

THE CHARGER



CLEVELAND CIVIL WAR ROUNDTABLE

FEB.. 2020

VOL. 43 #2

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February 12th Program

Reconstruction: What Went Wrong? Lincoln's Big Mistake: Selecting Andrew Johnson

Presented by: Judge Frank J. Williams

Chief Justice of the [Rhode Island](#) Supreme Courts (Retired)

If slavery is the original sin of American democracy, then the Reconstruction period following the end of the Civil War was our first and greatest missed opportunity to repent that sin. With the war's victorious end followed by the rapid passing of the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments in 1865, 1866 and 1870 respectively, progress for the freedmen of America looked promising. Sadly, hopes for progress and justice were soon dashed, and Reconstruction's collapse opened the door to the Jim Crow era condemning black Americans to an additional 150 years of oppression that extends to today. Why did Reconstruction fail? Our speaker, Frank J. Williams, will consider that question.

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Our speaker: Frank J. Williams is a native of Rhode Island. He is a graduate of Boston College and Boston University School of Law. He also received a master's in taxation from Bryant University. Williams served his country in the United States Army with distinction during the Vietnam War. In 2003, President Bush appointed him to the United States Court of Military Commission Review, ultimately becoming the chief judge where he served until 2009. Judge Williams was a member of the U.S. Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission and co-founded and for 16 years served as chair the Lincoln Forum. He is past president of The Lincoln Group of Boston, The Abraham Lincoln Association and currently serves as President of Ulysses S. Grant Association. Judge Williams was inducted as a Laureate of The Lincoln Academy of Illinois and awarded the Order of Lincoln (the State's highest honor) by the Governor of Illinois in 2009 as a Bicentennial Laureate. He stepped down from the [Rhode Island](#) Supreme Court in 2009 and is a frequent lecturer on the topic of Lincoln. He is the author of **Judging Lincoln** a collection of nine of the most insightful essays written by Judge Williams over the last twenty years. The Cleveland Civil War Roundtable would like to thank past president Mel Maurer for arranging Judge Williams's visit.



Take Note: Background Reading for Feb. Meeting

"Abraham Lincoln in Cleveland":

<https://clevelandhistorical.org/items/show/70>

For a history of Reconstruction and its failure, a recommended reference is:

"Eric Foner. Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877"

From Dennis Keating

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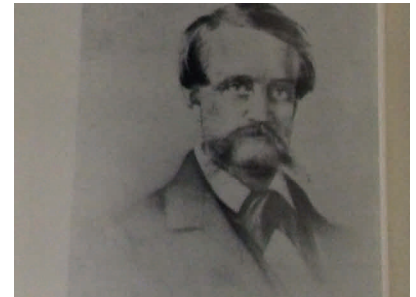
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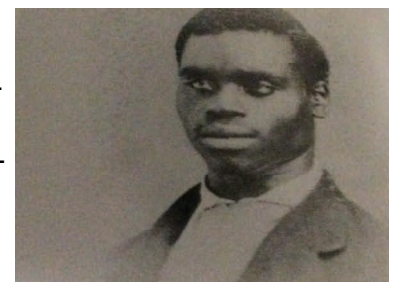
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The Escape and Terrible Ordeal of General John C. Breckinridge

One of the most interesting episodes following the collapse of the Confederate Government and its flight from Richmond is the ordeal of former U. S. Vice President and Confederate Secretary of War John C. Breckinridge. After the fall of Richmond in April 1865 the Confederate Government fled southward to Danville and then on to Greensboro North Carolina. All government officials were finally captured except two, Judah Benjamin and Confederate Secretary of War John C. Breckinridge.



Both made it out the country and to Cuba where they then made their respective ways to Great Britain and Canada. During the escape Breckinridge helped negotiate the terms of surrender between Sherman and Joseph E. Johnston. After which he rejoined the presidential party making their way through North Carolina and it was at this time that Breckinridge became the de facto president of the Confederacy. He was there when the other members of the cabinet convinced Davis that the War was lost and he recorded the terrible breakdown that Davis underwent. Several Confederate officers had made their way to the presidential party as it congregated in Charlotte, North Carolina. Among them Generals Vaughn, Basil Duke, Bragg and several others. At Abbeville South Carolina Breckinridge supervised liquidation of the Confederate treasury. Soldiers were paid off, and much was sent to Augusta, Georgia where it was finally seized by federal authorities. Contrary to popular belief very little was unaccounted for. When the presidential party reached Washington, Ga. most members had already fled toward their respective homes, and Davis was by this time a marked man. Robert Toombs the former Confederate Congressman adamantly refused to let him into his home fearing reprisals when the Federal troops arrived. However General E.P. Alexander was planning to join the Davis party but was disappointed when he learned he had arrived just after the Davis party left. At this point Davis had accepted the defeat of the Confederacy and decided to go south toward Florida and make contact with his wife and children. Breckinridge and Benjamin also left the party here and decided to make their way into Florida and then out of the country. Breckinridge headed south to Abbeville, Georgia where he heard of the capture of Jefferson Davis. Breckinridge then released the last few escorts that accompanied him and with his son Cabel reached Madison, Florida on May 15, 1865. Little did he know that he and his party were paralleling the route of Judah Benjamin; the two parties however never met until they reached Cuba. At Madison Breckinridge sent his son to Tallahassee to surrender to Federal authorities and get his parole. Here he met Captain John Taylor Wood, President Davis's nephew. Wood was with the presidential party but escaped when Davis was captured. Breckinridge and Wood made their way southward and crossed the Suwannee River on May 17 before moving on into Gainesville, Florida. Here they met Col. J.J. Dickinson, the Swamp Fox of the Confederacy, who promised to secure them a boat in which to make it down the east coast of Florida and on to Cuba. Breckinridge and his party left Gainesville and rode on through Ocala, and made it to Ft. Butler on the St. John's River, where they gave up their horses and met the man who would take them by boat south along the east coast. The sun was unbearably hot and the mosquitos were ravenous. Breckinridge, Wood and several others subsequently made their way along the east coast of Florida. Among them was Thomas Ferguson, Breckinridge's African American valet, who had been with him throughout the war and who subsequently would stay with the party until they arrived in Cuba. After crossing the St. John's River they headed east arriving at the Atlantic Coast near present day Cape Canaveral.



