Florida Voting, The Stolen Election 1876, and Henry George
By Dr. Mason Gaffney

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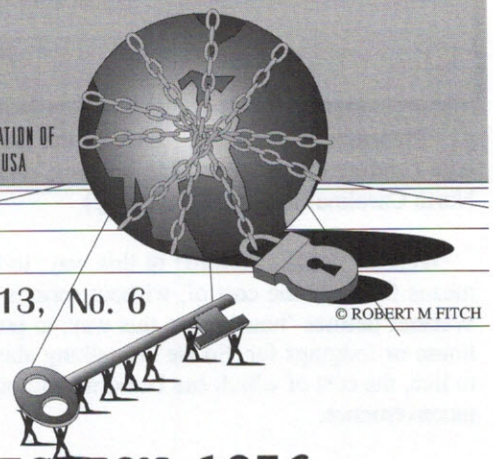

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FLORIDA VOTING, THE STOLEN ELECTION 1876, AND HENRY GEORGE

By Dr. Mason Gaffney, Riverside, CA

The voting mess in Florida recalls the disputed presidential election of 1876, and the corrupt deal that resolved it: the Democrats let Hayes win upon his promise to end Reconstruction, abandon the black freedmen, and turn the South back to its former masters.

Who brokered this corrupt deal? A key figure was Abram S. Hewitt. Georgists know Hewitt mainly as the politician who left Congress ten years later to contest George's run for Mayor of New York in 1886. But who was this Hewitt? A nobody?

In 1876, Hewitt was Tilden's campaign manager, at the very center of the deal that let Hayes steal the election. At that time, Democrats controlled the House; Hewitt was the majority leader. He was Presidential timber himself. The plutocracy threw a crack general into the fight against George, and his mission was clear. He said, "I am a candidate for Mayor for only one purpose. I regard the election of Henry George as Mayor of New York as the greatest possible calamity. ... For that reason and that only did I take this nomination." Academic historians and economists have gone far towards wiping out our collective memory of the Georgist phenomenon, so even most Georgists have little idea of its force. We may measure that by the force that was marshaled against it.

What were Hewitt's goals and views before he went home to block George? His personal goal was to become U.S. President, and he was considered eligible. His major business in Congress was repealing the basic measures of Radical Republican Reconstruction. It was the Democrats' interest to disenfranchise blacks, who were voting Republican. Hewitt, a major steel producer and mine owner, was also concerned lest Radical Republican ideas about redistributing land should start a contagion that might spread northwards.

Another sectional issue was transportation. The Mississippi and other southern rivers had been blocked by wartime measures, and were not repaired or reopened for many years. Shipping was diverted to New York, Philadelphia and Boston. Northeastern shippers also got bounties.

Northern Democrats, led by Tilden and Hewitt, were responsible for steering Federal money to northern ports and rails, starving southern internal improvements. Tammany was in on it: NY got big Federal money to improve its harbor. All that contributed to high freight rates in the southeast, adding to the miseries there. It helped lead southern Democrats away from Tilden, to acquiesce in the deal to make Hayes President.

When the voting in three southern states, including Florida, was disputed, Congress selected an electoral commission to make the call. The swing vote was one Joseph Bradley. Hewitt, as Tilden's campaign manager, accepted him as "entirely satisfactory." Bradley then voted for the Hayes electors, straight down the line. An honest mistake? Not likely. According to Nicholas Murray Butler, Hewitt was bucking for the Presidency himself, and Tilden finally felt betrayed.

A breach between Hewitt and Tilden grew during the weeks when Hewitt was working on the appointment of the Electoral Commission that was to determine the election results. Butler quotes Hewitt as saying, to a group of rich men plus himself, that "Tilden would, at that time, have gone to any lengths to obtain the Presidency and that he, Mr. Hewitt, was one of the powerful restraining forces which kept Mr. Tilden from precipitating a conflict ... " This was to protect his own chances at a future nomination.

Evidence of the breach came out when Hewitt was to be nominated by Democrats for Governor in 1882, thence to run for U.S. President in 1884. Operators had it all settled, and went to call on Tilden, who "flew into a rage and announced that he would never support Mr. Hewitt, that Mr. Hewitt had been untrue to him in 1876 and 1877 and that if Mr. Hewitt were nominated, he, Mr. Tilden, would write an open letter against his election." That queered the deal, and the Democrats nominated Cleveland; but our main interest here is that Tilden thought Abram Hewitt, his own campaign manager, betrayed him in 1876 to advance his own career. (continued on page 9)

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Having helped elect Hayes, southerners returned to the Democratic Party, allying themselves with the Conservative, Eastern wing, a wing "as devoted to the defense of the new economic order as the Republicans." Thus, Hewitt the conservative Democrat won after all, setting the stage for the alliance of anti-Progressive Republicans and the Solid South that dominated U.S. politics for a century.

