

David Levy Yulee: Conflict and Continuity in Social Memory

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David Levy Yulee was one of nineteenth-century Florida's most enigmatic and distinguished leaders. Since his death in 1886, Floridians have chosen to remember different aspects of his remarkable life. Some communities have concentrated on his political career, especially his relationship with the Confederacy. Known notoriously by some as the "Florida fire-eater," he also led the state in secession from the Union and maintained contact with leading Confederate officials throughout the Civil War. Other communities have focused on his role in the Florida Railroad and land development. Yulee was among the first and most prominent real estate developers in the state and many north central Florida communities owe their existence to his cross-state railroad which was the state's most extensive railroad until the early twentieth century. Yulee's accomplishments are perhaps more noteworthy when considering his Jewish ancestry. Until recently, Floridian's collective memory had largely ignored this part of his life. These various perspectives of Yulee's life are harbored in the state's social memory and embodied in its public history.

Social memory, one of several interchangeable labels including historical and collective memory, can be defined as the public recollection of the past. It is the way in which communities choose to remember, and forget, events and figures important to them. From social memory communities build and strengthen their identity, or at least a part of the community's identity.^[1] Oftentimes there is conflict over the vehicle of social memory, public history, because it perpetuates in concrete form one of several changing, and often competing, abstract ideas. Public displays of history solidify a perspective that is increasingly seen as immutable. Essentially, public history is a public display of power. This expression of dominance reinforces existing social and political hierarchies and beliefs while also projecting them onto future generations. Concurrently, while it emphasizes the attributes that one group within the community may value, it also suppresses the perspective and values of other groups. For example, in Natchez, Mississippi, "white" memory recollects an antebellum past of plantation luxury and loyal black slaves a past that simultaneously reinforced white authority in the existing power structure. Only with the Civil Rights Movement and increasing national attention were subordinated blacks able to promulgate their version of the past. These contesting memories, played out throughout the South, are redefining Natchez.^[2]

Yulee should first be introduced in a brief biography before exploring how he was remembered after his death. David Levy Yulee was born in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands in 1810.^[3] His father, Moses Elias Levy, was a successful merchant and a practicing Jew who obtained a Spanish land grant in Alachua County, Florida in 1821. David was brought to Florida as a young child by his father before being sent to boarding school in Norfolk, Virginia. After returning to Florida Levy studied law under future Florida Territorial Governor Robert Reid (1839-1841) in Saint Augustine. By 1832 Levy was a lawyer and immediately became active in territorial politics. Under Reid's guidance he quickly rose in the ranks of the state's Democratic Party, serving as a territorial delegate from 1841 to 1845. Levy adamantly pushed for statehood and was at least partially responsible for drafting the state's first constitution. Upon Florida's admission into the Union on 3 March, 1845, Levy was promptly elected to the US Senate as one of the new state's first senators.

A year later, in 1846, Levy married Nannie Wickliffe, the daughter of former Kentucky Governor Charles A. Wickliffe (1839-1840). At this time Yulee also officially changed his last name from Levy to Yulee by an act of Florida Legislature.^[4] Following an unsuccessful re-election bid in 1851, Yulee began enacting his plans for a cross-state railroad.^[5] He had been formulating this plan for years and finally had the time to engage himself in it before returning to the Senate in 1855. With tensions increasing between the North and the South, Yulee championed states rights and viewed secession favorably when given a lack of alternatives. Under these circumstances he led the Southern walkout from the Senate in January 1861. Although maintaining close relations with several prominent Confederate leaders, including President Jefferson Davis, Yulee remained only unofficially involved with the Confederacy for the remainder of the war.

