

United States Senator Matthew Quay in St. Lucie, Florida

One November morning some 120 years ago, a slight man with a louche eye walked out of the Paine boarding house in Old St. Lucie. Sunburned and unshaven, he wore a flannel shirt and threadbare pants stuffed into rubber boots. Between the house and the Indian River, the unassuming man was waylaid by a big-city reporter who insisted on a comment on the recent election.

“You know more about it than I do I guess,” said the man who continued to make his way toward the river. “I’m out of the world here. Haven’t seen a newspaper for ten days.”

“I understand, Senator, that you have beaten your record of last year at hooking tarpon?” said the dogging reporter.

“That’s not so,” the fisherman denied. “I haven’t come near it yet, though I’ve hooked some big fish.”

At that, he stepped into his boat and “pushed off into deep water with his oar.”

The next morning, November 20, 1890, this “interview” with Matthew Stanley Quay United States Senator from Pennsylvania, was published in the *NEW YORK WORLD*, dateline “St. Lucie, Fla.”

Quay began vacationing in St. Lucie in the 1880s, built a house there in 1890, a second in 1899, and then his powerful political friends built a third residence, a club, in 1902. Two of these structures still stand.

Matthew Quay’s influence went beyond the United States Senate. He was a president-maker and, as arguably the most powerful political “Boss” of the Gilded Age, etched deep political lines across the country between the Civil War and the Progressive Age. Once a household name in the United States, he has been woefully neglected in St. Lucie County. A half block lane, “Quay Way,” is his only footprint.

The senator came to St. Lucie for his health and for the fishing.

The family carried the consumption gene—the senator’s mother, father, sister and brother all died of the disease and Quay lived with the probability of the same fate. He felt St. Lucie was the healthiest place for him and retreated there when his lungs troubled him.

Fishing was his favorite sport—and tarpon fishing was the “Ultima Thule.” The ocean around the Indian River Inlet was a favorite of sportsmen seeking the “Silver King.”

The man who loved St. Lucie suffered a determined cadre of bitter enemies. He was excoriated from the pulpit and from the floor of the House of Representatives. According to rivals, muckrakers and reformers, he was “troubled with few scruples,” “a schemer by instinct, choice and unbroken practice from his earliest manhood, a gambler, a drunkard, an habitual bribe taker and giver,” “the master of corrupt politics.” He was accused of fraud, embezzlement, bribery, avarice, arrogance and dubbed a national disgrace.

However, President Theodore Roosevelt considered Quay worth a hundred of the reporters who vilified him. Other admirers included such disparate contemporaries as Andrew Carnegie and Rudyard Kipling.

Pioneer Circuit Judge Minor Jones, who often visited kin in St. Lucie Village, called him friend. The Judge was a stalwart Florida Democrat of influence (among other things he presided over Henry Flagler’s divorce) and he dubbed Republican Quay “Florida’s Third Senator,” as a result of the legislative attention the senator directed toward the state. Federal money for Indian River projects was loyally supported by the senator from Pennsylvania. St. Lucie County’s first snowbird was always ready to support local charities. For example, in 1899 he gave \$100 as seed

money for the Ft. Pierce Episcopal Church; he contributed to village Christmas funds. National newspaper coverage of his activities attracted attention to the area, luring other outdoorsmen to its hunting and fishing attractions. His Indian River neighbors judged him to be a gentleman, generous and democratic.

He was passionate about any issue that involved the Native American. Quay's great-great-grandmother was an Indian and he consistently supported legislation and Congressional oversight that aimed at justice for the Indian.

In Florida, he befriended individual Seminoles. For example, he paid Tommy Jumper's expenses to the hospital in St. Augustine in 1901. About the same time, he presented one of his Seminole neighbors with a silver mounted rifle.

Five Indian chiefs from the west visited Senator Quay in Florida in 1903. According to the STAR, they were to "be given a warm reception and everything provided for their pleasure and comfort" at the St. Lucie Club.

Matt Quay was a learned man who possessed one of the finest libraries in the nation. He read the classics in the original Latin. His hero was Pericles.

He was also a drinker and a gambler and he loved a good cigar. He knew men and was a master of patronage politics. He did not judge insider trading or "borrowing" public funds for personal investment a betrayal of the public trust. He was a consummate organizer and campaign manager. One of his basic rules to any candidate was to "keep your mouth shut."

