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# JOHN T. LESLEY: TAMPA'S PIONEER RENAISSANCE MAN

By DONALD J. IVEY



**Rev. Leroy G. Lesley family -- 1857.**  
**Left to right: Leroy G., Mary C., Indiana (Livingston), and John T. Lesley.**

- Courtesy Lesley Family

Life on the early Florida frontier forced a person to be versatile. In the mid-to late-1800s specialization had not yet consumed American society, and if an individual was to succeed, he would have to become a "jack-of-all-trades"-a Renaissance man. This is the story of one of those men.

Anyone with even a passing interest in early Tampa history will recognize the name John

T Lesley. Indeed, there were few aspects in the life of the young community -- be it economic, political, military or social -- that he did not touch in some significant way. His life was so inextricably bound with this area that at times it is difficult to separate the two. In a life that spanned 78 years, he saw Tampa grow from an outpost on the edge of the frontier to a bustling community on the verge of becoming a major Florida

city. Yet surprisingly, there has never been a serious attempt to compile a comprehensive biography of the man. This article, while by no means complete, will offer a look at the life of this remarkable man, his accomplishments, and his contributions to our area.<sup>1</sup>

John Thomas Lesley was born on May 12, 1835 in Madison County in the northern part of the Florida Territory.<sup>2</sup> He was something of a rarity for his day and age (and for ours as well) -- a Florida native. He was the eldest of the three children of Leroy Gilliland and Indiana Childs (some sources say Chiles) Livingston Lesley, who at the time owned a plantation about eight miles outside of the town of Madison and were among the earliest settlers of that county.<sup>3</sup>

John's father Leroy was a colorful character in his own right, who would come to exert a powerful influence over both his family and later, over the Tampa community. Originally from a well-to-do planter family in Abbeville District, South Carolina, he moved to the territory in 1829 with his younger brother James.<sup>4</sup> At the age of 36, he entered the ministry and was ordained a minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South in Quincy in 1846. "Six foot two, red-headed and as slender as his stipend," he was a man of zealous temperament, with strong opinions and a personality to match.<sup>5</sup> Tampa historian D. B. McKay aptly describes him in these terms: ". . . he was absolutely unreasonable with those who could not hold his views on politics, culture and religion. Domineering, arrogant and demanding ... he balanced these attributes with strict fairness, honesty and loyalty."<sup>6</sup>

His mother, Indiana Livingston Lesley was also a native of Abbeville, South Carolina. She had come to Madison County with her three brothers, who soon became some of the largest land and slave owners in the

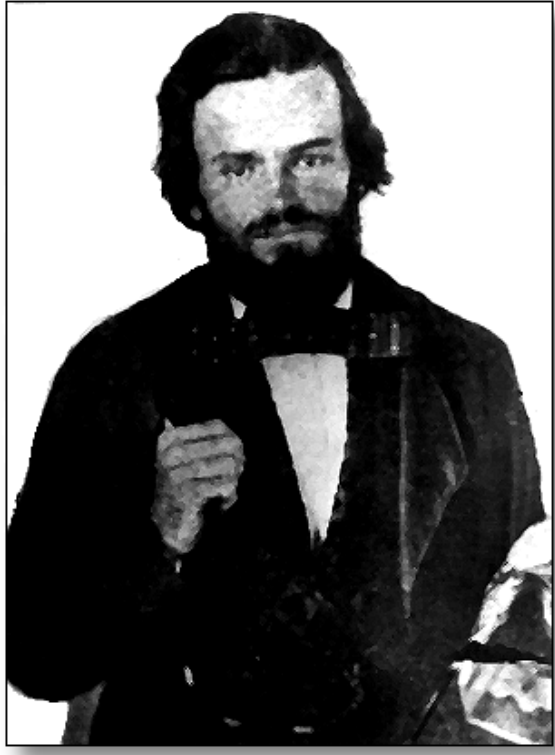
county.<sup>7</sup> When she married Lesley in 1834, "as her dowry she brought her husband several Negro families, and the Lesley plantation was increased considerably."<sup>8</sup> A woman "noted in life for her probity and strictly Christian walk," little more is known of her.<sup>9</sup>

From both of his parents, young John would inherit strong religious and moral convictions combined with his father's natural bent for leadership. McKay, who knew Lesley personally, says that he "inherited the ability to lead. I saw it demonstrated many times in town meetings, in political conventions, in gatherings to consider plans for the welfare of the community."<sup>10</sup>

Two years after his ordination, Rev. Lesley was assigned to the Methodist Hillsborough mission, with headquarters in Tampa. By the fall of that year he had moved his family (and their 15 slaves) to the new community, where they settled on a 30 acre tract near Lafayette (now John E Kennedy Boulevard) and East Streets.<sup>11</sup>

When the Lesleys first arrived in Tampa, the area was little more than a makeshift settlement built around the army's outpost at Fort Brooke. As one source states: "When Captain Lesley first came to Tampa there were only two stores in the place, and not more than two hundred inhabitants."<sup>12</sup> It was still very much a "backwoods" area, with no railroad link to the rest of the state and only a few sandy trails to serve as roads.<sup>13</sup>

Thirteen year-old John, who had previously attended the Madison Academy for Boys, became a pupil in Tampa's first community school. This school, held in the county courthouse, was taught by an Englishman, W. P. Wilson, and paid for by parents



**John T. Lesley on his wedding day.**

-Courtesy Florida State Archives

through tuition fees.<sup>14</sup> Little else is known about his early childhood and youth, although he must have acquired at an early age a love for working with horses. McKay recalled that in his later years Lesley "loved fine horses - he usually had five or six saddle horses in his home stable, some of them racers. He never missed a race meeting, and sometimes rode his horses - particularly if they were fractious."<sup>15</sup>

Unlike his father, John apparently had little inclination for the pulpit, but he exhibited a talent for working with his hands and soon took up the first of his many careers--that of carpenter.<sup>16</sup> Beginning in late 1851, the 16-year-old helped his father to build the first permanent church in town at the corner of Lafayette and Morgan Streets. The First Methodist, or "the little white church" as it

came to be known, stood on that site until it was destroyed by fire in 1894.<sup>17</sup>

When news of the Seminole ambush of the Hartsuff expedition raced across the frontier in late 1855, Rev. Lesley was among the first to organize a volunteer militia company for service against the Indians. As captain of his own company of mounted volunteers (which was subsequently known as the "Cow Boys" or, the "Florida Crackers"), he saw action throughout the duration of the Third Seminole War.<sup>18</sup>

John Lesley's military service records indicate that he was with his father's company from the very beginning. He was first mustered into service with the rest of the command on January 3, 1856 at Ft. Blount in what is now Polk County, but was then Hillsborough. Altogether, he would serve five terms of enlistment with the "Cow Boys," totaling 32 months of active service. For the first eight months, he served as a corporal, then for the following 18 months was a private, and finally ended his last six-month tour of duty as the company's first lieutenant, or seconding-command to his father.<sup>19</sup>

Capt. Lesley was an active and aggressive commander. Frequently, he would take his men on patrols deep into unsettled Indian country. It was hard campaigning, with troops continually engaged in tracking down enemy war parties, and searching out and destroying their dwellings and food supplies.<sup>20</sup>

One reported incident alleged that during one of these patrols, the famed Seminole warrior Billy Bowlegs himself had laid an ambush for Lesley's men. As Bowlegs supposedly later told Lesley, he had drawn a bead at close range on the captain, who was at the head of his men. He was about to pull



IN THE NAME AND BY THE AUTHORITY OF THE  
State of Florida.

TO ALL TO WHOM THESE PRESENTS MAY COME GREETING:

Whereas, John T. Lesley hath been  
Elected according to the Constitution and laws of this State, to be  
Captain of a volunteer Company of  
Infantry styled the Sunny South Guard  
from the 6<sup>th</sup> day of June 1861, to continue during good behavior, or until his  
office is vacated by law:

Now, Therefore, The said John T. Lesley is  
COMMISSIONED to be such Captain of said Sunny  
South Guard according to the Constitution  
and laws of said State for the term aforesaid, and to have, hold and exercise the said office, and all  
the powers appertaining thereto, and to fulfil the duties thereof, and to receive the privileges and  
emoluments thereof, as aforesaid.

In Testimony Whereof, The Governor of said State  
has signed this Commission, at the Capitol, in Tallahassee, this 30<sup>th</sup> day of July  
A. D. 1861.

W. A. Curry  
GOVERNOR OF FLORIDA

By the Governor—Attorney  
J. P. Holland  
ATTORNEY AND INSURANCE UMBRELLA

No trial  
of office yet  
claimed

STATE OF FLORIDA,

I do swear that I am duly qualified, according  
to the Constitution of this State, to exercise the

County of Hallebury office of Captain of the Sunny South  
Guard from the 6<sup>th</sup> day of June 1861 to which I have been Elected  
and will, to the best of my abilities, discharge the duties thereof, and preserve, protect and defend  
the Constitution of this State and of the Confederate States of America.

Given in and witnessed before me, this 6<sup>th</sup> day

John T. Lesley

and of August A. D. 1861

William D. Clay  
Justice of the Peace

Commission of John T. Lesley as captain of the Sunny South Guards.

--Courtesy University of South Florida Special Collections.

The trigger, when he noticed another detachment of soldiers to his rear and seeing them, called off the attack.<sup>21</sup> Whether or not this incident actually ever happened is debatable, but it does serve to illustrate the close-quarter, hit-and-run nature of the fighting.