Yulee spent the war years tending his plantations and protecting his railroad. The Florida Railroad, Yulee's private enterprise, was completed just prior to the outbreak of hostilities, but only ran briefly before service was interrupted by the war. In 1862, Union forces captured Fernandina and Cedar Key, the railroad's terminal points while the Confederacy retained the bulk of the line between them. The Confederate government hoped to dismantle the usable rails and re-build tracks in other, more vital parts of the Confederacy, but Yulee fought this decision by acquiring an injunction against the state, a decision that saved the railroad but brought his Confederate loyalties into question.^[6] Federal authorities did not question his allegiance, and in 1864 they attacked and burned his plantation near Homossassa, Florida. His family fled to "Cottonwood Plantation" in Archer, Florida where, in the waning days of the Civil War, Yulee assisted in the flight of Jefferson Davis's baggage train. As the war ground to a halt Levy was sent as part of a Florida delegation to petition for readmission into the Union, but was arrested in Gainesville, Florida, and imprisoned at Fort Pulaski, Georgia.^[7]

After being pardoned in 1866, he concentrated exclusively on his railroad and the acquisition of property along the rail line. However, by 1877 the railroad was in dire financial straits and Yulee was forced to sell his majority share. He briefly retained an active role as a vice-president, but retired in 1881. He and his wife retreated to Washington, DC, where she died in 1886 and he, a year later, in 1887.

Consciously or not, recollections of David Levy Yulee permeate the memories of Floridians, proof of which can be found in public history throughout Florida. In the town of Yulee and throughout Levy County there are bridges and streets, buildings and residence halls, school plays and even lecture series that are named after him. More prominent than the references to his name are the museums, dedications, and monuments featuring Yulee that span Florida. These forms of public history are interpretive and provide a specific perspective of the individual favorable to at least a part of the community. In this sense the community's collective memories both define Yulee's legacy while simultaneously defining themselves.

Florida's recollections of Yulee reflect the conflicts and continuities inherent in social memory. His various contributions to Florida have been recognized by different groups of people since the middle of the nineteenth century, especially in the northern part of the state. Here, he has been remembered earliest and most often in the context of regional development and community building through the Florida Railroad. Place names like Levy County and Yulee recognize his impact on these locations and perpetuate his memory. Consistent rail traffic and the accompanying growth of communities linked to the railroad through the 1930s further ensured the maintenance of Yulee's legacy. The continuing physical presence of the tracks and railroad

bed today hearkens to the pioneering days of many north Florida communities, thus keeping Yulee in the region's social memory.

Although first linked to the region through his railroad, the first public monuments recognizing Yulee were not related to his role in this capacity. The first interpretive monument honoring Yulee was commissioned in Archer at the site of his Civil War era "Cottonwood" plantation. Dedicated by the Kirby-Smith United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1932, it commemorated the flight of Jefferson Davis' baggage train in the final days of the Civil War.^[8] In May, 1865, several Confederate officials, including President Jefferson Davis and Secretary of the Treasury Judah P. Benjamin, attempted to evade Federal troops in Florida. During this flight President Davis was captured, but his baggage train, laden with official documents and containing the slim remnants of the Confederate treasury, made it as far as Yulee's Cottonwood Plantation. There, Mrs. Yulee confirmed Davis's capture to the loyal Confederates who then conceived a plan to disperse and hide the money and important papers. Some of this baggage remained at Cottonwood until discovered by Union troops shortly after Yulee's arrest in Gainesville a few days later. Unlike the place names invoking his role as a land developer, the Cottonwood monument focuses exclusively on Yulee's association with the Confederacy. In fact the plaque is only peripherally concerned with Yulee, instead celebrating Cottonwood's importance in the final days of the Civil War. Although the episode of the flight of Davis's baggage train only briefly touched the site it continues to provide a direct link in the collective memories of north Floridians to the dying Confederacy and the emergence of the "Lost Cause" sentiment prevalent throughout the South since the Civil War, and still occasionally invoked.^[9]

