



BOOK REVIEW

Florida Founder William P. DuVal: Frontier Bon Vivant

A Book By James M. Denham (© University of South Carolina Press, 2015)

| Reviewed by Grant Pattison

Editor's Note: A version of this article originally appeared on FloridaVerve.org, The James Madison Institute's website devoted to Florida's history and culture.

There's a certain aura about our country's antebellum heroes that grants them an immortal presence. Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky, for example,

is lionized by historians and biographers as "The Great Compromiser" and more than a dozen counties across the country bear his name, from "Clay County, Minnesota" to

“Clay County, Florida.” William P. DuVal, on the other hand, has largely fallen into obscurity, a situation that Florida Southern College Professor James M. Denham seeks to correct in his latest book, “Florida Founder William P. DuVal: Frontier Bon Vivant.”

Over the course of two decades, Denham pieced together an unprecedented account of the life of DuVal, a man who was aptly described in this excerpt from the Florida Journal, dated 1841: “[His] appearance, whether waking or sleeping... indicates the cheerful, contented, happy man... Few are his superiors in the persuasive eloquence before a jury... He is the most popular man in the country... As a Statesman he is practical and shrewd – as a debater ready and strong.” Denham notes, however, that DuVal’s “sunny hues” would be taxed throughout his life as he orchestrated the development and statehood of the Florida Territory.

DuVal grew up in Richmond, Virginia, son of a Revolutionary War hero, Major William DuVal. For his service, Major DuVal received vast land grants in Kentucky, land that his sons would eventually call home and where a young William P. DuVal would make a name for himself as a brilliant lawyer. DuVal realized his political ambitions early, seizing the opportunity to run for one of Kentucky’s four congressional seats in 1812. DuVal

won the race unopposed, but by this time war with England was all but certain. After the formal declaration of war, DuVal was appointed captain of the Eighth Regiment of Volunteers, also known as the “Yellow Jackets,” leading subsequent campaigns throughout Indiana to push back Indian forces supported by the British.

Eventually finding his way to Washington, D.C., DuVal began his first Congressional session May 24, 1813, along with more than 50 percent of the other first-time delegates. In his first session, DuVal used his charm to network with some of the nation’s greatest leaders, like the “brilliant, stern, taciturn, and inflexible South Carolinian” John C. Calhoun. The duo quickly made a name for themselves in the House, at one point opposing President James Madison and his proposed embargo against Britain. He took a stand even though the measure was popular among Kentuckians,

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including fellow native and political-heavyweight Henry Clay. DuVal and Calhoun would lose the embargo vote, but they did gain an important victory by pushing much-needed draft legislation through the House. The bill called on “80,000 men” to join the war effort, but before they could be commissioned, the fledgling Congress was granted a miracle.

On Jan. 18, 1815, General Andrew

Jackson defeated British forces at the Battle of New Orleans, bringing the War of 1812 to a screeching halt. In its place, a wave of postwar nationalism seized the United States, leading to the period that became known colloquially as the “Era of Good Feelings.” Jackson continued to build on his popularity by essentially wresting control of Florida from Spain in the First Seminole War. In 1818, President James Monroe awarded Jackson a military governorship of the territory. Because formal U.S. control of Florida had to await the consummation of a treaty, Jackson did not arrive in Pensacola to assume his gubernatorial duties until July 1821. In the meantime, in a chain of political events that would prove fortunate for DuVal, Calhoun had used the influence he had gained as President James Monroe’s Secretary of War to reward DuVal with a newly created judgeship in St. Augustine. DuVal accepted the position, and after returning to Kentucky for a short time, set out for Florida.