After John was mustered out of the army on May 17, 1858, he returned to Tampa and began a second, and far more profitable career than that of carpentry: stock-raising.<sup>22</sup> At that time, Hillsborough County was a prime producer of cattle in the state, and by the late 1850s a new market had been opened up for the trade in Cuba, by Scottish-born Tampa merchant James McKay.<sup>23</sup>

Lesley was right on McKay's heels for the Cuban market, and by 1860, his business acumen had enabled him to build up a sizeable fortune. The 1860 census shows Lesley with real estate valued at \$2,550 and personal property worth \$3,980 - including three slaves. At the age of 25, Lesley had already become one of Tampa's leading citizens.<sup>24</sup>

This interim period between the Seminole and Civil Wars also saw Lesley becoming increasingly active in civic affairs. In September of 1858, he was elected to the first of many public offices he would hold throughout his life--that of city marshal of Tampa.<sup>25</sup> In the following year, he helped to organize Tampa's first volunteer fire company, and served as its 1st sergeant.<sup>26</sup> The period also brought him a new bride: the former Margaret (Brown) Tucker, 20, widow of the late William W. Tucker, whom she reportedly married at 14.<sup>27</sup> The couple was married in Tampa on August 26, 1858, with the Rev. Lesley presiding.<sup>28</sup>

When Florida seceded from the Union on January 10, 1861, the news was generally

very well received in the Bay area. Most residents were ardent secessionists, and with their roots in South Carolina, the Lesleys were no exception.<sup>29</sup> John Lesley's own feelings on the issue were neatly summarized in a speech he delivered to the citizens of Tampa shortly before leaving the area to go to war:

That constitution which our forefathers forged from blood and suffering for six years, has by the darkened hands of Abolitionists and Republicans been broken asunder - and the High Tribunal of the land defied in its decree defining rights of personal property [a reference to the 1857 Dred Scott decision, which defined slaves as property] ... [they] have entirely devoured the last vestige of personal guarantees of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness defined by the Constitution ... if fate decrees, but God forbid, Anglo-Saxon brother will be warred with brother for right and country. . . we of the South vow anew that we stand united in a glorious cause: and we its defenders beseech of a Divine Providence guidance for a triumphal victory.<sup>30</sup>

Like many in the South, Lesley formed his own company of volunteers, which came to be known as the "Sunny South Guards," to meet the supposed northern threat. According to the Lesley family, this unit was originally organized in Tampa in 1860 as an independent volunteer company for policing the Bay area.<sup>31</sup> During this period, they could often be seen parading nightly "by torch light through Tampa streets."<sup>32</sup> The guards were said to have been "from the best families of the town and vicinity."<sup>33</sup> For example Lesley's first lieutenant was Henry

L. Mitchell, a young Tampa attorney who later became Governor of Florida.<sup>34</sup>

The Guards were first mustered into the Florida State Militia, and later were accepted into the regular Confederate Army. After constant feuding between the Guards and state militia authorities in the area, Lesley himself took command of Ft. Brooke on August 21, 1861. His command lasted less than two weeks, and he and the Guards were then ordered to Shaw's Point near the mouth of the Manatee River.<sup>35</sup>

In December, as Company "K" in the newly formed 4th Florida Infantry Regiment, the Sunny South Guards were ordered to Fernandina in northeastern Florida to help meet an expected Federal invasion there, and became the first Tampa company to leave the area for the war.<sup>36</sup> There, Lesley and his men received their baptism of fire, as the 4th was involved in sporadic clashes with Federals for control of the area. After Confederate forces evacuated the island in March 1862, the Guards were sent to Camp Langford, near Jacksonville and then west to Mobile, where the regiment served on routine duty as provost guards. This lasted until July, when they were ordered to return to Florida to check a Federal raid coming from Pensacola. In the meantime, on September 5, 1862 Lesley had been promoted to the rank of major of the 4th to fill a vacancy.<sup>37</sup>

In July, the 4th moved on to Chattanooga, where they joined Gen. Braxton Bragg's Confederate Army of Tennessee, which was then locked in a bitter struggle with the Federal Army of the Cumberland under Gen. Rosecrans. On December 31, 1862, the unit saw heavy fighting at Murfreesboro in central Tennessee, and two days later, again saw action at Stone River, where the 4th was the last Confederate unit to retire from the

field of battle.<sup>38</sup> In these actions, Lesley's Seminole War experience must have been of value, for he proved to be a fine officer. After the engagements, he was commended for his courage in action by the commander of the 4th, Col. W.L.L. Bowen, who wrote: "Much is due to ... Major Lesley for [his] active efficiency in both actions."<sup>39</sup>

But by 1863, as the war dragged on in the West and news of events in Florida began to trickle back to the troops there, Lesley wanted to return home. The tightening of the Federal blockade on the South combined with increasing lawlessness in the Tampa Bay area had brought severe hardships on Tampans, including Lesley's family. Reports coming out of the town in 1862 painted a bleak picture: "The state of things [at] Tampa is fearful. They are literally starving. They have no coffee, no tea, no flour, and no cloth of any kind, except their common homespun, for which they pay \$1.25 per yard. They all say they cannot hold out much longer."<sup>40</sup> On February 28, 1863, he submitted his resignation as major of the 4th, and in his resignation letter, gives us a look at the state of his own affairs at home:

I have several Negroes now uncontrolled and a large stock of Cattle roaming at large which will necessarily go to destruction [sic] unless some attention is given to them. [B]esides My effects are in that portion of the State of Florida where it is almost impossible to obtain provision at any price. Corn now bringing from \$500 to \$800 dollars per bushel...my private affairs have been neglected and are fast going to ruin.<sup>41</sup>

After his resignation was accepted, Lesley returned home, only to begin a new phase of his military career. Florida was at that time

**Cattle Notices.**

**A**LL PERSONS ARE HEREBY NOTIFIED to watch for, Milk, Kill, Drive or Ship, any cattle in the following Marks and Brands except by permission from me or my authorized agents.

SX

JO

JS

SX or large C with small C in center

H

B L

Circle S.

Circle S

JT

T

T

Big C and little C in center.

Big C and little C in center.

Alex Sloan and M. H. Sloan, in Sumner and Hernando counties; E. G. Wilder and H. M. Bryant, Hillsboro and Polk counties; T. S. Knight, S. T. Hancock, W. H. Vandervoort, John Young and C. P. Parrish in Manatee and Polk counties are my authorized agents.

JOHN T. LESLEY.

supplying large amounts of beef to the Confederacy, but increasing Federal incursions into the state greatly hindered those efforts, and little of the precious contraband was getting through.<sup>42</sup> Other groups were also making Confederate operations in the Tampa Bay area difficult. Historian Ernest L. Robinson calls these groups "marauding parties who were making war on the thinly settled villages from Cedar Keys southward. These marauders were looked upon as little better than pirates, as they robbed all ages and sexes."<sup>43</sup> As the Confederate armies to the north were slowly starving, a decision was made by authorities in Florida to combat this situation. Special units of cowmen were formed on the Florida frontier to help fight off the Federals and the large numbers of Confederate deserters who aided them.<sup>44</sup> Known as the "Cow Cavalry," they protected cattle from Federal raiders and rustlers, and oversaw cattle drives to supply the Confederate army, going as far north as Savannah and Charleston.<sup>45</sup>

John T Lesley was probably the first man in the Bay area to raise a company for the Cow Cavalry. Returning to his previous rank of captain (a title he would ever after be addressed by the citizens of Tampa), Lesley formed Company "B" of the 1st Battalion, Florida Special Cavalry, a unit which became known as the "Sandpipers." They were stationed at Ichepucksassa (Plant City) and patrolled an area ranging as far inland as the shores of Lake Okeechobee, and as far north as Bayport in Hernando County.<sup>46</sup> Soon after his company was formed, Lesley was joined by his father in service. Rev. Lesley, now 57, raised a company of his own for service with the Cow Cavalry, which was subsequently based at Brooksville in Hernando County. (Rev. Lesley had moved to his area on the outbreak of the war, and had established a plantation there.)<sup>47</sup>



John T Lesley and his men took part in several incidents of note during this period. In April of 1864, they fought their first engagement with Federal forces at Bowlegs Creek in Polk County. The brief action cost the Sandpipers their first casualties--Private James Lanier was killed, and another private, Henry Prine, was wounded. In another incident, he led his men in another skirmish against the Federals, this time at Twelve Mile Creek. Leading only 19 of his men, Lesley reportedly attacked a force of 109 marauders and in a brief but bitter skirmish routed them.<sup>48</sup>



**Original seal of the Town of Fort Brook [e], which was found on the site of a former city dump on hooker's Point in 1952.**

--Courtesy Tampa Tribune

A third incident took place at Bayport on the night of July 10, 1864. There, by Lesley's own account, he attacked a Federal force of "800 of the enemy who were burning and destroying property in their march, which I succeeded in doing."<sup>49</sup> But the full story of that incident provides details which Lesley probably would have preferred to forget. An account of the battle by William McCullough, a Federal soldier who fought

against the Cow Cavalry on several occasions, paints a very different picture:

After arriving upon the side of the [Bayport] swamp, the main command lay flat upon their arms, while we had out skirmish pickets in front, and fifty men lying in wait on a road ... It was now about 10 at night, and everything fixed for a fight if the enemy showed themselves. The party on the road proved to be the old Capt. [Rev. L.G.] Lesley ... Young Lesley [John T.], the Captain's son came up, and his father taken him for one of the Yankees, fired into him, wounding his own son, and killed my wife's nephew [Emory Campbell, of John Lesley's company] who had been conscripted into their lines ... The next morning we searched their ground ... and picked up their muskets and a cloth had which was supposed to belong to the dead man killed by themselves. After they had the fight among themselves, they returned to the town of Brooksville about 10 miles in the interior and left the Yankees masters of their own encampment and the battlefield.<sup>50</sup>

John T Lesley's grandson Theodore Lesley also provides another, more detailed description of his grandfather's part in the engagement and its aftermath:

In the year 1864 the Yankees made a landing at [Anclote, south of] Bayport. The few Confederates were instrumental in keeping them from reaching Brooksville, but they nevertheless did much damage in burning homes . . . After they had turned, and were making back to their boats, the Southerners decided

to lay a trap for them. They split up into two commands, and met farther down the road one on opposite sides, and awaited [sic] for the Federals. Capt. Hope [actually Lt. David Hope, of Rev. Lesley's company] and his men were first to arrive and station themselves. Shortly afterwards they heard and saw movements across the way, and opened fire. This was Capt. J.T. Lesley and his troops taking their places.