He was "unquailing under either opposition or calumny;" he never panicked and he never gave up.

A look back at the challenges Senator Quay faced down in 1899-1901 will earn the admiration of any modern political partisan who has experienced "nerves" waiting for election results. In 1899, Quay was a candidate to succeed himself in the Senate. The state legislatures chose the senator in those days and after 79 ballots between January and April, the Pennsylvania Legislature failed to name one. When that body adjourned, the Governor appointed Quay. Quay went to Washington to take his seat, but objections were raised and in January, the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections, *by a margin of one vote*, advised against his seating. On April 24, the full senate voted to oust him *by a margin of one vote*, 33-32. His enemies joyfully celebrated his demise. In 1900, from his house in St. Lucie, Quay launched a letter writing campaign and on January 16, 1901, the Pennsylvania legislature voted to send Matthew Quay back to the Senate of the United States. Hundreds joined the celebration on the train that carried him back to the Capital and crowds cheered him at every station along the way. The day culminated in much back-slapping and congratulations on the Senate floor, Quay's desk the center of congratulatory flowers that bloomed across that hall.

The Washington *Times* pondered his crisis management style: "There are few men in public life more stoical in temperament than Matthew Stanly Quay . . . He has probably weathered more political storms than any other politician in the country. Often when he seemed upon the verge of political destruction he, by the most surprising finesse, put his opponents to rout . . . Through all the vicissitudes which beset him, and when his future seemed to be hopeless, Senator Quay smiled his secretive, confident, stoical smile . . ."

His friends were as keen in his defense as his enemies in attack. He exhibits a "familiarity with natural men, and want of all artificiality and snobbery . . . the people who are abusing Quay have not the least idea of his intellectual components;" "He is not a liar; he is not insincere." "He is "uniformly correct and cordial in his official intercourses, and he has done so many acts of plain kindness . . .;" "Mr. Quay is a plain, simple, modest and kindly man, with a taste for

books and literature, with no propensity for the acquisition of riches, and with a genius for the organization and control of men in masses . . . Without prating about honesty, he has this essential of the highest integrity that he meets every obligation and keeps his every word. He fails in no duty and he is never beaten.”

A collection of letters the senator wrote from St. Lucie to various members of his family contains gems of information about our early history. Here are some excerpts complemented by items from the local newspaper:

January 24, 1886 ***“The cold weather has killed the fish. They are lying dead by millions all along Indian River for 200 miles.”***

July 12, 1886 ***“We are off for a trip of ten days hunting on St. Lucie River. Dick has brought in three more deer.”*** (Dick Quay was the senator’s son.)

April, 1890 All the northern papers carry the story of Quay’s Indian River tarpon. The fish struck ***and “There was a mighty leap, the sheen of silver was in the air, a fierce toss of the head like that of a wild Texas steer, and whizz went my reel,” said the senator. The fish pulled the boat and “Every five minutes . . . repeated his evolutions, shaking his broad jaw each time he jumped to dislodge the boat. But he was securely hooked . . . Fifty feet away I noticed a huge fin cutting the sill water . . . The tarpon, too, as if he had human feelings (he certainly exhibited human fear) soon knew that an immense shark was around and that a new danger threatened him. . . I had the fish within 10 feet . . . clearing the water the big man eater came like an arrow. There was a splash . . . the tarpon was lifted clear out of the river, and the spot where an alive fish had been was crimson with blood.”***

November 25, 1890 ***“We have been here since the 10th fishing . . . We have caught 31 tarpon. . . The tarpon we taken with hook & line by moonlight in the inlet. . . Mrs. Paine has been sick but is better. She is frail and looks feeble. Jim and Tom are just the same. . . Dick bought five acres from Tom and is building a big frame roomy home upon it. It has eight large rooms 15 by 20 an attic a two-story verandah on three sides and fronts on the river.”***

March 10, 1891 ***“The launch is here with “Coralie” in large letters on each side of the prow and is a beauty. Dick’s house is getting along nicely and is going to look well from the outside. . . When it is completed the lot will have to be fenced and beautified and I guess Annie will have to come down with servants next summer and get in the furniture and start the machine running. It is an exceedingly good house for this country. Mrs. Paine has been very sick ever since we came & I am fearful will not get well. Of course matters are out of gear and Jim has to get along as best he can. The table is not as good as usual. If she is taken away I don’t know what they will do.”***

March 19, 1891 ***“I wrote again to include two blue prints of Curt & his tarpon. He caught them night before last. . . The dock you see on the right is Dick’s. The half finished structure at the end is the boat house which is to have an open pavilion for 2nd story.”***

May, 1892 A pamphlet entitled *The True Story About Senator Quay's Occasional Trips to Florida* was published. This was in answer to charges concerning his excessive absence from the Senate that spring. He was in St. Lucie battling influenza. His wife was here, too, nursing him back to precarious health.

