



## COLUMNISTS

### New Stories about Old Chess Players

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## Isaac Trabue

Colonel Isaac Hodgen Trabue (1829-1907) is a forgotten-19th century chess player who has an interesting life history. Trabue reminds me of another Kentucky colonel, Colonel Sanders of fried chicken fame, both in looks (see his picture [here](#)) and in his entrepreneurial energy, though he was not always as well-loved and successful as Sanders.

Many of my facts here come from a biography of Trabue on pages 729-731 of *Memoirs of Florida*, part of the Florida Heritage collection. The biography in the memoirs is entirely sympathetic. Readers who want to delve further into the seamier side of Trabue's character might look at the article "Trabue, alias Punta Gorda," in the *Florida Historical Quarterly* 1967, pages 141-148. I have only read the abstract of this work, but it clearly takes a dimmer view of the events that made Trabue worthy of mention in the history of Florida.

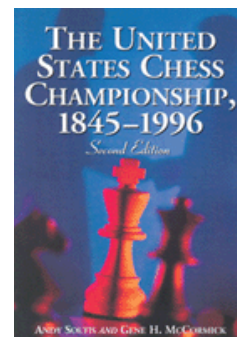
Trabue came from a prominent Kentucky family. His grandfather was a general in the Revolutionary War, and his father ran the amusingly named Greasy Creek Iron Works. His father was also a noted preacher in the Campbellite church (they preferred the seemingly redundant name "Christian Church"), a 19th-century sect advocating a simple gospel as opposed to complex creeds, and an end to church hierarchy. Jane Porter, a well-known author of the time, was related to his mother. His in-laws were also prominent, but their story will be delayed until we discuss the family tendency towards almost-successful innovation and grand plans.



Colonel and Mrs. Isaac Trabue at Punta Gorda 1891.  
From the Rollins College Archives.

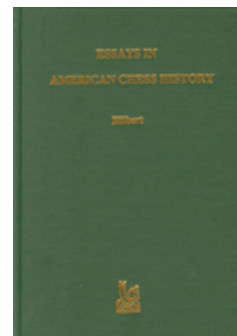
Isaac Trabue attended military college in Georgetown; his teachers there included future U.S. Senator and Presidential candidate James G. Blaine. When the civil war broke out, Trabue, though a slave owner, sided with the Union, and served as an aide to Governor Magoffin. He raised the first company of Union volunteers from his county, and supplied coal to Grant during his campaigns on the Mississippi River. I do not know of any actual battlefield duty performed by Trabue. He is not the Colonel Trabue from Kentucky who played a significant role in the battle of Shiloh; that Trabue fought for the Confederate side in this divided state. I am fairly sure that he is the Captain Isaac Trabue who shot another captain, as reported in the *Chicago Tribune* of July 17 and July 20, 1861. Perhaps this is before he took up chess, since he later wrote (as quoted in the *Washington Post* of July 1, 1906) "Chess is a great civilizer; it teaches calmness, moderation, checks impatience, cultivates courtesy and

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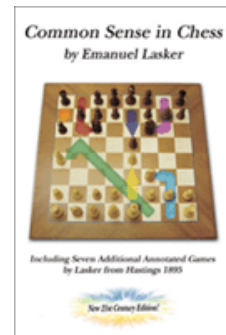


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politeness, enforces decision of character, makes you stand to what you do.”

After the war, Trabue practiced law in Louisville, where he became well-known as an opponent of large corporations. He was quixotically active in politics. In a strongly Democratic state, he ran as a Republican candidate for Congress in 1872. By 1876 he had switched to the Greenback party, a party inspired by the Panic of 1873, which openly advocated inflating the currency by printing more money. He was an elector on the Greenback slate, which drew fewer than 3,000 votes (from over 250,000 cast). His biography says that he ran for state treasurer as a Greenback in 1877 and attorney-general in 1879. The 1879 report is confirmed by a story from the time, but a *New York Times* report on August 21, 1877 shows a Trabue running as a Republican for secretary of state. With all but seven counties reporting, Trabue was losing to the Democrat Tate 95,000 to 20,000; it is possible that this is another politically unsuccessful Trabue. In 1884, Trabue was an elector for the Greenback and Anti-Monopoly slate pledged to General Benjamin Butler. Clearly, Trabue was a form of populist, and held stubbornly to his convictions.

Trabue was well-known as a chess player while he lived in Kentucky. He won a game against Zukertort in Louisville in 1883, and was for some time responsible for a chess column in the *Louisville Argus*. Page four of Yussman’s *History of the Louisville Chess Club* mentions a visit by Zukertort. In a 1919 article about the history of the club, the local chess writer Theiss recalls a twelve-board blindfold simul by Zukertort, placing this in 1884. A Steve Trabue is named as being one of the ten players whose names Theiss can remember. It is not clear from this whether Isaac Trabue’s victory over Zukertort is part of this twelve-board exhibition, or whether it came in a separate event.