Their first volley killed Emory Campbell, and wounded Capt. Lesley in his left arm. The ball smashed through grandfather's elbow, and plowed up the bone coming out at his shoulder. He was taken to camp where the doctors told him it would have to be removed. Thereupon, Grandfather, commanded Ed. Wilder and one of the Collins [Hardy, John, William, D.J. and Enoch, all of whom served in John T Lesley's company], and told them to stand guard over him and if he lost consciousness to see to it that the doctors did not remove his arm unless it started turning blue. True to their trust these faithful men remained guard throughout the night while their captain tossed in pain & delirium. The doctors in cleaning the wound had to probe deep for pieces of bone, & the cloating [sic] that had been driven deep within the wound by the bullet. The arm was set at right angles and never could be straighten[ed], although in after years Capt. Lesley did manage, by perseverance, to raise it to his mouth.<sup>51</sup>



**John T. Lesley, c. 1885. Photograph by Mitchell & DeWaal of Jacksonville.**

--Courtesy Florida State Archives

As alluded to by Theodore, some blamed David Hope for the shooting, although in a letter to John written shortly after the war, the Rev. Lesley states: "I have heard it said that some of your old Company have been heard to say, that if they ever got a chance, they would have satisfaction out of Hope for shooting you; the later part I contradict." But in spite of this wound (and the controversy which surrounded it), Lesley apparently remained on active service until the end of the war.<sup>52</sup>

Lesley and his Sandpipers would also take part in the Cow Cavalry's abortive raid in February 1865 on Fort Myers, which at that time was a major base of operations for Federal units operating in South Florida. Lesley's men, together with two other area companies of Cow Cavalry, all under the command of Major William Footman, the 200 or so men slogged through rainy



**Portrait of the 1885 Florida Senate, taken on the steps of the Old Capitol in Tallahassee. John T. Lesley is in the 2<sup>nd</sup> row from the top, 4<sup>th</sup> from the left.**

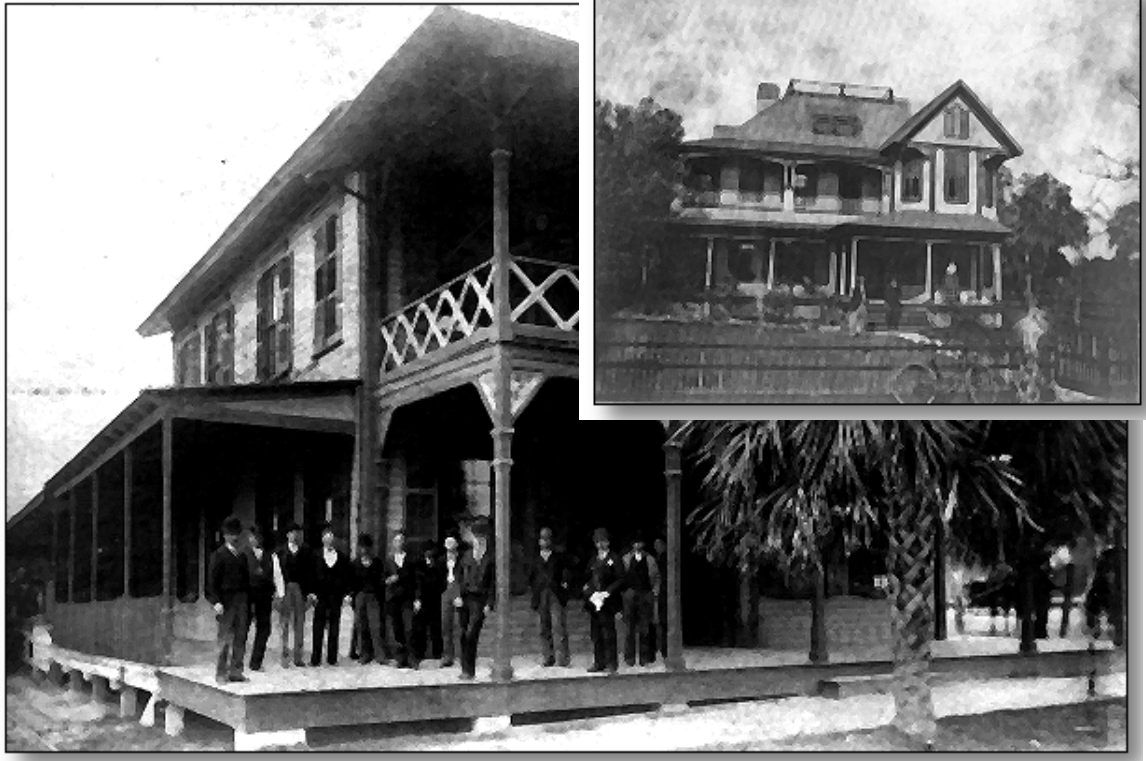
--Courtesy Florida State Archives

weather to reach the fort on February 20. After an inconclusive artillery duel between the two sides, the Confederates withdrew from the area, hungry and demoralized.<sup>53</sup> One of Lesley's own men who served in the expedition, E.G. Wilder, later recalled that "late at night we started our long, weary march back to our former quarters, a distance of 175 miles, with but a scant supply of horse feed or rations. Some of our boys ate palmetto buds on that memorable trip."<sup>54</sup> Lt. Francis C.M. Boggess, who also served with the Cow Cavalry during the attack, summed up the whole affair when he later noted that "the whole thing had been a failure and with no bread or anything to eat but beef and parched corn. The whole command was demoralized."<sup>55</sup>

Before the final collapse of the Confederacy, one last adventure awaited the Lesleys. Theodore Lesley recalled the incident in a brief sketch he wrote on the family's history:

In May of 1865 a bearded man answering to the name of Charles Howard appeared in Brooksville inquiring for the home of Captain [Rev. L.G.1 Lesly. Upon being directed and arriving at the plantation, some six miles south of the town, he revealed his identity [sic] as Judah P. Benjamin, Secretary of State for the late Confederacy. He explained he had been directed to him by his relatives in Abbeville, S.C., where he had attended that





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**United States Custom House, northwest corner of Ashley and Lafayette [Kennedy] on the river, 1886. Office and warehouse personnel during administration of John T. Lesley, Collector of Customs, 1894-1897. Left to right, H. Glogowski, Odet Grillion, Theodore Lesley, Park Trammell, J. T. Park, C.W. Carlton, Lee Ferris, Clem Watson, Col. R. B. Thomas, J. T. McMichael and J. A. Grable.**

--Courtesy Lesley Family

last Cabinet meeting with President Davis, and was asking his aid in making good his escape from the country. Captain Lesly pledged his cooperation, and the Secretary was made comfortable in the Lesly home while Capt. Lesley's son, Major John T Lesley, of Tampa, was sent for. Together the father and son made the necessary arrangements. Benjamin was carried by them to Ellington [Ellenton, in Manatee County, where Benjamin was hidden in the Gamble Mansion], where he stayed until a Sea worthy boat was obtained. Boarding it at Sarasota, he and there began his romantic and perilous

voyage that finally landed him at the Bahamas, the first stop to his ultimate destination, England. He later sent a letter to Captain Lesly thanking him for his aid and, to Mrs. Lesly [the Rev.'s second wife, Lucy Jane (Sandwich) Lesly] a number of yards of beautiful silk for a dress, together with buttons, needles and thread.<sup>56</sup>

After John T Lesley was paroled by U.S. forces (probably later that month), he returned home to an area economically devastated by war. Federal troops occupied Fort Brooke until 1869 and Lesley's cattle business was no doubt severely damaged by the effects of the war.<sup>57</sup> James McKay, Jr.,



**Captain John T. Lesley on his horse :Black.”**  
--Courtesy Lesley Family

**John T. Lesley residence, erected 1897, 407 East Street, Town of fort Brooke, now Tampa. Left to right, Theodore, John T. and India Lesley.**

-- Courtesy Lesley Family

later wrote that "[a]fter the close of the war, we returned to our homes which we found, in most instances, in a dilapidated condition. Tampa was a hard looking place. Houses were in bad order. Streets and lots were grown up mostly with weeds and the outlook was not very encouraging."<sup>58</sup>

To recover, Lesley built a sawmill on his property and supplied the area with building lumber. This, together with his cattle trade, helped him to slowly recoup his wartime losses. By 1869, he had formed a partnership with Tampa merchant William B. Henderson to engage once more in the Cuban cattle trade. This enterprise would be the engine that fueled Lesley's future prosperity, and together, Lesley and Henderson began buying cattle from cowmen all across the state.<sup>59</sup> The 1870 census shows that he had rebounded somewhat to his pre-war level of prosperity, for returns of that year show him to have real estate valued at \$1,800, and a personal estate worth \$5,000.<sup>60</sup>

He also led the movement to help the area recover from its political misfortunes. In