Similar to Cottonwood, the Yulee Sugar Mill Ruins and State Historic Site have been remembered in the context of the Confederacy.^[10] The mill is on a small parcel of the original 5,100 acre plantation which also contained Marguerita, Yulee's mansion as, "a show place of the Old South."^[11] During the Civil War this plantation produced citrus fruits, cotton, and, of course, sugar which were then smuggled past Union blockaders to supply the beleaguered Confederacy. Well concealed in the dense forests surrounding the Homossassa River, "Marguerita" was finally discovered—or as some local residents recall, betrayed by a "traitorous slave,"—and destroyed by Federal troops in April, 1864.^[12] Only the sugar mill remained largely undisturbed by the marauding Union soldiers before eventually falling into disrepair. Briefly owned by the Citrus County Federation of Women's Clubs, the ruins today are managed by the Florida Division of Parks and Recreation. Although there is currently no interpretive information around the ruins, its physical presence suggests an ambiguous meaning. Most noticeably, it serves a testament to the destruction of the Confederacy. But, as an enduring symbol of the "Old South," it also invokes the perseverance of identification with the "Lost Cause," a relationship that still resonates in the memories of many Floridians.

The link between Yulee and the Confederacy, and the South in general, began changing during the social revolution of the 1960s. Concurrent with these social changes were the physical ones wrought by the "bulldozer revolution." Historians like C. Vann Woodward considered this the beginning of an "Americanization" of the region in terms of the decline of Jim Crow alongside burgeoning suburban populations of a modern and developed South that increasingly looked like the rest of the United States.^[13] These changes also began eroding open support for the "Lost Cause." North Florida, like many areas across the southern US, reassessed the manner in which it perceived, or at least broadcast, its local history. Rather than focusing on his Confederate ties, many north Florida communities recast Yulee in a different light. Recalling his importance in regional development, these communities remembered Yulee the railroad pioneer

and community builder. While his impact on the development of these communities was not locally forgotten, this part of his life was not at the forefront of local public history.

Beginning in the late 1970s, several north Florida towns refocused their projections of Yulee in local memory. Among others, Archer heralded this newer representation of one of their town's heroes. Archer was established and correspondingly grew as a result of Yulee's Florida railroad, reaching its zenith of expansion around the turn of the century when railroad traffic was at its peak. Despite the centrality of the railroad to Archer's existence, the only public acknowledgment of Yulee's importance to the local community was the Cottonwood memorial. By 1977 the town chartered the Archer Historical Society which envisioned an alternate, and more inclusive, agenda for Archer's public historical representations. Claiming to "preserve and protect ... heritage ...[and] those things upon which our nation, our state, and our community were founded," as well as "promoting unity, friendship, and understanding among the citizens of our town," the Archer Historical Society began shifting the focus in the town's local representation of Yulee from Confederate to railroad pioneer and internal developer.^[14] Archer's historical society and local officials were assisted in their endeavor by the Florida Department of State/Division of Historical Resources who have an obvious interest in shaping the social memory of Florida's past. This task was completed by 1988 when the Archer Historical Society, in conjunction with state and local officials, placed a monument and opened a museum at the site of the old train depot. Now known as the Archer Railroad Museum, the small, single-room old depot building is dedicated almost entirely to Yulee, his railroad, and its centrality in Archer's history.

Yulee also figures prominently in Fernandina Beach's public history. In fact, Fernandina Beach was actually uprooted from its original location in anticipation of the coming railroad. The Amelia Island Museum of History opened in the early 1980s and honors Yulee as the father of Fernandina Beach. He is featured in one of the museum's show-case exhibits including original railroad documents, memorabilia, and early photographs of Yulee, Fernandina Beach, and the Florida Railroad.

The city of Fernandina Beach and the Florida Board of Parks and Historical Memorials first honored Yulee in 1961 by dedicating a monument to him symbolically located at the town's center near the railroad's starting point. Entitled "Florida's First Atlantic to Gulf Coast Railroad," the monument suggests community pride in the result of Yulee's vision. Nearly forty years later, in 2000, the Florida Department of State and the Florida League of Cities, placed another plaque recognizing Yulee as a "Great Floridian." This plaque was placed adjacent to the first monument, on the city hall building. Nearby both of these memorials is a third plaque, undated and seemingly older than the first two, indicating the location of Yulee's former residence in Fernandina Beach which he occupied until the 1862 Federal invasion. In recalling the glory of the Old South's plantation lifestyle, this monument spoke for, and likely still speaks for, the element of the community attached to the "Old South" of legend.

