

# Matthew M. Levy

(ca. 1845–1933)

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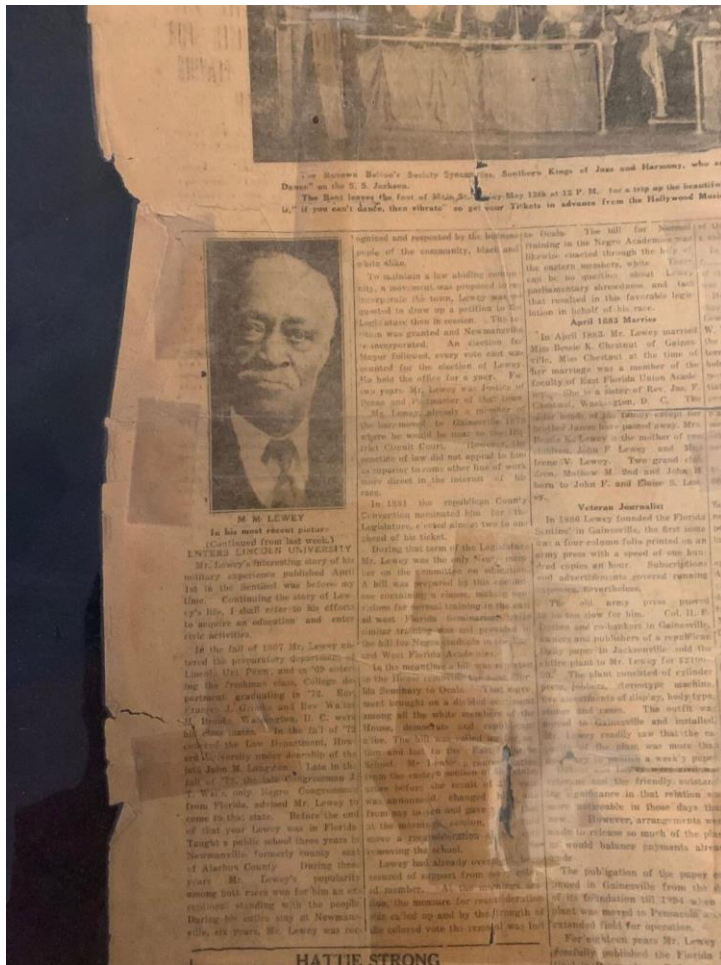
Photograph of M.M. Lewey and other staff of the *Florida Sentinel*. From [The New York Public Library Digital Collections](https://www.nypl.org/collections)

# A forgotten obituary: The legacy of Sgt. Matthew M. Lewey

- [Avery Lotz, Staff Writer](#)
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Lewey was a Civil War veteran, Florida's first Black newspaper editor and Black lawyer, a founder of the Independent Party of Florida, a friend to Booker T. Washington and a freedom fighter. He stood with [Josiah T. Walls](#) to fortify Alachua County through reconstruction and served as a mayor, teacher and justice of the peace.

John Lewey, 56, holds a piece of his great great grandfather's history in his hands: an article from The Florida Sentinel published on April 22, 1933. It's yellowed and worn, and held together with tape.



Courtesy of John Lewey

Last week, a member of the Alachua County Historical Commission posted a question on the Historic Haile Homestead Plantation Facebook page:

“Does anyone know which member of the 55th Mass USCT settled in Gainesville after the war and became a lawyer, teacher and publisher?”

There was no answer — very few know his story.

John lives in Jacksonville, more than 70 miles from where his ancestor is buried in Gainesville.

He said he’s saddened that Alachua County hasn’t recognized Lewey’s contributions to society. But he’s glad his history is gradually being uncovered.

The Alligator spoke with experts to learn more about Lewey and his place in Alachua County’s history. Some posed the question: Has his legacy been forgotten?

### **Thenceforward, and forever free**

For the first 15 years of his life, Lewey lived in Maryland, a slave state, where he received little formal schooling aside from a short time at a private Black school, according to Irvine Garland Penn’s “The Afro-American Press and Its Editors.”

His parents, John and Elizabeth, wanted their son to succeed.