**Confederate re-enactors at the Lasley family monument, Oaklawn Cemetery Ramble, April 30, 1995, Tampa.**

--Courtesy John Baxley

1865, with the civil administration in chaos, he was elected to serve for a two-year term in the combined roles of Sheriff and Tax Assessor & Collector ex officio for Hillsborough County.<sup>61</sup> In March of 1869, Lesley ran for Mayor of Tampa, and headed a ticket which, as Theodore Lesley later wrote, "pledged to dissolve the city government and thereby keep it from falling into the hands of . . . corrupt adventures," whom Theodore claimed were "the former slaves of the South, abetted by northern guns and Southern renegades, [who] filled every public office with controlled henchmen."<sup>62</sup> Lesley's ticket won, and went on to fulfill their campaign pledge. No city council meetings were held and on October 4, 1869,



the county declared the City of Tampa to have "forfeited its charter, all property of the city shall be taken over by the county clerk."<sup>63</sup> By 1873, however, conditions had improved, and the city government was re-established in Tampa, with Lesley being elected one of the municipality's city councilmen for that year.<sup>64</sup>

As the state Democratic Party slowly began to recover from the effects of the war and Reconstruction, Lesley emerged as one of its leading lights in south Florida. He played a role in its revitalization in the area and soon won notice as "a leading orator in political

**Theodore Lesley (1911-1978), grandson of John T. Lesley, Lesley family historian and official Hillsborough County Historian.**

--Courtesy Tampa Tribune

campaigning , his style of speaking being direct, logical, and broad in its treatment of subjects."<sup>65</sup> By 1868, he was serving as chairman of the Hillsborough County Democratic Executive Committee, where, in Theodore Lesley's words, he was "successful in throwing off the Radical rule."<sup>66</sup> The Tampa Times later said of him that "no man in Florida displayed more bravery and fidelity in the long and trying fight to relieve the state from 'carpetbag' rule and negro domination."<sup>67</sup>

In 1876, he was elected as Hillsborough County's representative in the Florida House. In that year, the Democrats were successful in finally winning back both the State Legislature and the governor's chair from the Republicans, which marked the final end of Reconstruction in Florida. In part the Democrats won because of a pledge made during the campaign to restrict the rise of state tax rates. But in the subsequent session of the Legislature held during the following year, that pledge was apparently abandoned by many, and a push to raise the rates was begun. According to Theodore

Lesley however, John T. Lesley led the movement to restrict the tax and hold the Democrats to their pledge and successfully "defied the governor and a majority of the senate and held the lower house from approving a higher millage for state tax than had been promised the people."<sup>68</sup>

At the close of the 1877 legislative session, Lesley was harshly criticized by some of his colleagues (led by Rep. P.P. Bishop of Putnam County), and was placed in the curious position of having to defend himself from charges of having *not* raised taxes. In an editorial in the *Sunland Tribune*, Lesley responded with angry scorn to his critics, saying that:

What they found themselves able to do and say did not excite a fig's worth of solicitude in my mind ... How adroitly the Gentleman from Putnam avoids [the] facts for facts they are, and I challenge their denial. We submitted figures to prove our position; they could not refute them. We asked this same writer up on the floor of the House to come up and redeem the pledge he had made to the people in the late campaign. His modest reply was that campaign speeches were one thing, and business another, and that this was business. As for myself, I made no pledge in the late campaign that I did not intend to carry out and still intend to labor for.<sup>69</sup>

It was the first of several times that he would be called upon to defend his actions in public office, and illustrated two of his most dominant traits as a politician: a strong sense of moral and ethical principle, as well as a tendency towards being somewhat thin-skinned and over-sensitive to criticism.

For his stand on this issue, Lesley received statewide attention, and was praised as "a legislator who has labored for the good of the people with such a singleness of purpose ... His record may be found in the proceedings of the Assembly, and it is that of a man, who, in spite of all the pressures that could be brought upon him, has pushed ahead fearlessly and with unflinching integrity to the performance of the duties with which he felt himself charged."<sup>70</sup>

As a result, in 1878 he was unanimously nominated at the Hillsborough County Democratic convention to serve in the State Senate. At the time, he was in Cuba on business, but returned to accept the nomination, confidently noting that the Democrats' "course in that convention is a guarantee of their endorsement of my action in the past, a willingness to trust me in the future, and leaves but one course for any true lover of the rights and liberty of his people to pursue ... looking over your achievements in the past, the grand strides made in interest of reform against Radical misrule and oppression, I congratulate you that the end is near; that peace for which the Southern heart has long yearned, reached out in vain to gain, will be obtained, and in thunder tones to an amazed and astonished world proclaimed."<sup>71</sup>

His opponent in the general election was controversial Tampa Republican James T Magbee. Backed by Magbee's arch-rival, *Sunland Tribune* editor John P. Wall, Lesley was the darling of the hour. The result was a lopsided affair, with Lesley the victor by 589 votes to 143.<sup>72</sup>

But during the following year, Lesley would find himself once again embroiled in controversy. The issue this time concerned his position on a law which was passed allowing local grand juries to propose a raise

in county property taxes. Lesley supported the measure, and was again assailed by his critics. In response, he promptly resigned from the Senate, noting that "if I have erred, it is of the head, not of the heart, for I had no other interest than the interest of my people at heart... [I] am done with politics only wishing to be known as an [sic] humble worker in the ranks of Democracy."<sup>73</sup> But in fact, he was not yet through with politics - far from it, as later events would prove.

Meanwhile, in his business affairs, Lesley found the going to be somewhat easier. After 1872, Lesley sold his saw mill and returned to stock-raising on a full-time basis.<sup>74</sup> By 1879, he was one of the wealthiest cattlemen in Florida, and was shipping 12,000 head annually out of the area.<sup>75</sup> Noted Florida historian Joe Akerman, author of *Florida Cowman*, recounts an interesting story relating to the depth of Lesley's prosperity in those years. "Revele Anderson, a black cowman who worked for Lesley, remembers seeing a wash tub full of gold coins in the bedroom of John T Lesley. This was before Miller and Henderson [Capt. John Miller and Lesley's partner W.B. Henderson, who served as bankers for area cattlemen] started handling his banking for him."<sup>76</sup>

But by no means was Lesley just a "cowman." He diversified his business interests to include a vast array of real estate holdings and soon became the largest single landowner in the county. In 1877, the military reservation encompassing Fort Brooke was drastically reduced, with all but 148 acres going to the public domain for sale. Lesley was one of the largest buyers of this land, which he purchased for \$1.25 an acre.<sup>77</sup> This area would later comprise the town of Fort Brooke, which Lesley formed in 1887, serving as its mayor for most of its life until 1907, when it was incorporated

into the City of Tampa. Tampa historian Karl Grismer calls the town "notorious for many years for its gambling joints and houses of ill fame."<sup>78</sup> Another source attributes its creation to a personal slight which Lesley suffered:

As his [Lesley's] land bounded the town of Tampa on the east, he was many times accused of blocking the growth of the city, as it was unheard of trying to expand across the [Hillsborough] river. Following a personal affront he felt happened to him over settlement where the old military reservation was located ... he had the state legislature, in 1886 [actually the year was 1887 and the town was incorporated under the general laws of the state, not by act of the Legislature], incorporate all this land, together with his and reaching out to the business of what is now Ybor City as a municipality, and gave it the name of the Town of Fort Brooke.<sup>79</sup>

In 1884 for example, Hillsborough County tax rolls list Lesley as holding 3,553 acres of land valued at more than \$12,500.<sup>80</sup> In addition to properties in and around Tampa, he also owned more than 500 acres in what is now St. Petersburg and Gulfport, some of which was citrus groves.<sup>81</sup> As founder and president of the Hillsborough County Real Estate Agency, he also developed half a dozen subdivisions in the Bay area, some of which bore his name.<sup>82</sup> Another of his development projects, the Lesley Building which he erected in 1881 on the southeast corner of Washington and Franklin Streets, served for a time as quarters for Tampa's town hall.<sup>83</sup>

Between 1880 and 1890, Tampa grew by a whopping 668% -- from 720 to 5,532

residents -- making it the fastest growing community in the state at the time.<sup>84</sup> During this period especially - crucial years in Tampa's early development - Lesley played a key role in promoting the area's progress. After his death in 1913, the *Tampa Tribune* wrote that:

Captain Lesley was always prominent in civic affairs and in later years his judgment and advice were courted in matters affecting the future of Tampa and its business development... some of the leaders in Tampa's business enterprises today owe much of their success to his valuable counsel when they were I getting a start.'<sup>85</sup>

It was surely no exaggeration. A brief sketch of Lesley's activities during this period illustrates this point. In 1884, he enthusiastically supported the coming of Henry Plant's South Florida Railroad, which opened up the area for the first time to major development. To help this, the first railroad to reach Tampa, Lesley donated land just north of East Street near Cass as a right-of-way for the railroad.<sup>86</sup> In 1885, he became a charter member of the Tampa Board of Trade and served as its first vice president.<sup>87</sup> In this capacity he advocated establishment of a city water works and helped bring the cigar industry to Florida, selling 16 blocks of "Lesley's Subdivision" to Ybor and Company which formed the basis for today's Ybor City.<sup>88</sup> That same year, he also served as one of the incorporators of the Tampa Street Railway Company, which gave the city its first streetcar railway.<sup>89</sup> In 1886, he was a member of the first Board of Directors of the First National Bank of Tampa, which for a time was the oldest national bank in Florida.<sup>90</sup> And in 1887, he was one of the founders of the Tampa Electric Company,

which brought the first electric lighting to town. His influence had reached such heights that by 1887, the *Tampa Journal* was calling him "a man of great influence, [who] exerts today more power in the State Legislature than our present Representatives, the Board of Trade and the whole town of Tampa."<sup>91</sup>

In many ways, the 1880s were Lesley's "golden years," when he was at the height of his powers and abilities -- as a businessman, as a legislator, and as a force in the local community. But these years were not without their troubles for him, either. In 1880, he was involved in a tragic incident which sent shock waves throughout south Florida. At the time, Lesley was involved in a feud with a certain Dr. J.S. Hackney of the Alafia region. Exact details of the dispute are not known, but the bad blood between the two men seemed to stem from Lesley's cattle trading business. The feud grew to such proportions that, as D.B. McKay relates:

Dr. Hackney came to town one day and told several people that he intended to kill Lesley. Someone who heard his threat informed Lesley, so the latter was armed with a pistol when he came down town [to Tampa].