Yulee is recognized regionally as well as by individual communities. Certainly the most elaborate regional recollection of him is during the "Yulee Railroad Days." Inaugurated by the Archer Historical Society in 1994, this event was initially a local festival in Archer, Florida. Since then it has expanded over much of north-central Florida in celebrating the construction of the railroad and its accompanying development. Beginning in 2003 "Yulee Railroad Days" began including a bicycle tour re-tracing the tracks' route. The intent is to physically connect all of the towns impacted by the railroad, from Fernandina Beach to Cedar Key, in a regional celebration by 2010, the 150th anniversary of the inaugural train's run.^[15] The contemporary

physical connection between these towns provided by the “Railroad Days” celebration reinforces the historical connections rooted in the railroad.

While the regional memory is devoted nearly exclusively to his political and entrepreneurial background, Jews in Florida have been quick to claim him based on his religious descent and thereby assert their position in Florida’s history. The MOSAIC project began in 1984 as “a pioneer history gathering project of the Florida Jewish experience.”^[16] Originating in the Jewish Community Center in Plantation, Broward County, Florida, as a community history project, it quickly expanded to cover the entire state. By 1990 MOSAIC published a text and opened a traveling exhibit documenting Florida’s Jewish history. The museum display toured statewide and nationally for the next four year exhibiting and collecting Jewish memorabilia before resting permanently in the current Jewish Museum of Florida in Miami Beach.

Yulee is proudly displayed as nineteenth-century Florida’s most distinguished Jewish representative and the first Jewish Senator in the nation in this museum. In fact, the published counterpart to the exhibit, *MOSAIC: Jewish Life in Florida*, staunchly defends this position and the authors take great pains to refute Eli Evans claim for Judah P. Benjamin to carry this honor in Louisiana. According to the authors, in his 1988 biography of Benjamin, Evans incorrectly stated that Yulee had converted to Christianity in a bid to legitimate his contention that Benjamin was the first Jewish Senator. The authors point out that there is no documentation of his conversion in any records and that his contact with his father still revolved around his religious affiliation. Further, like Yulee, Benjamin married a gentile and even received the last rites, “at a final moment when he could no longer resist.”^[17]

Linking Yulee to Judaism and claiming him as the first Jewish senator in the United States is a point of pride for Florida Jewry.^[18] To assist these communities the state of Florida has taken an active role in strengthening Jewish connections with Florida. One byproduct of the MOSAIC project was the foundation of the *Jewish Heritage Trail* which was published through the Florida Department of State in the early 1990s. In promoting Florida’s multicultural history, it represents the collaboration of Jewish communities, especially in south Florida, with state agencies. In its introduction, it speaks to, and in many respects for, “south Florida … home to the second largest concentration of Jews in the world,” and also, “the nation’s third largest Jewish community, estimated in 1999 at 800,000.” Its express purpose is to expose the public “to the rich legacy of the Jewish community in Florida,” and to dismiss the perception “that Jews did not arrive until World War II.”^[19]

Ironically, much of Florida’s contemporary Jewish population is composed of recent immigrants, primarily from the northeast and including many senior citizens, who have only arrived en masse since the middle of the twentieth century. Relocating to Florida broke long established ties with their large Jewish communities in the North. Re-establishing residence in Florida also meant establishing new connections with the burgeoning Jewish communities of Tampa, Miami, and West Palm Beach. These communities bound themselves to Florida by basking in any triumph of Florida’s Jewish heritage. Yulee was far and away the most prominent Floridian associated with Judaism and his importance in Florida’s earliest history made him a key link to the past. In this context it is no surprise that these more recent arrivals have claimed him as one of their own, and especially in south Florida where the public has little previous recollection of Yulee. Tying themselves to Florida’s past, these more recent Jewish immigrants have used Yulee to legitimate their presence. And by adopting Yulee, these communities have imprinted their image of him into Florida’s social memory.^[20]

Contesting the public expressions over the memory of Yulee is another and less discernible black voice among the louder and more powerful white ones. It speaks of Yulee as a slave-owner and ardent defender of slavery. Yulee's railroad, like much of the South, was built on the back of slave labor. Likewise, his plantations were built and maintained by slaves. Yulee has only rarely been affiliated with slavery in historical narratives, and when he has, it has been in the context of the pleasant and paternalistic relations between planters and slaves evinced by the nostalgic "Lost Cause" myth.^[21] Only recently has the role of slave labor in the construction of the railroad even been acknowledged.^[22] None of the public history displayed in any of north Florida's communities recalls this feature of his life.