They sent him to live in New York, where he would receive a traditional education for the first time in his life, according to Penn’s text.

While in New York, he attended Madison Street Presbyterian Church, which was one of the leading Black Freedom Movement churches in the 19th century, said UF history professor Paul Ortiz.

However, with President Abraham Lincoln’s 1863 [Emancipation Proclamation](#), Lewey put his own life on hold to protect the Union.

At 17, Lewey was prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for the U.S., a country that labeled him as three-fifths of a human, Ortiz said.

The Proclamation stated that freed slaves “will be received into the armed services of the United States.” More than 1,000 Black men joined the fight, Ortiz said. Lewey joined the Massachusetts 55th Regiment, an African American troop of the Union Army. Joining the army as a freed slave was an act of bravery, Ortiz said.

“Signing up in 1863 meant you could be treated as a slave when you’re captured and had no rights as a Black man,” he said.

If Lewey and his fellow Black soldiers were captured by the South, it was essentially a death sentence, Ortiz said. Despite Lincoln's order that slaves in rebellious states were "thenceforward, and forever free," captured Black Union soldiers could be tried as slaves — many were killed.

Despite the risk, Lewey fought, said Richard Macmaster, a Gainesville resident and retired history professor.

"If you were a young African American in 1863, this was the very first time a state — much less the federal government — had said you could fight for freedom," MacMaster said.

He added that the 55th was the sister regiment to the 54th, a [famous](#) African American Union infantry regiment.

Lewey worked his way to the rank of senior sergeant and color bearer, according to Leedell W. Neyland's "Twelve Black Floridians."

The color bearer carried the flag of the regiment and led troops into battle, Ortiz said. While this position was considered an honor, holding the flag steps ahead of the rest of the regiment meant risking being shot at first — without a weapon to shoot back.

At the Battle of Honey Hill in South Carolina on Nov. 30, 1864, the danger of Sgt. Lewey's position became reality, Ortiz said. He was struck by shrapnel and musket fire and fell to the ground in a battle lost to the Confederate Army. Lewey's injuries were so severe that many left the battle assuming he had died.

In President Bill Clinton's [Medal of Honor service](#) for the Union soldier who picked up Lewey's flag, former president Andrew Jackson Smith mistakenly stated that the previous color bearer, Lewey, was dead.

He lived.

### **A call to rebuild Florida**

After the war, Lewey was transferred to New York's De Camp General Hospital where he recovered from his injuries, according to Leedell W. Neyland's findings.

Around the age of 20, he enrolled at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania to continue his studies, Ortiz said. He graduated with distinction and moved to Washington D.C. to attend Howard Law School. While attending Howard, he befriended fellow Civil War veteran, [Josiah T. Walls](#).

Walls urged him to move to Alachua County where there was unclaimed land, open leadership positions and a failing economy, Ortiz said.

Lewey moved to Newnansville, a town near Gainesville in 1876, according to Neyland's text. There, he practiced law and oversaw minor criminal trials as the justice of peace, served as the mayor and worked as a school teacher.

“During his entire stay in Newnansville, six years, Mr. Lewey was recognized and respected by the businesspeople of the community, Black and white alike,” according to a 1933 edition of the Florida Sentinel.

While working for the state legislature, Lewey was instrumental in creating the Union Academy in Gainesville and worked to lay the foundations for Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, MacMaster said. The Union Academy was the first school for African Americans in Gainesville and Alachua County.

Lewey aligned himself with the anti-corporate wing of the Republican Party, which focused on stopping the rapid spread of monopolistic railroads through small farms and advocated for Black workers in opposition to the Democratic party, according to a 1872 state legislature [speech](#) given by John W. Wyatt.

A goal of Lewey’s was to create an equitable educational system for all — not just for the wealthy sons and daughters of plantation owners, Ortiz said.

A timeline of the Pleasant Street District lists that Lewey was elected to the Florida House of Representatives in 1882.

Despite Lewey’s service to Alachua County, the anger of white supremacy seeped into his path, the professor added.