Hackney learned that Lesley was in Philip Dzialynski's store and went there in search of him. Lesley backed away but warned Hackney that if attacked he would shoot to protect himself. Hackney continued to advance and Lesley to retreat until he was cornered and could go no further. Then he drew his pistol and killed Hackney with the first shot.<sup>92</sup>

A subsequent grand jury investigation exonerated Lesley of all blame in the incident and ruled that the killing had been in self-defense.<sup>93</sup> But that did not quite end the matter. Shortly thereafter, Lesley was again almost killed in another incident, according to Theodore Lesley:

Mr. Simeon E. Sparkman, shot at grandfather following Dr. Hackney's death... Sparkman, his [Hackney's] son-in-law hid out behind a small store, that was then on [the] corner of Lafayette & East Sts., and shot at grandfather while the family was at supper. Due to old fashion glass, with the waves in it, he missed his target. No one saw him, but grandfather said he knew it was he, and sent him word to that effect, but nothing more ever happened<sup>94</sup>

The 1880s also saw Lesley increase his political clout within Democratic party circles. In 1882, Lesley declined a nomination to Congress and in November of that year was easily re-elected to a second term in the Senate - once again vindicating his stand on the issues.<sup>95</sup> On January 3, 1883, he returned to the upper chamber and received four key committee posts - to Claims, Railroads and Telegraph, Commerce and Navigation, and most importantly, to the all-powerful Appropriations Committee as Chairman. The next day, he would also receive another plum assignment - a seat on the Senate Standing Committee on Constitutional Amendments.<sup>96</sup>

Lesley exerted a powerful influence over the Senate, and a preliminary review of the records for that body in 1883 and 1885 indicates that he played a relatively lowkey, but important role in introducing new legislation and participating in debates.

During the 1883 session for example, he introduced bills to protect Florida's fledging sponge industry; "to prohibit the wanton destruction of food fishes in the State"; and to provide state funds to aid Florida's blind, deaf and mute population.<sup>97</sup> He also played a role in helping to defeat legislation designed to regulate tariffs on railroads and steamboats in Florida. This, of course, is not surprising considering his pro-business philosophy and his ties to railroad interests in the state, and reflects many conservative fears at the time that government regulation of these industries would restrict badly needed immigration into Florida.<sup>98</sup>

In the 1885 session, he retained his seat on the committees on Claims and Commerce and Navigation, but lost the Appropriations chair and his other assignments, receiving instead a seat on the committees on Legislative Expenses, Indian Affairs, State Affairs, and Privileges and Elections, which he chaired.<sup>99</sup> Later, he would serve on a special committee of the Senate to revise the state's constitution, although he is recorded as having voted against a similar measure two years earlier.<sup>100</sup>

For the subsequent Constitutional Convention that was called to convene at Tallahassee in June of 1885, Lesley was elected to serve as one of Hillsborough's three delegates. After the Convention opened on June 9, he was elected as one of its two vice-presidents, and as such briefly presided over some of the deliberations of that body. In the assignment of committees, Lesley drew two - Census, Apportionment and Boundaries, and Private Corporations, which he chaired.<sup>101</sup>

During the proceedings of the Convention, Lesley appears to have primarily concerned himself with the issues of county organization, census and apportionment and

corporations. In these areas, he seems to have been largely successful in promoting his views to the Convention. He was able to push through with few amendments what eventually became Article VII of the State Constitution (on Census and Apportionment) and Sections 2-4 of Article VIII (Counties and Cities) which largely bear his imprint. And finally, he also managed to keep excessive provisions dealing with the regulation of corporations out of the final document.<sup>102</sup>

On other matters however, he was less successful. A measure he introduced on legislative powers, elections and assembling was quietly shelved, and a last-minute amendment he introduced providing stiff penalties for bribery was defeated by a vote of 62 to 31.<sup>103</sup>

According to D.B. McKay, he kept a diary during this period which briefly touched on his service during the Constitutional Convention, and shows a growing frustration with the proceedings of that body. In it, "he dwells rather scornfully on the time wasted by both sides, of frequent sessions lasting only from 10 A.M. to 1 P.M., and of the incessant 'squabbling' about trivialities." But in spite of his personal disillusionment, Lesley won the respect of delegates on both sides of the aisle, and at the close of the Convention he was presented with a beautiful gold-headed cane by the Republican minority to thank him for his impartial service as vice-president.<sup>104</sup>

At the close of the Convention in August, Lesley returned to Tampa. He largely retired from public life until 1892, when he played a major role in the State Democratic Convention held that year in Tampa. He seconded the nomination of his old friend and comrade-in-arms Henry L. Mitchell for



governor, delivering an impassioned speech on his behalf:

... his influence like the dew from heaven falls gently upon the down cast and oppressed and but tends to the refreshing and reviving of their drooping spirits. No name could have raised such a cyclone of enthusiasm as the name of Henry L. Mitchell. As a man of destiny to stand in lofty grandeur towering above the noblest production of the most brilliant [sic] minds that have illuminated and enraptured an astonished world - as a councilor [sic] his wisdom is profound, boundless, infinite, as the golden chain reaching from earth to heaven. Let us then take hold of this man of destiny armed in panoply complete here is firm footing here is solid rock. Storms may threaten, but his hand the good man holds with the other fastened to the skies. His sterling worth big heart and teeming brain inspire the masses with confidence.<sup>105</sup>

Mitchell was easily elected, and in the following year, he returned the favor by appointing Lesley clerk of the circuit court for Hillsborough County, to fill a vacancy.<sup>106</sup>

But just a few months later in 1894, after years of faithful service to the Democratic Party, Lesley finally reaped the rewards of that service with an appointment by President Grover Cleveland to the patronage-rich post of collector of customs for the Port of Tampa. Lesley's application file in the National Archives provides a fascinating glimpse into late 19th century Florida politics. He lobbied hard for the appointment through his friends and

political allies within the party, and was supported for the job by a veritable "Who's Who" of Florida Democrats, including Governor Mitchell, Congressman Stephen Mallory and both of Florida's U.S. Senators, Samuel Pasco and Wilkinson Call. Call voiced the only sour note in the chorus of praise, and in an unusually candid message to the President, gave rather equivocal support to Lesley's selection:

... I have insisted with great urgency that no appointment should be made which rendered your administration liable to the charge that you approved the fraudulent suppression of democratic votes, and the control of conventions by improper corporate influences in primary elections, and state and county conventions.

I have insisted that such a policy would drive great numbers of democratic voters into the Populist Party.

... as to the propriety of the selection of Captain Lesley for appointment on the recommendation of Governor Mitchell, I addressed you a letter not intended to be made public, in which I stated that notwithstanding my high opinion of Captain Lesley, my personal obligations to him and my entire willingness to give him my support, if you would appoint him, I thought his appointment as Governor Mitchell's friend and supporter ... might have the effect of placing the state in control of the Populists in the next election ... while I still insist that any recommendation of approval by you in appointing Federal office, any persons in any wise responsible for the suppression of the votes of the democratic people in the primaries in 1892, by the so-called Democratic State Convention which met in Tampa, or any recognition of

the representatives of the corporation rule party by which that convention was controlled... will be dangerous to continued democratic rule in the state. [However] I am convinced that Captain Lesley may be excepted from this criticism [and] ... I therefore recommend the appointment.<sup>107</sup>

After 1900, Lesley retired from active business pursuits, turning over his cattle trading business to his son Emory.<sup>108</sup> But he continued to exert a powerful influence in local politics and public affairs. In April of 1900, he was one of the leaders of a faction within Hillsborough's Democratic party which successfully challenged and unseated Peter O. Knight, then chairman of the county's Democratic executive committee, who exerted a powerful influence over city affairs. Knight was harshly criticized for helping to impose high taxes on Tampan, with "little of it spent where it can be seen." To oppose him, Lesley and a number of others ran on an "anti-Knight" ticket which pledged to replace Knight's men on the county Democratic executive committee. They won a convincing victory, winning in all but one precinct, and even Knight himself was voted out. In 1906, Lesley was also one of a handful of men who organized and founded Tampa's first "white municipal party," pledged "to bring into existence a white primary for our city." According to one member, as the organization's first president Lesley gave "the benefit of his sage advice and the movement that of his influence," but at this stage of his life that was about all Lesley had left to give, as he was quoted as saying, "Boys, I am getting so old that I can't be out much at night, but you can use my name and I will do what I can." And finally during these years, with his old friend and political ally Sam Hope, Lesley became the leader of a movement to force the State of Florida to pay Seminole War veterans their rightful pensions. But even

after years of incessant lobbying and in spite of all their best efforts, the state still failed to pay the veterans, and neither Lesley nor Hope (who died in 1919) lived to see the claims paid.<sup>109</sup>

The end was not long in coming. On July 13, 1913, after a "life of honor," Capt. Lesley died quietly at his home, after a short and undisclosed illness.<sup>110</sup> He was 78 years old, and was survived by five of his six children: Indiana-, Emory, a prominent citrus and cattleman in Kissimmee; John; Theodore, who would have his own distinguished career as a public official; and Livingston. (A sixth child, William, died in 1904 while serving as sheriff of Hillsborough County.)<sup>111</sup> His grave may today be seen in one of the older sections of Oaklawn Cemetery.

