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W. H. Gleason

In their website article on the DuBois Home, the Loxahatchee River Historical Society describes W. H. Gleason as Jupiter's first real estate developer. He received free land in Jupiter from the Federal government in 1884, most likely as a deal to drain land and encourage homesteading. Indeed, W. H. Gleason and his wife Sarah G. Gleason have their names on a "Town Plat of Jupiter Dade County Florida" in 1891, where a subdivision was laid out along the Jupiter Inlet with astronomical names such as Saturn, Venus, Jupiter, Neptune, Mercury, Mars and Herschel.



This subdivision never came to fruition in Jupiter, and Harry DuBois purchased the property where his home still stands from the Gleasons in 1898. However, the story of W. H. Gleason and his wife is still a fascinating one involving big scandals, possible shady dealings, Reconstruction politics, and great generosity. Here is the story of the life of this fascinating man who touched Jupiter in its earliest days.

According to his great granddaughter, William Henry

Gleason was born June 28, 1829 in Richford, Tioga County New York. (Mary Nell Gleason Travis, on genealogy.com.) With training as an engineer and lawyer, by 1855 he had relocated to Wisconsin. Along with R. F. Wilson, he obtained a half interest in a plat known as East Eau Claire, and a survey was recorded at the county seat of Chippewa Falls for the village of Eau Claire. Perhaps Gleason learned what would become a principal trade - real estate development - in this period. In March 1856 Congress passed an act including a land grant for land along proposed railroads. "Some of the wildest and most visionary schemes ever generated in the mind of man owed their birth to this land grant..." Gleason probably learned much about land deals and land speculation during this period! Gleason was not only a founder of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, but was President of its first bank - the Bank of Eau Claire. (Eau Claire early history by Nance Sampson, posted on RootsWeb.com September 21, 2000.)

Thomas E. Randall in "History of the Chippewa Valley" Free Press Print, 1875 - (found on Rootsweb.com,) gives a little insight on the beginnings of another career which later made Gleason not only famous but infamous - the area of politics. He vied for the office of State Senator as a Democrat against Irish lawyer P. M. McNally, but McNally was chosen as the candidate for the Democrats. Captain William Wilson was chosen as the Republican candidate. But Gleason, instead of working for the Democrat McNally, worked hard for Wilson on Election Day!

Charles Smith Bundy in Early Days of the Chippewa Valley, Flint-Douglas Printing Co., 1916 (posted by Debra McCann on the McCann Family website,) goes into greater detail regarding this incident which was Gleason's FIRST political "SCANDAL." Bundy relates how he and others, including Gleason, went to the Republican nominating convention in what is now Menomonie, Wisconsin. Gleason dictated a public notice relating how they would have a "people's" mass meeting where he and the others would "furnish" a candidate and speakers, and Knapp, Stout and Co. would "supply" the "audience." Needless to say Wilson was nominated!

The canvass which followed was even more interesting. As Bundy recounts, the nomination of Wilson presented a problem because the district was Democratic and Wilson was a Republican abolitionist: How to get him elected? The election was three weeks away; Gleason was to canvass Superior; the others would canvass different areas. Mr. Bundy writes "It would be particularly interesting to know the particulars of Gleason's canvass, but that is now impossible." All that is known about it is that he made the trip (some 200 miles) on foot with an Indian guide; he was detained in the lake country several weeks after the election by inclement weather, and when he reached Madison with the returns they showed 800 majority for Wilson!?" Gleason would later be involved in a similar scenario in an even more infamous election involving the President of the United States!!!

Mr. Bundy described Gleason as "one of the most remarkable men I have ever known." He noted "the peculiar trait which differentiated Gleason from most men of remarkable mental activity was that he no sooner saw a conception of his own under way than he seemed to lose interest in it and flit to a new one." He explained that rather than watch Eau Claire grow, Gleason "turned his attention to banking. Between the

years 1857 and 1867 he organized bank after bank in different states, of course not wholly for benevolent reasons." Mr. Bundy says during the Civil War Gleason and W. H. Hunt were wholesale dealers for sutler's supplies for the army. Another money making proposition to be sure - and this W. H. Hunt would have his name linked to Gleason's for decades to come. The Gleason Family Papers at the University of Florida PK Yonge Library of Florida History list Gleason as a sutler for the 43rd New York State Volunteer Regiment in

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1861. He was in the Washington, DC area at the end of the war.

At some point Gleason met and married his wife Sarah. Randall's Chippewa Valley history recounts a story about Gleason becoming much enamored of a beautiful young woman who was at first "very much inclined to favor his suit" but she ended up marrying James A. Taylor instead. Who knows how many lives would have been different if Gleason had married his "first love" and stayed in the Eau Claire area?