Allan Nevins, Hewitt's tame hagiographer, was an historian at Columbia University. Columbia University? Oh, yes, Hewitt went on to become one of the Trustees, after merging his steel business with Andrew Carnegie to form U.S. Steel. Columbia sheltered not only J.B. Clark and E.R.A. Seligman, major detractors of George and shapers of Neo-classical Economics, but a nest of racist historians, led by William Archibald Dunning and John W. Burgess and Claude Bowers, who dominated the history of Reconstruction until recent times. For an idea of their views, see The Birth of a Nation, or dip almost anywhere into Bowers' diatribe, The Tragic Era. In 1940 this was considered respectable historiography, and Bowers was our Ambassador to Spain (FDR drew heavily on Columbia faculty). Burgess wrote that blacks are "ignorant barbarians." "... it is the white man's mission, his duty and his right, to hold the reins of political power in his own hands for the civilization of the world and the welfare of mankind." (Reconstruction and the Constitution, 1902).

Henry Steele Commager, Amherst historian, was considered a liberal stalwart, but when writing with Allan Nevins of Columbia, in their standard Pocket History of the U.S., he signed on to the following sentiments, masquerading as history, assigned to millions of students.

Slavery "was designed to regulate the relationships of black and white rather than of master and slave." The backwardness of the south was caused by "the presence of cheap and ignorant black labor - a situation that persisted long after emancipation." In 1850, Webster's support of the fugitive slave provisions of the compromise was "statesmanlike," a "great service to the nation," and "required high courage." In 1861, a southern advantage in the civil war was the "efficiency and organization of its agriculture." In 1868, the impeachment of Andrew Johnson was "a disgraceful attack upon the constitutional integrity of the president." Emancipation should have been gradual, and "with due compensation to the slaveholders." Carpetbag regimes were extravagant, thieving and insouciant. Under sharecropping, "Farmers furnished their tenants with ... land ... The system seemed to work well and was so convenient ... " The tenant got 1/3 of the crop.

Nevins and Commager's Pocket History was reissued in 1996 by the Trustees of Columbia University themselves, acting for the deceased Nevins.

Hewitt was a Trustee when Nicholas Murray Butler Rose to become Columbia's President, which he remained for nearly 40 years. Burgess was an especial favorite of Butler's. The two traveled together in Europe, where they fawned on Kaiser Wilhelm, whose praises Butler sang in America until the War made him volte-face. Burgess had studied in Germany and absorbed racism, chic among German students. Teutonism was common in German universities, and the culture, and helped lead to W.W. I. Burgess wrote, "The Teuton dominates the world by his superior political genius." Butler agreed. In 1921, he wrote to President Harding (whose nomination he had engineered) that he has explained to other powers why the U.S. doesn't want Japanese immigration, as follows. "I have explained our negro problem and have emphasized the fact that we did not wish a second race problem to grow up on our soil." He sent UK diplomats works by Burgess and Dunning, so they could "clearly gain a correct idea of that time (Reconstruction) in our history."

Thus, the heritage of Abram Hewitt lingered a long, long time in our culture. Many people think with Henry Ford that "history is bunk," a dry dustbin for the backward-looking; but many modern and controlling institutions, like the electoral college, are lengthened shadows from long ago. More generally there are the law, land tenure, perpetual corporate charters, the churches, the universities, political parties, the folkways and mythologies. History is mind-control: people wanting to control the present rewrite history to wipe out some memories, and plant modern fables in their places - happens every day. According to Foner, histories of Reconstruction spawned by the Dunning School at Hewitt's Columbia "did much to freeze the mind of the white South in unalterable opposition to ... social change and to any thought of ... eliminating segregation, or restoring suffrage to disenfranchised blacks." History is reality, a sobering dose of what really happened. By telling us how things have been, history also tickles the imagination and bends the future by telling us how they might be again, based on experience. I hope this vignette will illustrate what a strong role Henry George and his traducers played in our history, and shaping modern thought.

(editor's note: Dr. Mason Gaffney is a Professor of Economics at U.C.-Riverside and a member of the Board of Directors of the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation. He is the author of numerous scholarly papers, especially on taxation and natural resources. He is the co-author with Fred Harrison of The Corruption of Economics (1994, 272 pp. $16) and wrote the "Land as a Distinctive Factor of Production" chapter in Land and Taxation which was edited by Dr. Nicolaus Tideman (1994, 182 pp., $20) -- both books are available from the Robert Schalkenbach oundation. Dr.Gaffney is also the editor of Extractive Resources and Taxation (1967, listed in the Schalkenbach catalogue as available from University Microforms.) The toll free phone number of the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation is 1-800-269-2555, and the website is http://www. progress.org/books.
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