In summing up his life and accomplishments, perhaps the *Tampa Daily Times* said it best:

Captain Lesley needed no flowery tribute to fix his memory in the hearts of the people of Hillsborough County, south Florida, and all Florida for that matter, for his recorded works in war, politics and as a developer tell the story better than it can otherwise be written. Just the everyday acts of an honest, brave and unassuming man endear him to his friends and fellow citizens and do more to assure him credit in the minds of posterity than any written words or gleaming marble shafts... The death of Captain Lesley . . . removes the last citizen who figured prominently in the work of building Tampa from a military reservation into a city. He was a part of Tampa, and a big part, from the city's infancy, and his love for the city,

county and section increased as the years crept over him.... His death marks the breaking of the final link that severs the past and its traditions from the present and its hopes, and many tears have been shed because of the breaking of the bond.<sup>112</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to thank several persons for their help and encouragement of this project. Kyle VanLandingham, editor of the *Sunland Tribune*, offered invaluable advice, support and material for this project; Zack Waters and Jim Johnson provided both interesting insights and materials on Lesley's Civil War years; and Julius Gordon of the Hillsborough County Historical Commission Library also provided help through his Godsend, the indexes to the early *Florida Peninsular* and *Sunland Tribune* newspapers. I would also like to thank Ken Ford, Director of Heritage Village, for generously allowing me both the time and resources to complete this project. And finally, Dr. Joe Knetsch's excellent article on Sam Hope, which appeared in the November 1994 edition of the *Tribune*, provided much needed support and inspiration for this study.

It must be emphasized that this paper is in no way intended as an "end-all-be-all" treatment of Lesley's life. However, it is hoped that this work will lead to more in-depth analyses by future researchers. Much more needs to be written about both John T Lesley and the Lesley family in general. Hopefully, when the Lesley family papers become available at the University of South Florida Library's Special Collections later this year, more interesting material will come to light on this outstanding pioneer Florida family.

<sup>2</sup> Florida Confederate pension application of John T Lesley, Record Group 137, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee, Florida; Florida Genealogical Society, *Hillsborough County, Florida Cemeteries 1840-1985*, 8 vols. (Tampa, n.d.), vi, 1.33; Theodore Lesley, "A History of the Lesley Family in South Carolina, Particularly in Regard to the Descendants of William Lesly, Esq., of Abbeville," 37, unpublished manuscript in possession of the Lesley family, Tampa, Florida. Curiously, Theodore gives several variant spellings of the family name. The early version was apparently "Lesly," and he refers to

the Rev. L.G. using this spelling, although there are instances when the Rev. himself would sign his name "Leslie." However, by John T Lesley's day, the latter spelling apparently had become the norm, and this is the version I have used throughout this narrative for the sake of clarity.

<sup>3</sup> D.B. McKay, ed., *Pioneer Florida*, 3 vols. (Tampa, 1959), II, 353-354.

<sup>4</sup> Julius J. Gordon, *Biographical Census of Hillsborough County, Florida 1850* (Tampa, 1989), 356-357.

<sup>5</sup> D.B. McKay, "Manatee Methodist Church Marks Centennial With Program, Booklet," *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, 6 November 1949, sec. B, 14; D. B. McKay, "Leroy G. Lesley, Fighting Parson Led Tampans In Their Spiritual, Military And Political Endeavors," *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, 3 June 1956, sec. D, 13.

<sup>6</sup> McKay, *Pioneer Florida*, II, 356.

<sup>7</sup> McKay, "Leroy G. Lesley, Fighting Parson," sec. D, 13.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Tampa Florida Peninsular*, 5 May 1860, 2. Gary R. Mormino and Anthony P. Pizzo, in their book *Tampa: The Treasure City* (Tulsa, 1983) state (55) that she was from "one of Virginia's leading families," and according to Theodore Lesley ("A History of the Lesley Family," 33), both sides of her family were indeed originally from prominent Virginia families. See also McKay, *Pioneer Florida*, II, 354 and Gordon, *Biographical Census of Hillsborough County*, 356.

<sup>10</sup> McKay, *Pioneer Florida*, II, 357.

<sup>11</sup> Mormino and Pizzo, *Tampa: The Treasure City*, 55. Some sources (including Rowland H. Rerick, *Memoirs of Florida*, 2 vols. (Atlanta, 1902), ed. Francis P. Fleming, II, 592) have claimed that the move occurred in 1849, but this is improbable, based on John T Lesley's school attendance record in 1848.

<sup>12</sup> "Captain Lesley Died Yesterday," *Tampa Daily Times*, 14 July 1913, 8.

<sup>13</sup> "Life of Honor Ended; Capt. Lesley is Dead," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 14 July 1913, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Gordon, *Biographical Census of Hillsborough County*, 348; Harvey L. Wells Collections, 28 vols. (n.p.: n.d.), 11, 97, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo, Florida; Lesley, "A History of the Lesley Family," 37.

<sup>15</sup> D.B. \* McKay, "Tampa Harbor Key To Future Growth," *Tampa Tribune*, 18 May 1952, sec. C, 16.

<sup>16</sup> Ernest L. Robinson, *History of Hillsborough County Florida* (St. Augustine, 1928), 300. McKay (*Pioneer Florida*, III, 842) also states that he took up "engineering," and Lesley ("A History of the Lesley Family," 37) adds that he studied "engineering, both field and construction" at this time.

<sup>17</sup> McKay, *Pioneer Florida*, II, 354, According to Mormino and Pizzo (*Tampa: The Treasure City*, 54) the church was destroyed by fire in 1898, but the fire actually occurred in 1894. See D.B. McKay, "First Methodist Church In Tampa Built After Hard Work By Pastor," *Tampa Tribune*, 4 October 1953.

<sup>18</sup> McKay, "Leroy G. Lesley, Fighting Parson," Sec. D, 13.

<sup>19</sup> Seminole War military service records of John T Lesley, Lesley's Co., Fla. Mtd. Vols., Record Group 407, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Interestingly, a copy of one of Lesley's discharge certificates from this period found among papers in the Lesley Collection gives the following description of the man: "Five feet -- inches high, Light complexion, Dark eyes, Dark hair, and by occupation when enlisted, a Mechanic." (United States Volunteer Service discharge certificate of John T Lesley, 23 February 1858, Lesley Collection, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida. This material, along with the rest of the items from the Lesley Collection is not at present available to the public, and I am grateful to Kyle VanLandingham for kindly giving me access to copies which he had made while inspecting the Collection before it was donated to the University.)

<sup>20</sup> See *Florida Peninsular* of 30 January 1858, 2, which gives a typical report from the field of the kind of activities Lesley's command was involved in during the war.

<sup>21</sup> D.B. McKay, "Newspaper Story of 1885 Tells Of Lesley's Fight With Bowlegs," *Tampa Tribune*, 26 October 1947, sec. D, 2. James W. Covington, in *The Billy Bowlegs War* (Chuluota, Fla., 1982) writes (74) that the alleged incident occurred between Bowlegs

and John Lesley, but he has no doubt confused the son with the father.

<sup>22</sup> Lesley Seminole War service records; Robinson, *History of Hillsborough*, 300.

<sup>23</sup> John Solomon Otto, "Florida's Cattle-Ranching Frontier: Hillsborough County (1860)," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 63 (July 1984), 78.

<sup>24</sup> Eighth United States Census, 1860, Hillsborough County, Florida (Free and Slave Population Schedules); Lesley, "A History of the Lesley Family," 37. An interesting story concerning Lesley in this period also points to his entrepreneurial spirit. About 1860, one story claims that Lesley and his friend W.B. Henderson "went on a treasure hunt in the Boca Grande area with a man named John Gomez, who was supposed to know the location of pirate treasure." Gomez was a legendary local figure known as "the last of the pirates." See McKay, *Pioneer Florida*, II, 314.

<sup>25</sup> *Tampa Florida Peninsular*, 25 September 1858, 5, D.B. McKay, "Lesley Hobby Offers Interesting Data On Early Tampa History," *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, 20 June 1948, sec. D, S.

<sup>26</sup> *Tampa Florida Peninsular*, 23 July 1859, 2. Lesley's involvement in civic organizations also included membership in the local Masonic order. Records indicate that he joined Hillsborough Lodge No. 25 of the Free & Accepted Masons in 1866 and in 1869 served as the Lodge's treasurer. He was an active and enthusiastic supporter of the Masons throughout his adult life, and in 1897 was one of the charter members of Tampa's John Darling Lodge No. 154. According to the *Tampa Morning Tribune*, it was Lesley who "suggested the name of the lodge" in honor of Darling, one of the city's most distinguished early settlers and an active mason in his own right. See also *Florida Genealogical Journal*, XVIII, 72; "Life of Honor Ended," 5 and *Tampa Florida Peninsular*, 2 January 1869, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Lesley, "A History of the Lesley Family," 40; Gordon, *Biographical Census of Hillsborough County*, 348.

<sup>28</sup> *Tampa Florida Peninsular*, 28 August 1858, 3. The period also saw its share of sorrows as well as for the Lesleys. On June 1, 1857, John's only brother, Emory Livingston Lesley, 20, was killed in a freak accident involving the accidental discharge of a rifle, and less than 3 years later, on April 30, 1860, John's mother

died. She had been a semi-invalid for several years. See *Florida Peninsular* of 6 June 1857, 2, and 5 May 1860, 2; and McKay, "Leroy G. Lesley, Fighting Parson," sec. D, 14.

