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FOUNDATION OF FLORIDA'S POLITICAL HISTORY

FLORIDA HAS A LONG and varied political history. Today, we know Florida as the third-most-populous state in the Union, growing at a rate of nearly one thousand residents each day, and as Florida's population has grown and its voter demographics have changed, its political influence on the national scene also has grown.¹ For more than a century, its state governmental infrastructure—both legislative and executive—was controlled by Democrats, but by the beginning of the twenty-first century, the infrastructure of governance was solidly in the control of Republicans. What was once an unquestioned state for the Democrats in all respects for the better part of the twentieth century is now considered the bellwether state in presidential elections. What was considered part of the Democratic “Solid South” in state politics has now become a Republican stronghold, and Florida was the first southern state to make this transition into the modern era.² In historical terms, this political transformation has occurred in a relatively short span of time, and to understand the shift in party dominance from the Democrats to the Republicans, the context of Florida's political and social history provides relevant insights on how and why it occurred.³

“Because of its history,” writes Matthew Corrigan in his book about Republican Governor Jeb Bush, “a conservative political tradition collides with

an ever-changing diverse population in the state of Florida to produce a unique political makeup.”⁴

Population translates to people, and the people who assembled under the Republican banner in the last half of the twentieth century to usher in the two-party era in Florida politics were not just the marquee names who captured victories in the race for governor or won seats to represent Florida in Washington, D.C. They included the individuals who volunteered as part of the Republican Party organization; they joined the clubs that carried the Republican banner; they were candidates who offered themselves for local city and county offices; and they were the men and women who came to the Florida House and Senate to serve as part-time citizen legislators.

In less than a half century, Republicans transformed the political landscape and ushered in a new era with new leaders; they created a new structure for governance; and they championed a political dogma that changed long-standing government policies. They organized; they created an ever-expanding network of people; they built an organization that grew and matured from within; and they invited disenchanted voters from the traditional Democratic ranks to join them as the Republicans assumed the reins of power in the state capital. It was a political transformation that was, in many ways, unique, and from its early beginnings, it was a transformation that was both unlikely and unforeseen.

Few in Florida’s early history contemplated such enviable population growth, nor was there an expectation that the state would find itself in a political transition that ushered its voters into the epicenter of the nation’s politics. Initially, Florida was not a part of the Founding colonists’ efforts that culminated in the creation of the United States; and the European explorers who first explored Florida’s coast near the end of the fifteenth century were the Spanish. Juan Ponce de León gave Florida its name in 1513, and the Spanish established the first permanent European settlement at St. Augustine, where they fortified it by constructing the Castillo de San Marcos, an elaborate and imposing fort that the British were never able to conquer with military force.⁵ Despite its early settlement by the Spanish, however, Florida remained a political chess piece in the interplay between the two nations for nearly two centuries.

When the French and Indian War ended in 1763, the British gained possession of the Castillo de San Marcos and all of Florida, but this occurred in a negotiated settlement. British rule and influence in Florida were short-lived, however. Twenty years later, when the Treaty of Paris ended the American Revolution, the British Crown surrendered most of its North American possessions; the thirteen colonies became the United States; Spain regained control of the Florida Territory; and almost seven decades would pass before Florida joined the other colonies as a part of the United States.⁶ In the interim before statehood, the Florida Territory became a pawn in three wars and an occasional passing reference in the political events and personalities of its neighbors to the north.

Territorial Political Roots

The state became an arcane footnote in the political struggles of the new nation in 1804, when Aaron Burr fled to the South and sailed down the St. Johns River while corresponding with the Spanish governor of Florida after killing Founding Father Alexander Hamilton in a duel.⁷ Three years later, Burr was arrested for treason and accused of planning to form an empire out of the territories around the Gulf of Mexico, including Texas and Florida; the plan was never realized.⁸

Florida remained in undisturbed Spanish control and on the political fringe of the new nation until the War of 1812. Yet there was interest in Florida, and even before the U.S. Congress declared war against the British, President James Madison and his secretary of state, James Monroe, considered plans to seize territorial Florida from Spanish control. A government secret agent, General George Mathews, was dispatched to the Florida-Georgia border by the Madison administration with instructions to promote an attack into Florida by armed frontiersmen, and as the war against the British began, many of the southern activists in the region also saw the conflict as an opportunity for territorial expansion into Florida.⁹ Fearing that the British might seize Florida if the United States failed to act quickly, the frontiersmen, covertly supported by the U.S. military, seized the important port of Fernandina and besieged the Spanish fortifications at St. Augustine.