Gleason visited Florida November 22, 1865 to December 21, 1865. George Franklin Thompson, Inspector for the Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees and Abandoned Lands, toured the 5th District of Florida, consisting of Volusia, Orange, Polk, Hillsboro, Manatee, Monroe, Dade and Broward Counties, with Special Agent W. H. Gleason of Eau Claire. Thompson's journal and reports are a fascinating account of life in this more primitive Florida. The Wheedon and Whitehurst Family Papers at the Library of the University of North Carolina give us some more tantalizing information about Gleason's activities in the period after the Civil War. Dr. Samuel A. Mudd, who spent time in prison for his part in the assassination of Lincoln, wrote letters to Daniel W. Whitehurst in 1868-1869 about statements he made to William H. Gleason when Gleason was investigating the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln!

Gleason's trip to Florida must have caused him to see

boundless opportunity in the area, because W.H. and Sarah Gleason “settled” in Florida in 1866. Much of the land dealings of the Gleason family were in present day Brevard, Broward, Palm Beach and Dade counties.

The History of the National Weather Service Forecast Office (available on-line) by Russel Pfof, James Lushine and Almin Samet indicates “After the war, in 1866 all-but-abandoned Fort Dallas (Miami area) was occupied by carpetbaggers W.H. Hunt and W.H. Gleason and their families, who later became reconstruction radical Republican politicians from sparsely populated Dade County.”

In 1868, Gleason’s most famous political “escapade” or “scandal” occurred in Tallahassee. According to The Florida Historical Quarterly, Volume XXXII, July 1953 - April 1954, Published by the Florida Historical Society, he was the first Lieutenant Governor of Florida, as the office was created in the Reconstruction constitution of 1868. Newly freed blacks with no previous government experience held the balance of power in this Reconstruction legislature.

In this year, Gleason became forever known in Florida for proclaiming himself Governor in place of Harrison Reed (a founder of Neenah, Wisconsin.) An anti-Reed faction in the legislature prepared articles of impeachment, and although there was no impeachment trial, and the legislature adjourned, Gleason, ever the opportunist, interpreted the resolution as though the Governor had already been impeached, and proclaimed himself Governor! He could not work in the capitol, because Reed’s supporters barred the way, but he signed documents as Governor in November-December 1868. When Reed was reinstated as Governor, he ousted Gleason as Lieutenant Governor under residency requirements, and Gleason was removed from office in December.

There are other stories of Gleason and his “escapades” in politics. New York journalist Amos Jay Cummings wrote about Florida from 1873 to 1893 for various New York Newspapers. The book “Frolicking Bears, Wet Vultures, and Other Oddities” by Jerald T. Milanich includes an essay by Mr. Cummings about Mr. Gleason.

Mr. Cummings said Mr. Gleason spent most of his time in New York City, but he had gotten a large land grant in Florida in Dade County. He narrates that eight or ten people lived on the land, but they were entitled to a State legislator. Sometime around 1873, no election

notice was done so nobody was elected. He says Gleason headed for Miami and held his own election and showed up in the Assembly, and held the seat for two years. When he was defeated by two votes after that time, he (since he was County Judge, County Clerk, County Commissioner and one of the Board of Canvassers showed up for the Legislature anyway!

Cummings also tells a tale of how Gleason got his “chum”, a Dade County man named Sturdevant, elected

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State Senator from Brevard/Dade Counties by somehow holding back Brevard returns, and getting three Dade ballots thrown out because the voters were “foreigners” who were not qualified to vote. And the three “foreigners” even went to Tallahassee and proved they were naturalized citizens!! So Sturdevant was in power for four years. Mr. Cummings calls this “hocus pocus” - and one can see why he used those words!

Even with these “activities” Gleason still had time to devote himself to his other area of interest - real estate development. Bundy says he had “offered more bills in the legislature for internal improvements than any other man living or dead had ever done before. He spent a month with me in Washington in the year 1867, and during that time he drafted a dozen or more bills to be presented to the Florida legislature for enactment into laws, all of them deepening some river, draining some swamp or digging some canal.” The Gleason family papers have information on how Gleason established the Southern Inland Navigation and Improvement Company in 1869 to dredge existing waterways; build canals along the St. Johns River and Florida’s east coast and develop lands granted to the company by the State of Florida. Gleason’s political activities are not mentioned much in the family papers, but it would seem fair to surmise he got this government land because of his “connections” and that Gleason wanted to develop Florida land “of course not wholly for benevolent reasons”, as quoted previously by his great friend Mr. Bundy. Gleason knew if land was

drained and could be sold to settlers, he could make a killing!!! He wrote constantly about this subject of draining, canals and dredging. He wrote an article titled "Florida Internal Navigation" for the "Semi-Tropical" in 1877. In this article, he suggests digging SEVEN canals of 49 miles in various areas. He recommends SIX dredging projects of 15 miles. He also recommends a canal from the Caloosahatchie River to Lake Okeechobee, and from Lake Okeechobee to the St. Lucie River - of course this Okeechobee Waterway was actually constructed in the early 20th century and exists today! He was still writing about this subject in 1886, wanting to dredge to equalize the saltiness in the Indian River and save fish and oysters. (Indian River Journal, Vol II, Number 1, Summer 2003.)