“The thing that really enraged the former Confederacy leadership, which was trying to take power in the white supremacy movement, is the fact that you have these Black Union Army veterans like Lewey and Walls who are rising to positions of leadership,” Ortiz said. “You have a man who was actually a U.S. Army hero, wounded in combat.”

In April 1883, Sgt. Lewey married Bessie K. Chestnut, according to the copy of The Sentinel owned by John Lewey.

A coalition of Black minds, including Lewey, met in Gainesville for an [emergency conference](#) in 1884, Ortiz said. The meeting was held to combat the close-minded, one-party Republican state of Florida.

Lewey was nominated as the secretary of the conference, with the transcript reading: “Hon. John Wallace, of Leon, moved that Hon. M. M. Lewey, of Alachua, be the permanent secretary of the conference.”

“Gainesville was known as a center of organizing Black leadership, Black economic development and educational attainment, and it took decades of white supremacy to erase that,” Ortiz said.

After years of being the target of white supremacy, Lewey and his fellow Black activists started the Independent Party of Florida — the first biracial party in the deep South, a symbolic division of the U.S. that consists of Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, Mississippi and Louisiana.

“It's so amazing to me when I hear people say ‘Multiculturalism is a new idea. Interracial activism is a new idea, because no, it is not,’ Ortiz said. “In 1884, people in this conference argued that the way that African Americans were going to defend their voting rights was to align themselves with white people who are just as dissatisfied with the party of white supremacy.”

### **The Florida Sentinel: Organ of the Colored People of Florida**

In 1887, Lewey journeyed into a different career path: journalism.

He founded the Gainesville Sentinel, a newspaper aimed at elevating Black voices, businesses and experiences. His colleagues described him as “irrepressible,” according to a [1900 edition of the Colored American](#), a leading Black newspaper of the time from Washington D.C.

According to a 1933 edition of the Florida Sentinel, the original plant for Lewey’s newspaper could publish 100 papers an hour — but Lewey wanted to speed things up. The article described how Lewey purchased a plant from Jacksonville and moved its technology to Gainesville.

Despite Gainesville being a haven for Black voices, Alachua County was also a breeding ground for racism, Ortiz said.

Florida had the highest per capita lynching rate of any U.S. state, according to the Equal Justice Initiative’s Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror [report](#). Lewey’s activism through The Gainesville Sentinel shone as a beacon of hope for some, but made him a target for white supremacists, the UF professor said.

“This county was ground zero for anti-Black violence,” Ortiz said. “So to speak out, you either had to be able to defend yourself, or you had to be in a community where people would defend you.”

Lewey made the decision to leave Gainesville behind and moved to Pensacola in 1894, Ortiz said. There, he dropped the city name from his newspaper’s title and created the Florida Sentinel.

In 1905, Lewey launched the Pensacola streetcar boycotts, Ortiz said. The city temporarily suspended segregation in its streetcars — 50 years before the famous Montgomery bus boycotts began.

In 1911, he was named President of the National Negro Press Association.

The Sentinel became one of the top 10 Black-owned newspapers in the U.S., Ortiz said. It included editorials from world-renowned Black speakers and activists, such as Ida B. Wells, Booker T. Washington and Mary McLeod Bethune.

“It became a place to really showcase Black political, cultural and educational attainment,” Ortiz said. “It also was a place to launch Civil Rights struggles.”

His work as the editor of the Sentinel led him to become a founding member of the Associated Negro Press in 1919 — a Black newswire that distributed stories to newspapers across the country.

### **75-year-old freedom fighter and 85-year-old editor**

Even by today's standards, Lewey continued to work at an age when most had already retired, Ortiz said.

In 1912, he accompanied Booker T. Washington on his tour of Florida and wrote about his visit in the Florida Sentinel, according to a March 1912 publication of The Lakeland Evening Telegram.

In 1920, he, along with his wife Bessie and their two children, registered to vote—an act of courage against the Ku Klux Klan, Ortiz said. After World War I, he worked to register Black voters, arguing that they had fought in every American war and deserved to have their voices heard.

On the Sentinel's 46th birthday, the then 85-year-old finally announced his retirement in 1930, according to a newspaper statement. While there are discrepancies regarding the year of his death, he is believed to have died Aug. 12, 1933, in Jacksonville, Florida at 88.