<sup>29</sup> Zack C. Waters, "Tampa's Forgotten Defenders, The Confederate Commanders of Fort Brooke," *Sunland Tribune* 17 (November 1991), 3. One rather notable exception was early Pinellas pioneer James P McMullen, was "was strongly opposed to secession and announced his views so unmistakably that he became unpopular with his fellow citizens." See George M. Chapin, *Florida 1513-1913: Past, Present and Future* 2 vols. (Chicago, 1914), II, 406.

<sup>30</sup> D.B. McKay, "Sunny South Guards Feted With Poetry, Banner on Departure," *Tampa Tribune*, 17 July 1960, sec. E, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Theodore Lesley, "The Sunny South Guards Was Tampa's Elite Military Unit At Outbreak Of the Civil War," *Tampa Tribune*, 6 December 1959, sec. E, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Karl H. Grismer, *Tampa, A History of the City of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Region* (St. Petersburg, 1950), ed. D.B. McKay, 139.

<sup>33</sup> Waters, "Tampa's Forgotten Defenders," 4.

<sup>34</sup> Fred L. Robertson, comp., *Soldiers of Florida in the Seminole Indian-Civil- and Spanish American Wars* (Live Oak, Fla., 1902; reprint cd., Macclenny, Fla., 1983), 134.

<sup>35</sup> Waters, "Tampa's Forgotten Defenders," 5. Waters provides an excellent discussion of Lesley's activities during the early part of the war, and the situation in the Bay area prior to his command of Ft. Brooke. Also see Canter Brown, Jr., "Tampa's James McKay and the Frustration of Confederate Cattle-Supply Operations in South Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 70 (April 1992), 416-418.

<sup>36</sup> Waters, "Tampa's Forgotten Defenders," 6-7.

<sup>37</sup> Special Order No. 17, H.Q. C.S. Forces, Chattanooga, Tenn., 5 September 1862, Lesley Collection; Civil War military service records of John T Lesley, Co. K-Field and Staff, 4th Florida Infantry, Record Group 109, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Clement A. Evans, ed., *Confederate Military History*, 12 vols. (Atlanta, 1899), XI, 44-45; McKay, *Pioneer Florida*, III, 842.

<sup>38</sup> Lesley, "The Sunny South Guards Was Tampa's Elite", sec. E, 4.

<sup>39</sup> United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1880-1901), series I, XX, 815-819. A humorous (and very human) incident from the battle, no doubt remembered by Maj. Lesley, appears in a handwritten composition book by Theodore Lesley which is now part of the Lesley Collection at the University of South Florida. It reads: "During the battle of Murfrisbourough [sic], while Major Lesley was assisting in leading his regiment in an attack, he over heard one of his privates remark when a Jack-rabbit Jumped out [of] his hiding place during the thickest of the battle; 'Run, rabbit run! If I had no more reputation to sustain than you had tall, I'd run too.'"

<sup>40</sup> Waters, "Tampa's Forgotten Defenders," 7-8.

<sup>41</sup> John T Lesley Civil War Confederate service records.

<sup>42</sup> Waters, "Tampa's Forgotten Defenders," 7-8.

<sup>43</sup> Robinson, *History of Hillsborough*, 301.

<sup>44</sup> Waters, "Tampa's Forgotten Defenders," 7-8.

<sup>45</sup> Robert A. Taylor, "Cow Calvary: Munnerlyn's Battalion in Florida, 1864-1865," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 65 (October 1986), 196-214.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>47</sup> McKay, *Pioneer Florida*, II, 356; McKay, "Leroy G. Lesley, Fighting Parson," sec. D, 13.

<sup>48</sup> Taylor, "Cow Calvary," 202, 205; Lesley, "The Sunny South Guards Was Tampa's Elite," sec. E, 4; Robinson, *History of Hillsborough*, 301. Taylor ("Cow Calvary," 202) mistakenly identifies Bowlegs Creek as being "near Tampa" when in fact it is in Polk County.

<sup>49</sup> Lesley Confederate pension application; Taylor, "Cow Calvary," 202.

<sup>50</sup> Kyle S. VanLandingham, "My National Troubles," *The Civil War Papers of William McCullough*, *Sunland Tribune* 20 (November 1994), 66.



<sup>51</sup> Theodore Lesley, Composition book kept in his own handwriting, Lesley Collection, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida.

<sup>52</sup> Letter from Rev. L.G. Lesley to John T Lesley, 7 May 1865, Lesley Collection; Lesley Confederate pension application.

<sup>53</sup> Rodney E. Dillon, Jr., "The Battle of Fort Myers," *Tampa Bay History* 5 (Fall/Winter 1983), 30-32.

<sup>54</sup> D.B. McKay, "Confederates Captured U.S. Pickets At Billy's Branch But Didn't Take Ft. Myers," *Tampa Tribune*, 26 August 1956, sec. D, 15.

<sup>55</sup> Dillon, "The Battle of Fort Myers," 33.

<sup>56</sup> Lesley, "A History of the Lesley Family," 35. See also Michael G. Schene, "The Daring Escape of Judah P Benjamin" in *Tampa Bay History* 4 (Spring/Summer 1982), 69-73 and Joe Knetsch, "Forging the Florida Frontier: The Life and Career of Captain Samuel E. Hope," *Sunland Tribune* 20 (November 1994, 36.

<sup>57</sup> Grismer, *Tampa*, 155.

<sup>58</sup> Anthony P Pizzo, *Tampa Town 1824-1886* (Miami, 1968), 71.

<sup>59</sup> Robinson, *History of Hillsborough*, 301; Joe A. Akerman, *Florida Cowman, A History of Florida Cattle Raising* (Kissimmee, 1976), 107-108.

<sup>60</sup> Ninth United States Census, 1870, Hillsborough County, Florida. Interestingly also, Lesley's third son William, barely a week old at the time, is apparently listed as "James E" in the census records of this year.

<sup>61</sup> Robinson, *History of Hillsborough*, 301; Commission of John T Lesley as Sheriff and Tax Assessor & Collector ex officio of Hillsborough County, Lesley Collection.

<sup>62</sup> McKay, *Pioneer Florida*, II, 380. Others (Mormino and Pizzo, *Tampa: Treasure City*, 68 and Grismer, *Tampa*, 155) have given the reason for dissolution as economic, as citizens were no longer able to afford municipal property taxes.

<sup>63</sup> McKay, *Pioneer Florida*, II, 380; Grismer, *Tampa*, 155.

<sup>64</sup> Grismer, *Tampa*, 162.

<sup>65</sup> The National Cyclopedia of American Biography, 63 vols. (New York, 1907) V, 67., Theodore Lesley also quotes a Mr. E. Claude Gates, who "Described Captain Lesley as a most eloquent and forceful speaker in whom the people of South Florida had great confidence." (Lesley, Composition book, Lesley Collection.)

<sup>66</sup> Lesley, "A History of the Lesley Family," 38; *Tampa Florida Peninsular*, 28 November 1868, 3. There has been speculation that while a member of the Democratic Executive Committee, Lesley may have also been involved with the Ku Klux Klan, which had close ties to the Democrats during Reconstruction. However, no evidence has yet ever come to light linking Lesley with the Klan, and so this connection must remain as pure supposition.

<sup>67</sup> "Captain Lesley Died Yesterday," 8.

<sup>68</sup> Lesley, "A History of the Lesley Family," 38.

<sup>69</sup> *Tampa Sunland Tribune*, 5 May 1877, 2. Interestingly, Bishop was not returned to the House in the 1878 elections.

<sup>70</sup> *Tampa Sunland Tribune*, 10 March 1877, 2.

<sup>71</sup> *Tampa Sunland Tribune*, 5 October 1878, 2.

<sup>72</sup> Kyle S. VanLandingham, "James T Magbee 'Union Man, Undoubted Secessionist, and High Priest in the Radical Synagogue,'" *Sunland Tribune* 20 (November 1994), 18.

<sup>73</sup> *Tampa Sunland Tribune*, 14 October 1880, 2.

<sup>74</sup> *National Cyclopedia*, V, 67.

<sup>75</sup> Akerman, *Florida Cowman*, 112.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 110, 112.

<sup>77</sup> Grismer, *Tampa*, 168.

<sup>78</sup> "Ancient Leslie Property, Relic Of Slave Days, Gives Way To Parking Lot," *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, 30 March 1952, sec. C, 12; "Fort Brook," *Tampa Tribune*, 6 October 1887, 3. D.B. McKay (in "Fort Brooke Town Seal Found On Site Of Old Dump," *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, 19 October 1952, sec. C, 6) also provides some interesting details concerning Fort Brooke: "It was a town adjoining Tampa on the east, extending from East street to about Twenty-second street and from Sixth avenue to the

bay ... The town's principal distinction was that it harbored the notorious Athanasaw gambling house, saloon and vaudeville theatre. It is doubtful if the equal of this den of iniquity has ever existed in the state of Florida. In 1898, when thousands of troops were assembled here preparatory to the invasion of Cuba, this place was jammed every night, and seldom a night passed without a serious riot. There were hundreds of bullet holes in the metal ceiling of the main hall. It is my memory that virtually no taxes were assessed - dependence for revenue was entirely on fines assessed in the police court." Also, contrary to what some sources have written, John T. Lesley did not serve as Mayor of Fort Brooke for the entire existence of the town, and records have also been found which give the spelling of the name variously as "Brook" or "Brooke." See also *The Acts and Resolutions Adopted by the Legislature of Florida* (Tallahassee, 1895), 314.