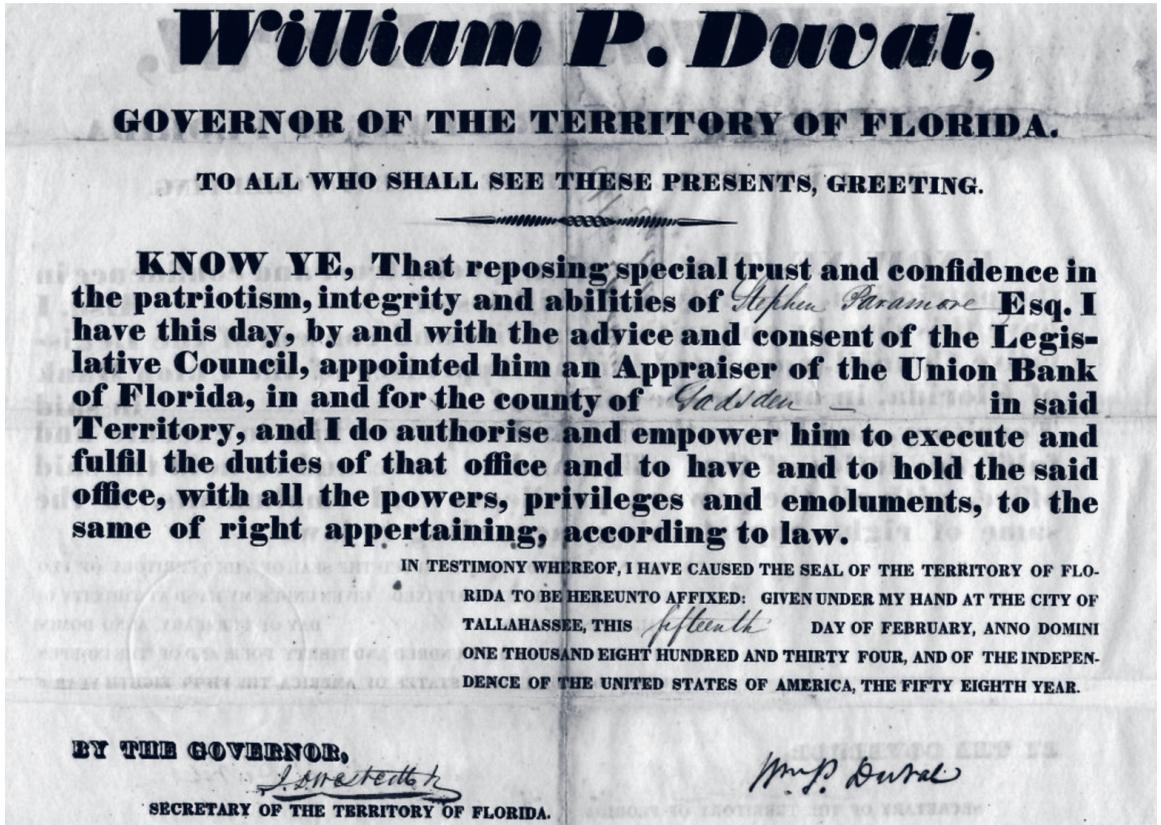
In April 1822, DuVal was confirmed as Florida’s first non-military Governor, but no sooner had he taken his seat in Pensacola than the growing pains of the young territory became apparent. One issue in particular stood heads above sectionalism, settlement, and the unstable economy: the issue of Indian affairs. In his early days, DuVal

commissioned an Indian census, which counted “17 towns containing 1,395 Indians” in the peninsula. DuVal subscribed to the Jacksonian idea of Indian “containment,” meaning that he would have to uproot and move the tribes in order to make way for American settlement. To his character, though, DuVal often wrote empathetically of the Indians, on one occasion lamenting, “The Indians in Florida are in a wretched state...” “Not knowing where they would eventually live,” Denham adds, “would prompt them to neglect their crops.”

Adding to the Indians’ desperate situation, settlers poured into Middle Florida looking to profit from the rich cotton lands of the Red Hills Region. With violence on the rise, DuVal hammered out the Treaty of Moultrie Creek, which systematically dispersed the Seminole Indians from their vast expanse along the Apalachicola River, estimated to be “24 million acres,” “for fewer than six”

inland of Tampa Bay. Allowed to remain in the peninsula were a number of Indian chiefs, including Chief Neamathla, the diametric opposite of DuVal, a man DuVal described as “bold, violent and restless.” Eventually spurred by repeated mischief, DuVal and his interpreter confronted Neamathla. According to DuVal, he was greeted with “300 well-armed warriors. I (DuVal) immediately

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went into their square yard... and ordered them all to meet me on the 26th of July at St. Marks & assured them that their ruin and destruction (*sic*) was certain (*sic*) unless they obeyed my orders.” DuVal then appointed a new surrogate chief in place of Neamathla in hopes of preventing future revolution. Flush with success, DuVal wasted no time making light of his conquest. “His actions certainly evidenced much bravery,” Denham writes, “but the governor’s vivid storytelling ability soon gave the act legend-like proportions.”

With the Indians out of sight for the moment, DuVal had to face another issue standing in the way of Florida’s settlement. The increasing rivalry between East Florida via St. Augustine and West Florida via Pensacola threatened the continuity of the territory; rumors circulated that the latter

would be annexed by Alabama. According to Denham, “The need for a territorial capital somewhere between St. Augustine and Pensacola was obvious. The legislative council... provided for DuVal to appoint two commissioners to select a site for a capital midway between two points... DuVal announced that the next legislative council would meet there.” DuVal believed that “This step was necessary to a fair and equal administration of the law of the Territory.” The development of the area, he added, “will unquestionably render Florida, at no distant period, a rich and powerful state.”

It would take little time for DuVal’s vision to become a reality. According to a local paper, “the young capital of Florida is already attracting the attention of capitalists... Many buildings are erecting...

in the bosom of a fertile and picturesque country.” Another census in 1830 recorded “nearly 35,000 people” who shared DuVal’s zeal, half of which are said to have inhabited Middle Florida. These first Floridians included rich slave-owning planters from “Virginia, Kentucky, and the Carolinas,” as well as their less fortunate counterparts, eager to make use of fertile lands. Later that year, DuVal would permanently move his family from Bardstown, Kentucky, to his new home just south of the Capitol building in Tallahassee.