August 27, 1892 ***"We had unexpectedly, the most pleasant journey I've had to Florida. . . we came from Titusville on the Progress a slow boat. Left Titusville at midnight and reached here about 4 PM. . . The mosquitoes were pretty bad last night but there were very few in the house and none to scarcely any in the second story balcony."***

September 1, 1892 ***". . . at 8 or 9 AM a cool sea breeze springs up and blows steadily all day to fly away after sundown. There is bright moonlight and everything is as pleasant as can be except for the mosquitoes. . . but they do not annoy me much. Some mornings there are none in the upper balcony, and we sit up there in the breeze in the moonlight. Two of the hammocks are strung up there and are comfortable in the afternoon. We have wire screens in the sleeping rooms, mosquito nets up and get along very well after we go to bed. The fruit except the oranges are ripe and we are feasting on mangoes, sapodillas, cattle guavas. The mangoes I had last year were spoiled. The cocoanut trees are all living. The yard was grown up three feet in grass which I have had cut off. We are getting fresh meat and ice from Titusville twice a week."***

From the Titusville *STAR*: "It is said that Quay's bathing suit is one of the best illustrations of his character that has ever been noted. He goes into the surf attired in a flaming red flannel suit—silent, but conspicuous."

September 14, 1892 ***"If the cholera comes the best place is right here—There never has been a case of cholera or yellow fever or any epidemic disease on the Indian River. . . We get good meat, churn our own butter, have plenty of ice, fruit" and fish."***

November 11, 1893 ***"The government only would repair its lines of telegraph here. So if you wish to wire me you would have to send via Sebastian instead of Fort Pierce. There is a railroad telegraph there and they will send the telegram down by boat. The storm blew the trees here all to pieces. About all our cocoanuts are dead except in the nursery. Three are higher than the fence. The ground is all cleared and fenced and is finally improved in appearance. Mrs. Paine is very well."***

November 18, 1893 ***"We have three mails per week from the North on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays; going North Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. The telegraph lines are still down and at least on yesterday there was no connection with Ft. Pierce. . . Have Clarence Summerlin at the house fixing up the yard and playing coachman."***

November 25, 1893 ***"We have good boarding and are comfortable. Have a norther in hand just now which has squelched the mosquitoes. Am looking today for a party of five Machiavellians."***

November 28, 1893 ***“Have all been well except that I did a little too much drinking last night and feel shaky for the first time since I came down. . . The railroad track . . . will be here in less than three weeks. . . The house is wonderfully improved by the new paint and the clearing up of the lot between us and Paine’s has worked wonders. . . There are no tarpon here. I killed a rattlesnake today at the inlet. It was swimming across one of the cuts . . . The ‘Sick God’ is behaving himself and getting fat as an alderman.”***

1894 Quay was on the River in 1894. “Quay’s most recent experience in Florida was as costly as funny. Railroad now runs from Jacksonville down to Titusville, thence all the way down the Indian River, beyond St. Lucie, the point where our most distinguished fisherman has his cottage. . . While in the course of construction, Quay suggested a station at St. Lucie. The obliging railway officials asked him to indicate the spot, size, etc., which he did. It is now finished and Quay was sent the bill for the entire cost--\$1,500 . . . “

March 12, 1895 ***“Mrs. Payne is not so well. Everything is gone about the house here except century plants, sisal hemp and Spanish bayonets. We can get no oranges, grape fruit, bananas or vegetables and have a pretty hard time accordingly with the table. The girls are having a hard time. Have only been out on the launch to the store—have not been fishing.”***

November 27, 1895 ***“We are having a feast of good victuals—oysters, deviled crabs, pompano, green turtle, venison.”***