<sup>79</sup> "Ancient Leslie Property," sec. C, 12; Acts and Resolutions, 1895, 314.

<sup>80</sup> 1884 Hillsborough County Tax Rolls, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo, Florida.

<sup>81</sup> Harvey L. Wells Collection, "Original Private Owners of Property 1849-1892 St. Petersburg," Map Collection, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; *Sea Breeze*, 1 December 1886, 1. According to Mrs. Claudette Dean, Curator of the Gulfport Historical Museum, Lesley was also the second person to develop a subdivision in the area that is now Gulfport.

<sup>82</sup> "Ancient Leslie Property," sec. C, 12. See also *Descriptive Pamphlet of Hillsborough County, with Numerous Maps, Engravings, Etc.* (Tampa: Hillsborough County Real Estate Agency, 1885), which gives an interesting description of both the county and the company.

<sup>83</sup> Pizzo, *Tampa Town*, illustrations section. As further evidence of his diversification efforts, Lesley also owned a drug store on the corner of Franklin and Whiting streets, which he advertised as "Proprietors & Dealers in Patent & Pharmaceutical Preparations, Toilet & Fancy Articles such as soaps, perfumeries, brushes, combs, Vases, Toilet Sets, [and] Jewelry of all Descriptions," *Tampa Sunland Tribune*, 7 September 1882, 4). Furthermore, he (or less probably, his father) owned a salt factory on the east side of Tampa Bay with W. B. Henderson and at one time also served as an agent for the International Steamship and Railroad Company, headed by former

Confederate General John B. Gordon. (See D.B. McKay, "Constitutional Conventions Reviewed," *Tampa Tribune*, 24 September 1950, sec. D, 6; and *Tampa Florida Peninsular*, 12 May 1869, 2.)

<sup>84</sup> Grismer, *Tampa*, 192.

<sup>85</sup> "Life of Honor Ended," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 5.

<sup>86</sup> "Ancient Leslie Property," sec. C, 12.

<sup>87</sup> Durward Long, "Historical Beginnings of Ybor City and Modern Tampa," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 46 (July 1966), 33.

<sup>88</sup> Hampton Dunn, "Turn to Greatness," *Sunland Tribune* 10 (December 1984), 14; Long, "Historical Beginnings," 34. Concerning the Ybor sale, it should be noted that Lesley was a heart a businessman. Vicente Ybor had initially offered \$5,000 for the land, but Lesley would not sell for less than \$9,000 - a price which Ybor felt was much too high. In stepped the Tampa Board of Trade - who, no doubt through Lesley's influence - voted to make up the \$4,000 difference in price. Tampa got its cigar industry, and Lesley made a tidy profit as well. See also Grismer, *Tampa*, 181-183.

<sup>89</sup> Grismer, *Tampa*, 309.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 309; *Tampa Journal*, 19 May 1887.

<sup>92</sup> D.B. McKay, "McKay Tells Stories Of Some Of Tampa's Early Characters," *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, 4 August 1946, sec. A, 20.

<sup>93</sup> *Tampa Sunland Tribune*, 21 October 1880, 3.

<sup>94</sup> Lesley, Composition book, Lesley Collection. Theodore adds that "Grandfather always carried his pistol to bed with him. He did not put it under his pillow, but at his feet. Aunt India (Indiana Lesley, John T. Lesley's daughter) said when she was nothing more than a baby, & sometimes slept in the bed, you could always stretch your toes and feel it there, and it always gave you a thrill."

<sup>95</sup> *Tampa Sunland Tribune* 6 April 1882, 2. Theodore Lesley (in "A History\_ of the Lesley Family," 39) also claims that John T Lesley declined nomination or appointment to several other offices as well -namely, as Lieutenant Governor (probably in 1880),

and as Secretary of Immigration and Commerce under Governor Edward A. Perry in 1885. According to Theodore, he was also elected as a Florida delegate to the Democratic National Convention in 1880, but was unable to attend due to business concerns.

<sup>96</sup> *A Journal of the Proceedings of the Senate of the State of Florida* (Tallahassee, 1883), 41, 43. It must be emphasized here that a much deeper analysis of Lesley's activities in the Legislature and Constitutional Convention is needed to better pinpoint his exact roles in these assemblies. Though a brief description of his service has been provided here, Lesley's full role in Florida's political scene during this period is an important story that remains largely untold.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 178, 398.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 379-381.

<sup>99</sup> *Senate Journal*, 1885, 18-20.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 48, 412; *Senate Journal*, 1883, 274. Another item of note is a bill that was proposed immediately after the act was passed in the 1885 session which called for the convening of the Convention. Entitled "A bill to pack a Constitutional Convention in the interest of the Democratic Party," it was quickly "laid on the table" on Lesley's motion, and there died a silent death. Only its author, a certain Sen. H.C. Baker of the 16th District voted for the measure.

<sup>101</sup> *Journal of the Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the State of Florida* (Tallahassee, 1885), 52-54.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 79, 296-297, 307, 363-364, 397, 504, 526-530.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 89, 97, 566-567.

<sup>104</sup> McKay, "Constitutional Conventions Reviewed," sec. D, 6; *Constitutional Convention Journal*, 1885, 58 1. Unfortunately, few other details are known about this diary, although McKay does say that: "Each day he recorded at the opening of his entry the condition of the weather - warm, hot, cold, pleasant or raining. Then he would record the financial transactions of the day - from 15 cents paid for a shave to a sale of real estate or cattle involving \$10,000 to \$12,000." Also, the cane which Lesley was given at the close of the Convention is still in the possession of the Lesley family today. Its inscription

reads: "J. T. Lesley Vice President from friends in Convention 1885." Lesley represented the Tampa Board of Trade in Washington, D. C. in March 1886 in a successful effort to have Tampa declared a port of entry. *Tampa Tribune*, 25 Feb., 11, 25 March, 1886; 26 Feb. 1887. Lesley was opposed to prohibition. In an election in Tampa in 1887, the wets won 1065-1036. *Tampa Tribune*, 29 Sept., 6 Oct. 1887; *Tampa Journal*, 22, 29 Sept., 5 Oct. 1887. Lesley's views on race relations can be found in a letter dated Jan. 11, 1885 to Peter W. Bryant, prominent southwest Florida black leader. He writes that the "colored race" had been "following false political prophets" and that the Democrats were pledged to support the equality of "all men before the law, whether they be white or black..." He hoped that the division between the races would be "narrowed to a mutual political mingling one with the other and a perfect amity of political feeling. ..." *Tampa Tribune*, 7 Feb. 1885.

<sup>105</sup> "Speech of John T. Lesley delivered in the State Democratic Convention of 1892 Seconded the nomination of Hon. Henry L. Mitchell as the Democratic Candidate for Governor," Lesley Collection. Theodore Lesley, quoting E. Claude Gates, also relays an interesting story regarding Lesley's role in the Mitchell campaign: "When Henry L. Mitchell was making the race for Governor of Florida a party of politicians, which included John T. Lesley made a trip to Manatee and held a great political rally. In the course of the governor's [Mitchell's] speech he said something which aroused the indignation of the settlers. So that night all the party returned home except Capt. Lesley, who, on the following day smoothed things over." (Lesley, Composition book, Lesley Collection.)

<sup>106</sup> "Life of Honor Ended," 5; Grismer, *Tampa*, 322.

<sup>107</sup> Application file of John T. Lesley for Collector of Customs at the Port of Tampa, Record Group 56, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Call to Cleveland, 21 December 1893. It should be noted, however, that this is the only letter in Lesley's vast application file which delivers such a lukewarm message of support. Most endorsements written on his behalf were extremely enthusiastic; and later, Call himself would write a more decisive statement in Lesley's favor. Call may have held some animosity against Lesley for his part in a dispute over the title to some of the Fort Brooke Military Reservation which erupted in the 1880's. For clues, see Jeffrey Lewis, "How Tampa Lost the Fort Brooke Military Reservation," *Ex Libris* 5 (Summer 1982), 1147,

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which provides an excellent overall discussion; Grismer, *Tampa*, 168-169; and *Tampa Journal*, 24 October 1889, W. Also, according to Lesley's application file, he was nominated as Collector of Customs on January 4, 1894 and appointed on February 5, 1894, not in 1893, as most accounts claim. He resigned from office in 1897. Once appointed, Lesley ran the office in the pragmatic, businesslike manner which characterized all his undertakings. Interviewed by the *Tampa Times* shortly after coming into office, Lesley announced that "I shall appoint none but honest men, whom I can trust and who are competent to fill the place assigned to them. Some people seem to think I will sweep the custom house clean as soon as I enter it, but I have no idea of dismissing qualified men and putting in an entirely new force that know nothing about the business of the office." (Lesley family scrapbook, 28, in the possession of the John T Lesley family, Tampa, Florida). Nevertheless, the post was lucrative indeed for Lesley's two youngest sons, Theodore (father of the family historian of the same name) and Livingston, who both received jobs in the customs service under their father. See Rerick, *Memoirs of Florida*, II, 593-594.

<sup>108</sup> Rerick, *Memoirs of Florida*, II, 592

<sup>109</sup> Lesley family scrapbook; *Tampa Times*, 15 July 1913, 2; *Tampa Tribune*, 28 April 1900; Knetsch, "Forging the Florida Frontier," 39.

<sup>110</sup> "Life of Honor Ended," 5.

<sup>111</sup> Rerick, *Memoirs of Florida*, 11, 592-594; Florida Genealogical Society, *Hillsborough County, Florida Cemeteries*, VI, 133; "Sheriff Lesley is Dead," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 9 December 1904, 1.

<sup>112</sup> "Captain Lesley Died Yesterday," 8.