Florida's collective memory, embodied in its public history, has imagined David Levy Yulee in various ways since the end of the nineteenth century. For the first half of the twentieth century Yulee was publicly remembered mostly for his support of the Confederacy, a relationship maintained in the memories of local residents through the demarcation of his former plantations and associated antebellum "Old South" lifestyle. However, this "Lost Cause" sentiment has receded, though certainly not disappeared, from the public foreground since the social upheavals of the 1960s and the simultaneous waves of northern immigration into the state. Replacing the image of Yulee the southern planter is a more widely acceptable image of Yulee the entrepreneur and railroad developer. North Florida communities have always remembered Yulee through the railroad, but public recognition of him in this context has been limited to the last forty years. At the same time, Yulee has also been increasingly recognized publicly as a Jew. This representation not only assists the relatively new Jewish communities in binding themselves to the state's history, but also recalls a multicultural past that accepted, and continues to accept, diversity with tolerance. Symbolized in the quasi-permanence of the monuments dedicated in his honor, David Levy Yulee remains engrained in Florida's historical memory. While different facets of Yulee's life have been promoted, repressed, or ignored, Floridians memory of him as an important man in their state's history has never faded.

^[1]See William F. Brundage, ed., *Where These Memories Grow* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 1-24. Also, Susan A. Crane, "Writing the Individual Back Into Collective Memory," *American Historical Review* 102:5 (1997), 1372-1385; Alon Confino, "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of a Method," *American Historical Review* 102:5 (1997), 1386-1403; David Paul Nord, "The Uses of Memory: An Introduction," *Journal of American History* 85:2 (1998), 409-410.

^[2]Jack E. Davis, *Race Against Time: Culture and Separation in Natchez Since 1930* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

^[3]The following brief biography comes primarily from Leon Huhner "David Levy Yulee, Florida's First Senator," in Leonard Dinnerstein and Mary Dale Palsson, eds., *Jews in the South* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1973). Other sources include Celeste H. Kavanaugh, *David Levy Yulee: A Man and His Vision* (Fernandina Beach, FL: Amelia Island Museum of History, 1995); Charles Wickliff Yulee, "Senator Yulee of Florida: A Biographical Sketch," *Florida Historical Society Quarterly* 2:1-2 (1909); Arthur W. Thompson, "David Yulee: A Study of Nineteenth Century American Thought and Enterprise" (Dissertation, Columbia University, 1954); Mills M. Lord, *David Levy Yulee: Statesman and Railroad Builder* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press), 1940.

^[4]Much debate, beyond the scope of this paper, centers on the reasons for his name change. Adler suggests he changed his name to enhance his political career and rebuke his father while Mickler and Young Smith claim it was

changed to pacify his wife and father-in-law who reportedly exclaimed “it’s not that I fault your Jewish grandmother, it’s just that I can’t think of a son-in-law with a Jewish name.” Joseph G. Adler, “The Public Career of Senator David Levy Yulee” (Dissertation, Case Western Reserve University, 1973), 39; Latrell E. Mickler, “Florida’s First Senator,” *Florida Living* (September, 1988), 11; Dorothy Young Smith, “David Levy Yulee,” *Co-op Chatter* (March, 1972), 7.

^[5]Mills M. Lord, *David Levy Yulee: Statesman and Railroad Builder* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1940); Frank W. Sweet, *Yulee’s Railroad* (Palm Coast, FL: Backintyme, 2000).