January 18, 1896 ***“We are all well and fat and lazy enjoying ourselves and eating prodigiously. I hate to go home . . . Our private car is to be here on the evening of the 21st . . . We go to Palm Beach tonight to return Monday. Gen. Schofield & his wife were here a night and day. . . The Genl was stationed here in 1854 at Ft. Capron at the old Russell place. He wanted to look on the old ground but was taken with rheumatism in the foot and ran away to find a doctor at Palm Beach.”***

March 12, 1896 U.S. Senate Washington, D.C. The Hannah’s ***“are to be here this evening and they go at 4 AM tomorrow to St. Lucie. I told them . . . they could go into our house and sleep there and eat at Ben’s. You must have them, and have Ben understand that no one else is to be quartered there. They had better give the keys when they come away to Jim Paine . . . I am well and feeling as well as usual here. Maybe not as well as in Florida.”***

August 21, 1896 St. Lucie ***“We have only been out fishing a few times to catch fish for the table. I took one tarpon. It almost dragged Clarence and me out of the boat. . . We are having lots of fruit from Miami, sugar apples, alligator pears, sapodillas & lime.”***

November 26, 1898 St. Lucie ***“Dick is going to build the bath house but you know must have time to think about it. We have none of us seen a snake since we came. . . Sue and Annie row a mile or two every day and have become quite expert as oarswomen.”***

November 26, 1899 St. Lucie ***“Everything is lovely here. The lot is in better condition than ever before . . . The house is looking exceedingly***

well in a new coat of paint. Dick's house of course adds to appearances. It is pretty and well built and the inside is very superior but I think the old house the more comfortable. The fence between the two lots has been taken down and its disappearance has improved matters wonderfully. There is good fishing, and we have oysters, clams, green turtle and quail as before. The Indians are not on the River this year and there is no venison."

January 24, 1901 KILCAIRE St. Lucie ***"I feel better today than I have since I took the grippe but am still very weak. . . My stomach is better I believe it was nearly ruined by medicine and that whiskey & champagne made it worse. . . Dick's house will not be ready until Monday but he insists on being here Saturday evening and we are not able to take care of him every room but one being occupied. The thermometer is 55 degrees this morning."***

September 15, 1901 KILCAIRE St. Lucie ***"Rome is very well and enjoying himself so is John though he spends most of his time contriving ways and means to defeat the mosquitoes. . . Kraw sends us crawfish, alligator pears, papayas, pineapple, etc. and we have plenty of Cattle guavas and bananas. The persimmon tree is full of fruit and we are fighting the mocking birds for it. I am stupefied by the assassination of the President. Soon it will be that any public man will have to go armed & keep sharply alert. I tried to write a message of condolence to Mrs. McKinley and gave it up. Words seemed inadequate for the case. You had better write a letter for your mother to her. How is her Mood?"***

March 18, 1903 KILCAIRE St. Lucie To his daughter, Sue: ***"I am glad to have your news about your engagement. I wish you to marry the man of your choice but would like to see the family trend broken just once by a happy marriage."***

September 6, 1903 KILCAIRE St. Lucie ***"I am feeling well as ever now and though I have not been weighed believe I have regained all my flesh. Did your mother write to Mr. Hahn about the Bald Eagle interest? You women must be learning to attend to your own business. . . We had a hard rain day before yesterday. Our home leaked all over but Dick's was watertight. . . I include a letter . . . from the President."***

December 9, 1903 KILCAIRE St. Lucie ***"It is cold here. We have fire in the library all the time. Your uncle Curt is hunting ducks every morning before daylight. He hasn't caught very much yet except a bad cough. . . I don't sleep much yet but I think I am eating more. They say I look better than when I came."***

February 16, 1904 St. Lucie To his son, Dick: ***"In the week ending yesterday noon I lost something like one pound and a quarter. . . This cannot go on very long. Say nothing about it. I thought you ought to know."***

Matthew Stanley Quay died May 28, 1904. His will, dated May 27, 1904, was filed in St. Lucie County, and filed for probate June 16, 1904 in Beaver County, Pennsylvania.

©Jean Ellen Wilson

Guest Cameron

Donald Cameron took his father's seat in the Senate in 1877

Famous Quay political quotes:

"To what do you attribute the Republican defeat?"

Quay: "Lack of votes."