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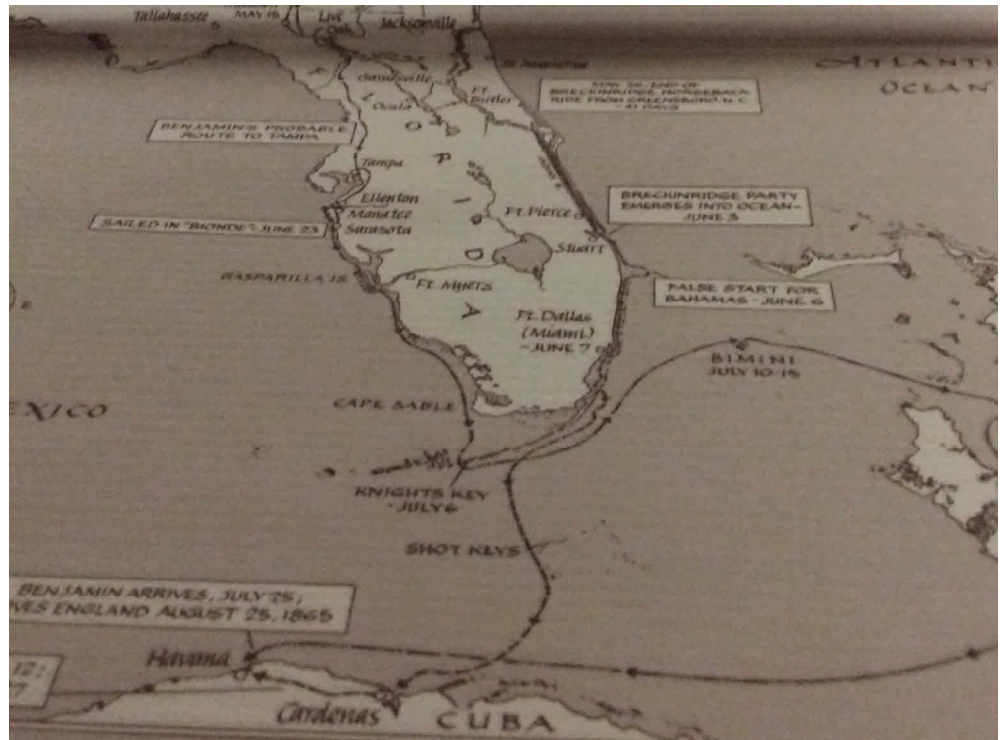


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The party pressed on along the coast hiding during daylight hours and traveling by night. They passed the Union outpost at Fort Lauderdale, and hid in the swamps surrounding Fort Dallas at the mouth of the Miami River, where they arrived on June 7, 1865. From here they made their way across Biscayne Bay, fighting a band of renegades who inhabited the swamps around the Bay and then set out across the straights of Florida, surviving storms, exposure to the hot sun and millions of hungry mosquitos. They ran out of water and were thoroughly



dehydrated by the time they arrived in Cardenas, Cuba on June 12, 1865. After much rest and recuperation they went on to Havana and subsequently arrived in England on August 27, 1865.

Breckinridge spent three and a half years in self imposed exile in England before moving to Niagara on-the-Lake in Canada. In 1868, after President Johnston's Christmas Amnesty, at the urging of friends he returned to his native Kentucky. Breckinridge was urged to run for office but steadfastly refused. The War had taken something out of him and as he told a friend "Politically I am an extinct volcano". He did however constantly urge understanding between the north and south; he condemned the Ku Klux Klan and championed the civil rights of former slaves. He died at his home in Lexington, Kentucky exactly ten years after crossing the Suwannee River on his flight into Florida.

Paul Siedel

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Program: Reconstruction: What Went Wrong?
Speaker: Judge Frank J. Williams, Chief Justice of the
Rhode Island Supreme Courts (Retired)

JUDSON MANOR Drinks 6pm Dinner 6:30
Judson Manor , East 303th St. & Chester

Program: Reservations: You must make a dinner reservation for any meeting you plan to attend no later than three days prior to that meeting (so we can give a headcount to the caterer). Make your reservation by sending an email to ccwrt1956@yahoo.com

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