While he died in Jacksonville after moving from Pensacola, he is buried in Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Gainesville, MacMaster said.

Mount Pleasant Cemetery is now a regular site for burial ceremonies for Chestnut Funeral Homes, Director Larry Saunders said. The funeral home, run by Saunders, Charles Chestnut II and Charles S. Chestnut IV, has served Gainesville for more than 100 years.

The funeral home curated the burial of their distant cousin — Matthew Lewey — over 90 years ago.

“In history, We kind of just go from the high point to the next high point,” MacMaster said. “So it seems as though apart from being victims, African Americans weren't really doing much in Florida between reconstruction and the civil rights movement in the '60s and '70s, and that's just not true. People like Matthew Lewey were really fighting the good fight, year after year, and he was doing it right up until he was very very old — older than I am.”

To Ortiz, his legacy could have died with him.

Neither his name nor his contributions to the county, state or country are mentioned on the Alachua County History website. He isn't taught about in many classes. There are no buildings, monuments or schools built in his name — while those of Confederate soldiers litter the country, Ortiz said.

However, Ortiz said he believes Alachua County has an opportunity to reinvigorate Lewey's story in the way Lewey himself would have wanted.

Lewey would have wanted a school curriculum that taught a full scope of African American history — not one that begins with the civil rights movement in 1964, Ortiz said. The role of Black citizens in rebuilding the country after the Civil War must be recognized.

“That history was suppressed,” Ortiz said. “That history was whitewashed. Now we have the opportunity to set the record straight.”

### **Additional Information:**

#### **Matthew M. Lewey**

Matthew Lewey was born in Maryland and attended Howard Law School. He later moved to Florida, and established the Gainesville Sentinel in 1887, but changed its name to the Florida Sentinel when he moved to Pensacola in 1894. A leading African American newspaper, it was circulated throughout the South, and at one time was the South's largest black newspaper. Lewey also served as the first president of the Florida Business League, an organization formed to aid blacks in business.

Journalism professor Patrick S. Washburn describes the role of the black press in America as “operating against a background of continual inequalities for blacks and a white America that routinely, and sometimes fiercely and even illogically, fought the granting of any new rights, black newspapers came to be in the vanguard of the struggle.” He also argues that the black press was necessary because of the racial bias in white papers. Simply put, “white newspapers virtually refused to cover blacks unless they were athletic stars, entertainers, or criminals, blacks were forced to read their own papers to learn about everyday black life in communities across the country.” Because the African American press was so intentionally focused on black news and concerns, it may not be surprising that the white-run Florida papers we've digitized, which do refer to each other frequently, by and large don't address the existence of the black press. However, we will point out that some papers had regularly occurring columns or pages that made [space for African American news](#), but, in our collection of papers, this example seems to be the exception and not the rule. Some of the more outspokenly segregationist papers in Florida at this time opposed the inclusion of such columns with the argument that it involves [“pushing the negro forward to a place where he does not belong.”](#)



M. M. Lewey, editor of The Sentinel, published at Pensacola, has just installed a new power press. Lewey formerly published his paper in Gainesville and was one of the most popular negroes that ever resided in Alachua county. He is well educated, and was at one time a practicing attorney in this city. He was also a member of the Legislature from this county in 1883 and was instrumental in preventing the East Florida Seminary from being removed from Gainesville to Ocala. Lewey is a great hustler for business for his paper, and The Sun is glad to hear of his success.

[The Gainesville daily sun-March 9, 1908](#)

Despite the infrequent mention of the African American press, there is a pleasantly surprising amount of positive coverage of Editor Matthew M. Lewey (stylized as M. M. Lewey) and the *Florida Sentinel*. The paper served a variety of cities during its publication period. It was published in Gainesville from 1887-1894, Pensacola from 1894-1914, and Jacksonville from 1914-1931. Lewey was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1848 and, prior to moving to Florida, he served in the Civil War for the Union. He eventually became involved in politics and served as both a Justice of the Peace for Alachua County and a member of the Florida House of Representatives prior to starting the *Florida Sentinel*.