From today's perspective and with the concern for environmental issues, perhaps Gleason can be viewed as a greedy opportunist who wanted to ruin natural areas in parts of Florida in order to get rich. The US Army Corps of Engineers Publication # NWS 83-9 "History of the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway", published in January 1983, puts the times into perspective. "After the Civil War, the State's Internal Improvement Fund was heading into receivership, its money lost in interest guaranteed on prewar bonds for dilapidated railroads. Everglades property was being offered for thirty cents per acre and no one was buying. During the 1870's various schemes and scandals arose over the Everglades. Involved in one shady deal, Republican Lieutenant Governor William H. Gleason was ousted from office. He went on to petition the Internal Improvement Fund's Board of Trustees for swamplands that he intended to drain and he set up the Southern Inland Navigation and Improvement Company to claim free land grants from the state. Gleason's accomplishments did not match his expectations, however, and nothing came of this scheme."

Although all this swamp draining and dredging did not happen during his lifetime, Gleason purchased much land in Florida and certainly had an impact on the State. In 1868, he purchased 16,000 acres of land for \$1.25 an acre around what is now Melbourne and renamed the area of Arlington "Eau Gallie". It is not known whether he named Eau Gallie after the town of Eau Galle, Wisconsin which is about 36 miles from Eau Claire. He offered the State of Florida 2,320 acres to construct an agricultural college. A two-story ten-room classroom building was erected in 1875, but due to Reconstruction politics the college ended up locating in Lake City and eventually in 1906 to Gainesville, where it became the

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA!! With his usual business "luck", Gleason got the building back, and he turned it into another money making enterprise - the Grenada Hotel!!

The Gleason family relocated to Eau Gallie in the 1880's and built a beautiful home and it was there W. H. Gleason died in 1902. Sarah died in 1912.

As referred to earlier, Gleason's last great "scandal"

"After the Civil War, the State's internal improvement fund was heading into receivership..."

occurred while he still lived in Miami, in 1876. And this incident involved the President of the United States!! Many people think the Presidential election of 2000 was the only time Florida was involved in a presidential election controversy. But they would be wrong, because Florida was intimately involved in the disputed 1876 election between Rutherford B. Hayes and Samuel J. Tilden - courtesy of William Henry Gleason!!! The following story from "Miami in 1876" by Arva Moore Parks, found on the Historical Museum of Southern Florida website, tells this amazing story.

In 1876 there were 73 registered voters in Dade County. There were three precincts - one was in Jupiter where there were hardly any residents except the lighthouse keepers!! In one precinct three foreign sailors who had registered previously were challenged at the polls. They were told papers would be produced to allow them to vote if they voted a "certain way". Bloodshed almost ensued, and after waiting all day they finally voted. This was just the beginning: ballot counting began and then 15 or 20 ballots were knocked or blown on the floor, but the count continued. In all of Dade County there were 55 voters.

Gleason came in third place, but he decided to contest the election!!! So Dade County returns were not sent to Tallahassee until the dispute was settled. This thrust Dade County into the forefront of the disputed Tilden/Hayes Presidential election. Gleason alleged many voting regularities and the final result was one

precinct's votes were thrown out, so Gleason was the winner with only SEVEN votes. During this time period, Dade County was in the national press because of their missing returns, and there was speculation that Dade had several hundred voters (including Indians) who could turn the tide of the national election. As it turned out, Dade County did not affect the Presidential election. But because in the end there were only fourteen votes for President in Dade County, and Dade County held up the entire count from Florida - which caused wild rumors and speculation from the national press - Dade County became a nation-wide laughing stock of the election debacle. All this thanks to Gleason's contesting of the election!!! As learned from the history books, the election controversy continued on until the night before the election when Tilden conceded to Hayes in order to unite the country, and Hayes brought an end to the political Reconstruction era which was so important in the life of W. H. Gleason.

The beginning of this article referred to an act of generosity, and it will end with this story of how Sarah Gleason insured that the public would always have access to one beautiful unspoiled area.

In an article dated April 22, 1922, from the newspaper called The Rays of Delray the Ocean City, the author explains in 1871 Sarah G. Gleason purchased oceanfront property with long-time friend W. H. Hunt. The Gleasons half-interest was later sold to William S. Linton (as in Linton Boulevard.) Over time there were many legal dealings on this land - it was mortgaged back to Sarah G. Gleason by the Lintons, then foreclosed upon, and Sarah got 100% ownership after Hunt was deceased in 1899.

Sarah Gleason insured this land would always be dedicated to public use. This beautiful mile long stretch of land along the Atlantic Ocean is now "Sarah Gleason Park" and Delray Municipal Beach.

Perhaps because of all of the schemes of her husband, all his visions of draining swampland, becoming a Governor and winning elections no matter what the cost, Sarah hoped that this beautiful



stretch of public beach would become the final legacy for herself and her husband William Henry Gleason. Although their subdivision was never built in the Town of Jupiter, this family made a lasting impact on the east coast of Florida.

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