^[6]Characterizations of Yulee’s allegiance to, and involvement with, the Confederacy have varied. For instance, Fairbanks assesses Yulee as “among the most radical of the southern leaders,” and Cutler claims that “He was soon drawn into the debates on slavery and for fifteen years was one of the most ardent champions of the cause of the southern states.” George R. Fairbanks, *History of Florida* (NY: J.J. Little and Co., 1898), 145; Harry G. Cutler, *History of Florida Past and Present*, (NY: Lewis Publishing Co., 1923), 2:365. Contrasting this description is that of Dye, who claims that Yulee was “not enthusiastic for the cause,” and Cash, who states that Yulee was a follower of his party and not a leader. Thomas R. Dye, “Race, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Economic Development: A Case Study of Cedar Key, Florida” MA Thesis, Florida State University, 1992), 34; W.T. Cash, *The Story of Florida* (NY: American Historical Society, 1938), I:424.

^[7]Incidentally, he remained confined there longer than anybody else in the former Confederacy except Jefferson Davis.

^[8]A thorough description of the proceedings can be found in A.J. Hanna, *Flight Into Oblivion* (reprint, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959), 113-120. The United Daughters of the Confederacy and other women’s clubs were largely responsible for disseminating “Old South” memories in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. More info on the United Daughters of the Confederacy’s role in shaping social memory can be found in Karen L. Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003).

^[9]David Anderson, “Down Memory Lane: Nostalgia for the Old South in Post-Civil War Plantation Reminiscences,” *The Journal of Southern History* 71:1 (2005), 105-136.

^[10]See Jerry Blizin, “*David Levy Yulee, The Unsung Pioneer*,” a speech presented to the Citrus County Historical Society at Yulee State Park, 29 May, 1992; H. Maddox, speech delivered at Yulee Park, October 26, 1950; Florida Division of Recreation and Parks, *A Guide to Yulee Sugar Mill Historic Memorial*, 12 January, 1971 (BTS); Smith, “David Levy Yulee,” 6-8.

^[11]H. Maddox, speech delivered at Yulee Park on 26 October, 1950, 4.

^[12]Florida Division of Recreation and Parks, “*A Guide to Yulee Sugar Mill Historic Memorial*,” 12 January, 1971 (BTS).

^[13]C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 6.

^[14]“Archer Historical Society Charter,” 18 August, 1977. In Rance O. Braley, *Nineteenth Century Archer* (Archer, FL: Rance O. Braley and Archer Historical Society, 1988).

^[15]www.yuleerailroaddays.org (accessed 12 February, 2005).

^[16]Rachel Heimovics and Marcia Zerivitz, *Florida Jewish Heritage Trail* (Tallahassee: Florida Dept. of State, 2000), introduction.

^[17]Evans quoted in Henry Green, Marcia Zerivitz, and Rachel Heimovics, *MOSAIC: Jewish Life in Florida: A Documentary Exhibit from 1763 to the Present* (Miami: MOSAIC, 1991), fn 50.

^[18]*Ibid.*, 10. Unlike those historians who claim the title “Yulee” was Moorish in origin, the Jewish Heritage Trail authors asserts that he added the appendage to honor his Sephardic ancestry.

^[19]Heimovics and Zerivitz, *Florida Jewish Heritage Trail*, introduction.

^[20]Leonard Rogoff, *Homelands: Southern Jewish Identity in Durham and Chapel Hill, North Carolina* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 308, 313.

^[21]Braley, *Nineteenth Century Archrr*, 9. Using extant sources, Braley describes the “loyalty and service” of one slave who, nevertheless, still had to be feared because “he will never abandon the hope of freedom.” Moreover, as an expression of gratitude, Yulee supposedly gave another emancipated slave, Uncle Pauldo, his slave horn. Braley writes that this horn was later given to the Kirby-Smith United Daughters of the Confederacy, a fact they could not confirm.

^[22]There is no indication of the use of slave labor in Sweet, *Yulee’s Railroad*. However, the current “Yulee Railroad Days” website (www.yuleerailroaddays.org), as well as the Archer Historical Society website (www.afn.org), both acknowledge the use of slave labor in the railroad’s construction (accessed 12 February, 2005).

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