During Lewey's time in Pensacola, *The Pensacola journal* regularly discussed his involvement with groups like the [Negro Business League](#) and [Republican Party](#). Lewey also supported [education for African Americans](#), even [appearing](#) and [traveling](#) with Booker T. Washington when he visited Florida in 1912. The white press was generally complimentary of his work with both [The Chipley banner](#) and the [Gainesville daily sun](#) complementing his work. *The Pensacola journal* seemed to praise the Christmas edition of the *Florida Sentinel* almost annually as well as their annual special edition published in the summer. *The Pensacola journal's* praise for the [1912 special edition](#) highlights the "graphic account of the recent tour of Dr. Booker T. Washington through Florida" calling the paper "a very fine effort" while also denoting that it is "a negro newspaper."

# REPUBLICANS HOLD MEETING

COLORED MEMBERS OF THE  
PARTY OBJECT TO THEIR  
TREATMENT AND ELECT MORE  
DELEGATES TO CONVENTION.

Objecting to the treatment accorded them at the county Republican convention of last Monday when they allege the chairman would not hear them or entertain their motions, a large number of colored Republicans gathered in Sunday's hall Thursday night and passed resolutions condemning the manner in which the recent convention was conducted, endorsed Theodore Roosevelt for president and elected the following delegates to the state convention who are pledged to support and vote for Roosevelt men:

Delegates—J. T. Spann, M. S. White, M. M. Lewey and T. S. Grice.  
 Alternates—E. B. Palmer, W. J. Bennett, Isom Vann and Freeman Powell.

The following, recommended by a special committee appointed for the purpose, were elected congressional delegates and alternates:

Delegates—R. Morris, Jr., A. Lucas, I. H. Johnson and Jas. Thompson.  
 Alternates—Wm. McDuffy, G. W. Powell, R. Perkins and Lorenzo Lewis.

[The Pensacola journal-January 27, 1912](#)

Despite the considerable praise *The Pensacola journal* heaped on M.M. Lewey, their coverage of his activities eventually and abruptly ceased. We know that he moved the paper to Jacksonville in 1914, but to our knowledge there is no mention of it occurring in our newspapers. However, in the year prior to the move, his name does begin to appear in the legal notice section of the paper. In one announcement, the manager of [Ferris Warehouse and Storage Co.](#) was to “sell to the highest bidder for cash, one lot of household furniture, property of M. M. Lewey, stored in our warehouse upon which no charges have ever been paid.” And on [September 23, 1913](#) there is a story about the City Tax Collector seizing his property to cover taxes he owed. This is the last story about Lewey in *The Pensacola journal* and it stands in stark contrast to the tone of the other articles in which he is discussed.

## **BOOKER WASHINGTON'S VISIT TO LAKELAND**

Principal Washington will arrive in Lakeland Tuesday morning at 7:47, coming direct from Tampa and will remain here until 5:40, when he will leave on train No. 28 for Orlando.

Accompanying Principal Washington on his tour will be a distinguished party of representative men, among whom are Hon. John C. Napier, Register of the Treasury, Washington; Dr. George Hall, member of the Provident Hospital staff, Chicago; Charles Banks, Cashier Bank of Mound Bayou, Mound Bayou, Miss.; Bishop George W. Clinton, A. M. E. Zion Church; Dr. R. E. Park, Boston; Dr. M. W. Gilbert, President Selma University; Mr. Horace D. Slatter, general newspaper correspondent, Hopkinsville, Ky.; Mr. Alain LeRoy Locke, Rhodes Oxford Scholarship student, Philadelphia.

Dr. Washington, Hon. John C. Napier, Mr. M. M. Lewey, Mr. Nathan Hunt, Mr. Emmett Scott will be guests of Rev. A. L. Brunson, on Lake Wire, 'phone 64-Black.

Dr. M. W. Gilbert, Major R. R. Morton, Dr. George C. Hall, Mr. Richard Carroll will be entertained at the home of Mr. H. W. Bigham,

[The Lakeland evening telegram-March 2, 1912](#)