



Governor Nullifies Election: A Study of Florida's 1831 Congressional Delegate Race

Andrew Jones and Dr. Benjamin Gunter and Idy Codington



Abstract

This project focuses on a political rivalry in early Tallahassee between William Pope Duval (Governor, 1822-1834) and Joseph Mills White (Congressional Delegate, 1825-1837). While conducted in Florida, this feud is reflective of a national rivalry because of Duval's association with Andrew Jackson (President, 1829-1837) and White's association with John Quincy Adams (President, 1825-1829). The White-Duval feud culminated in the election of 1831, where Duval nullified the U.S. Congressional Delegate election that White had won. This project analyzes the results of the election and its coverage in newspapers at the time. There were various vote totals reported that differed and the press and public were unsure of the results until a month after the election. This election gives us insight into Florida's electoral process and shows how Florida had election controversies with national implications, even before its statehood.

Background

The White-Duval rivalry of 1831 reflected rivalries in national politics.

- Duval was close to Vice President John C. Calhoun and President Andrew Jackson.
- White was an associate of John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay (former Secretary of State and currently Senator). White was also son-in-law of John Adair (US representative for Kentucky). Florida White, (Adair's daughter) was an important campaigner for White.

The feud also reflected political factions in Florida Territory.

- The "Nucleus" allied Duval with James Gadsden, Richard Keith Call, and Robert Butler. This group focused on acquiring land, building wealth, and controlling local government, aided by appointments from Andrew Jackson.
- Joseph White and William Wyatt (building contractor and political figure) were Anti-Jacksonian and supported opposing parties like the Republicans and Anti-Masons. While White and Jackson held similar views on many topics like slavery, religion, masonry, and tariffs, White still opposed Jackson's leadership.

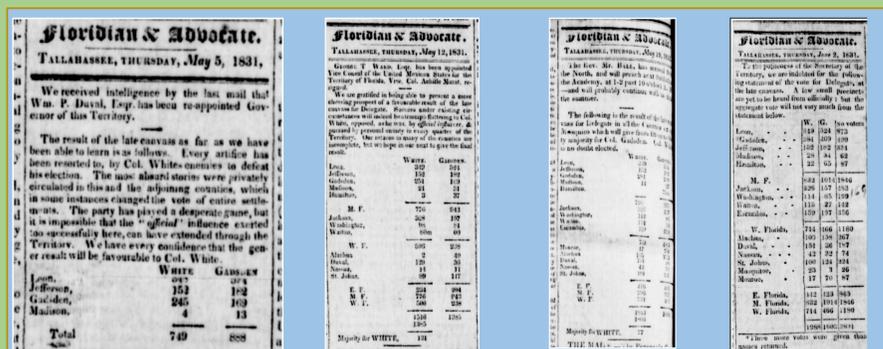
Despite federal support for members of the "Nucleus," Joseph White frequently bested them in statewide elections as he was more popular with the people of Florida.

- Duval attempted to nullify the 1831 Congressional delegate election between Joseph White and James Gadsden, citing an 1828 Florida territorial law requiring both the votes and names of the voters to be submitted to the governor.
- When votes with no poll book submissions were not counted, Duval declared a tie and triggered a new election.
- Duval's nullification was largely ignored and Congress still granted White his role as delegate

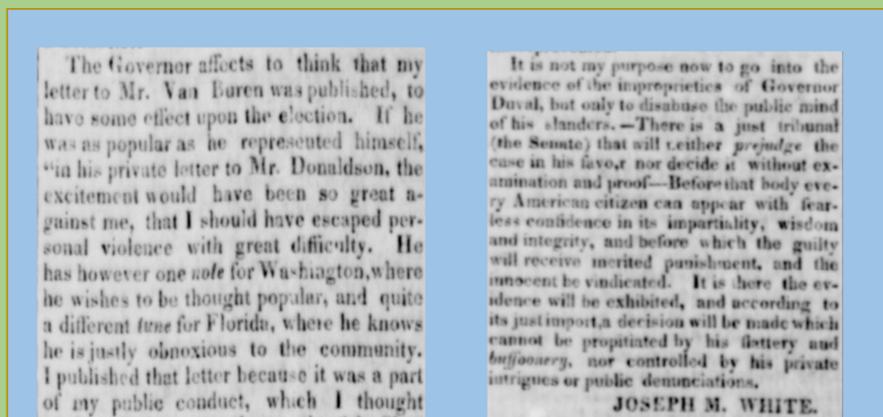
The purpose of this research is to assemble, election records, newspaper articles, and personal letters illuminating the nullification.

Results

Results for this project come from the newspaper *Floridian & Advocate*. They include images of text from May 5, 12, and 19, 1831 and June 2, 1831. These results show reported election numbers for the 1831 Congressional Delegate Election. They also include a letter from Joseph M White criticizing William Pope Duval, the governor of Florida at the time. This was included in *Floridian & Advocate* on June 2, 1831.



Floridian & Advocate images of election counts



Excerpts from open letter to *Floridian & Advocate* by Joseph M. White

Methods

The research conducted in this project was through a literature review. At the beginning of the research process, we were given various books and excerpts to read to focus our research. The most helpful of these was Bertram Hawthorne Groene's *Ante-Bellum Tallahassee*. This laid the groundwork for my knowledge of early Tallahassee and narrowed my focus towards early political relationships.

After narrowing my focus, I read *Florida Founder William P. DuVal: Frontier Bon Vivant* by James Denham. This helped me get a feel for the political relationships of the time, and I was mainly struck by the long feud between William Pope Duval and Joseph Mills White. I was particularly interested in Duval's nullification of the 1831 legislative delegate election, which featured White. After I decided to focus on the feud between Joseph White and William Pope Duval, I read *Joseph Mills White: Anti-Jacksonian Floridian* by Ernest Dibble. This was crucial for establishing a background and served as a starting place for diving into primary documents.

Following this, I went through microfilm records of the newspaper *Floridian & Advocate*. This primary-document research yielded first-person perspective from 1831, especially about how the newspaper was used as a political tool by the candidates.

Analysis

The Florida Territory's 1831 Congressional Delegate Election was a microcosm of what was to come in terms of elections, both in Florida and in the United States. These takeaways stand out:

- Information is often hazy / slow to clarify during contested elections. During this election, it was over a month after the election when the final vote total was included in the newspaper. This mirrors many present-day situations, as contested elections will take time for a result to appear.
- Newspapers play a pivotal role in electioneering. In the newspaper leading up to and after the election, Joseph White wrote several letters that were posted in newspapers. These letters criticized Governor Duval, who was not his opponent but a member of the opposing political faction and a man of great influence. These included both criticisms of policy and ad hominem attacks. Then as now, political power struggles in Florida involved mudslinging and using the media to gain votes.
- People in power will go to extraordinary lengths to maintain their position. While there was precedent for the nullification, no one in the state respected the decision to nullify the election. Duval's decision to nullify was a retaliation based on White's public and private attacks on him (Denham) (Example in results page). Upset by these attacks on his character, Duval retaliated through any means necessary. This response was so unpopular that the second election was ignored, and White kept his position.

In summation, this election's details relate heavily to many political events throughout America's history.

References

