomination controversy. He began to distance himself from some of Bryan’s views, especially on evolution. Where Bryan denounced Darwin’s theory as unbiblical and a threat to the faith of the nation’s youth, Murphree, defended evolution as a theory “accepted by scientists as offering the most plausible explanation of life processes.”

Bryan and Murphree’s view of the Democratic presidential nomination also began to diverge. By the end of January 1924, Murphree was tired of the overwhelming press attention, even though he did not issue a rejection of Bryan’s nomination until February 21. He was

“embarrassed by the publicity of this whole affair” and wished “it had never occurred.”

Not Bryan. He was a tireless and victorious candidate for the position of at large delegate to the Democratic National Convention. The convention was held in New York City during June and July 1924 and became the longest nomination contest in the history of presidential conventions. Although Bryan, after Murphree’s withdrawal, pledged to support William McAdoo, he put Murphree’s name before the convention as one of three southerners whom he deemed to be qualified for the presidency. Many of the delegates thought Bryan was a joke, a political fossil as extinct as the human ancestors that Bryan had derided as “monkeys” in his speeches against evolution. When one attendee yelled “Never heard of him” after hearing Bryan praise Murphree as “Florida’s eminent educator,” the Great Commoner insulted the common heckler: “I would not expect that persons uneducated as to the great men of the nation would recognize the mention of their names.” The convention was the most humiliating experience of Bryan’s life.

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Fig. 5: William Jennings Bryan at the 1924 Democratic Convention (UFDC): <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00032189/00001/citation>.

While his nomination episode was humiliating for the university president as well, Murphree saw at least one positive outcome. His fifteen minutes of fame focused press attention on UF. Murphree said he received letters from people across the country who expressed interest in moving to Florida and having their sons attend the university. There was also another legacy. In waging his fight to become a Democratic convention delegate, Bryan advocated for a Floridian being nominated for president. Today, the prospect of not having a Floridian run for president seems unlikely.

Murphree's presidential nomination story is documented in the administrative papers of President Murphree within the University Archives and contemporary newspapers, including the *Florida Alligator* (University of Florida Digital Collections) and the *Gainesville Sun* (Libraries databases). [S](#)