As Florida’s economy flourished, the “Corrupt Bargain” had swept up Washington in a sea of political turmoil, effectively reorganizing the political landscape into what Denham classifies as more sectional, partisan groups, one supporting Jackson, the other, John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay. With Adams/Clay in the White House, DuVal became more vocal in national politics, allowing his support for Jackson to become apparent. The importance of this divide would eventually come to fruition in the rivalry between the Whigs and the Democrats, a rivalry fueled by the question of a central bank in Florida, as well as other questions, including the issue of statehood, and whether Florida should be admitted as one or two states. The rivalry dominated the media: “The Democratic Press began to take up the argument that somehow Whigs, defenders of the banks, and supporters of division, were in league

with the Abolitionists.” Denham claims that the accusation “would be akin to charging political opponents with being Communists in the 1950s or supporters of Islamic Terrorists in the post 9/11 world.” Oddly enough, DuVal would play the field on a number of these issues, spending time as both a Whig and a Democrat, lending to his reputation as disingenuous, and a political opportunist. After losing a number of key legislative votes to the resurgent Whigs, the political tide began to turn against DuVal, who reported from St. Augustine that he

felt “disposed to quit this Territory. The hour of gloom & melancholy often deeply shadow my mind and thoughts...”

In 1845, DuVal’s commitment to the territory finally paid off, and the state of Florida was admitted to the Union. What, then, has kept DuVal from historical preeminence? Denham suggests that political clout would sour public

opinion of DuVal. In an effort to resurrect his political career, DuVal tried to secure a seat in Washington as one of Florida’s first congressmen. An overwhelming defeat at the hands of the Whigs left DuVal disheartened. He “had hit rock bottom,” says Denham. “In his mind the people of Florida had repudiated him.”

By now abolition had found the spotlight; national politics reached fever pitch as Northern and Southern interests became increasingly polarized. Devoid of wealth and opportunity in Tallahassee,

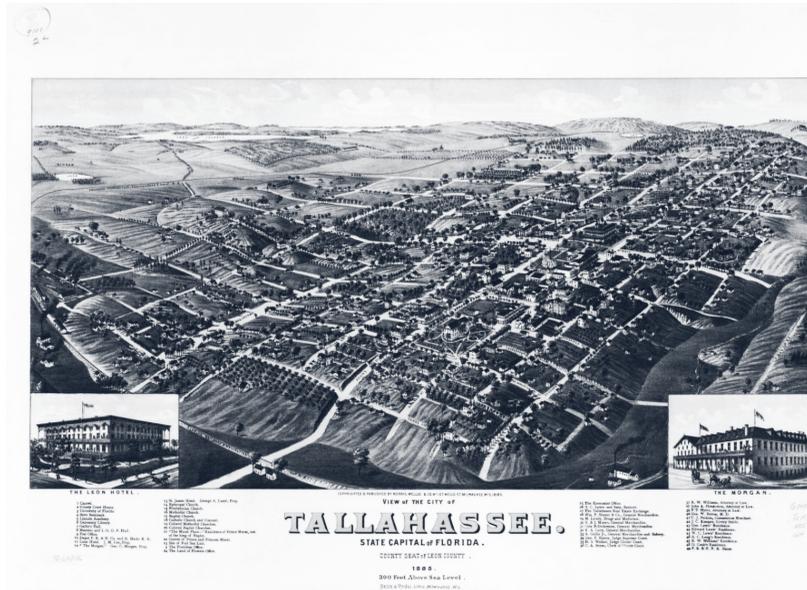
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DuVal would make haste for Austin, Texas to join his son Thomas' law firm. There, DuVal would find work mediating familiar claims between rowdy settlers and the Comanche Indians. Before long, though, DuVal was ushered back to Washington, where he pursued damages for his clients and acquainted himself with the statesmen of the 32nd Congress.

It would be in Washington, ever “abreast of national affairs,” that DuVal’s health faltered under the strain of his efforts. He died March 18, 1854, shortly after his 70th birthday. Tributes were published in newspapers around the country, including *The Pensacola Gazette*, which reported DuVal’s death with proper sentiment: “Thus has gone one of the fastest and most faithful men of our young state. In all his sufferings he maintained the same lofty spirit and the same self-sacrificing disposition which distinguished his public and private life in Florida.”

Denham’s work covers the struggles of settling Florida, the first true political betrayal in the split between Jackson and Calhoun, the ruggedness of frontier America, and the fruition of Texas’ annexation, leading up to the divisive decade preceding the greatest conflict in American history, the Civil War. Despite the details about this tumultuous era, history buffs and casual readers alike will find themselves surprised by the fluidity of the text, which, given the amount of historical data, is

no small feat. It took Denham 23 years – between other projects – to assemble this hallmark biography. What results is the first cohesive narrative of a man whose influence spanned eight presidencies and the birth of



► View of the state capital of Florida in 1885. *Courtesy of Library of Congress.*

the Florida Territory.

Indeed, what Denham has achieved in “Florida Founder” is a revival of DuVal’s reputation. One can imagine that DuVal would want nothing less than to tell his own story for another millennium; Denham was happy to oblige. By piecing together a slew of journal entries and correspondence with political actors across the country (both friends and rivals), Denham allows William P. DuVal to stand at the lectern once again.

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