The *Brooklyn Eagle* of August 14, 1887 calls Colonel Trabue [actually misspells him as Traub] the most eccentric of all chess editors in the United States. To show that the Trabues seem to have cultivated chess skill as a family, the *Macon Telegraph* of December 3, 1866 calls a Mr. W.C. Trabue (presumably a close relative of the Colonel) one of the most skilled players of the Louisville Chess Club, and gives a twenty-seven move win of his against a player visiting from New Orleans.

Trabue’s place in history comes not from his time in Kentucky, but for his activities in Florida. Before discussing Trabue’s claim to fame, let me discuss his wife’s remarkable family. Trabue was married to Virginia Taylor; most of my knowledge of this family comes from a website celebrating the achievements of her mother, Charlotte deBernier Scarbrough Taylor. The grandfather of Virginia Taylor Trabue was a temporarily successful visionary. In 1818, he helped found the Savannah Steam Ship Company. He entertained President Monroe in his home, and escorted him on a cruise aboard his ship *Savannah*. Monroe promised that if the ship successfully sailed by steam to Liverpool and St. Petersburg, he would purchase the ship for use as a Navy cruiser. The *Savannah* sailed to Liverpool, where it was refused entry due to fears that the pine-knot fire of the steamship would destroy shipping. On reaching St. Petersburg, they were royally received by the Czar, and given expensive gifts. Unfortunately, the ship had taken too little cargo, and the trip was a financial disaster. Virginia’s grandfather, who had a 7,000-acre plantation, was held responsible for the debt, and forced to declare bankruptcy. Virginia’s mother was persuaded to marry a coffin manufacturer against her better judgment; within a decade, the husband declared bankruptcy, and her mother returned to Savannah with three children.

Virginia’s mother, Charlotte Taylor, has been called Georgia’s first female entomologist (a scientist who studies insects). She wrote articles for *School Fellows* (a children’s magazine), *American Agriculturist*, and *Harper’s Monthly*. She was an expert on plant parasites, and her study of the silkworm led her to make a grand prediction for the revival of the silk

industry in the United States. Before her death in 1861, she was working on several books. The book manuscripts do not survive, but her specimen book was handed down to Virginia, and is still on display in the town that is associated with the Trabues. Pictures from her specimen book, and a list of the articles printed in *Harper's* by Charlotte Taylor, are available on the web.

In 1885, at the age of fifty-six and having some health problems, Isaac Trabue decided to move to Florida. True to the grand dreams of his family, he devised a plan. Like many a sucker, Trabue bought land in Florida, getting a price of \$1.25 per acre. The land turned out to be basically a swamp, in bad condition. Unlike true suckers, however, Trabue had realized this would happen, and had a clever combination in mind. Ironically, after years of being anti-corporate, Trabue realized the importance of a sweetheart deal. He struck a deal with Henry Plant of the Southern Florida Railway; Plant would extend the railway to the new town (modestly called Trabue), and in return would receive fifteen of Trabue's original thirty acres of land. Suddenly, the land was worth \$3,000 per acre; a pretty fair return on a \$1.25 investment!

Was this a criminal act? No, this was the Gilded Age of Capitalism, and pretty much anything went; it is even spoken of with pride in Trabue's biography in the memoirs of prominent Floridians.

However, Trabue had even greater plans for his city. An enormous hotel was built, and Trabue developed the ambitious plan of making his city the leading producer of pineapples in the United States, an effort which was at least temporarily successful (though I don't know how many competitors there were for this honor). Here is an amusing picture postcard showing a horse and wagon carrying an enormous Florida pineapple:



*Post card collection, Florida Photo Archives*

Trabue used the proceeds from sales of pineapples to pay for gold medals at his annual chess tournaments. He attempted to endow these tournaments in perpetuity, as shown in the following from the records of Manatee County, Florida, filed on June 3, 1885. (I am indebted to Don Atwell of Punta Gorda for tracking down these records):

“Block 28 in the town of Trabue, on the Waters of the Charlotte Harbor, Florida; said block is to be planted in Pineapples, lemons, oranges or other profitable fruits, which are to be properly cared for and when ripe sold, two-thirds of the profits of said fruits are to be given to the first best chess player that plays at the tournament to commence on the second Monday in December, at two and a half o'clock AM of each year, at the Town of Trabue, Fla.”

Legal descriptions of the tournament and trust conditions follow. I have to wonder about the condition that the tournament starts at 2:30 in the morning, and am guessing that 2:30 P.M. was intended.

Trabue and Plant fell out in a bitter dispute over how to develop the town. Although the exact nature of the issues has become unclear over the years, Trabue seemed to want to run the town as his own operation, as an unincorporated city. Thirty-four men gathered in a pool room and decided to incorporate the town. To add insult to injury, the town name was changed from Trabue to Punta Gorda. Lawsuits followed over what rights

Trabue retained, and he lost; this probably accounts for Trabue's later aversion to members of his own profession.

Trabue wrote a chess book, as a result of which he has been credited with the invention of a chess variant, which he named (with typical modesty) Trabue. The book can be found in the Cleveland Public Library. He wrote this under a pseudonym. Giving himself a promotion but acceding to the town's wishes, Colonel Trabue becomes "General Punta Gorda," and the book is called *Rules and Directions to Play Four-Handed Trabue, American Chess*. This game seems to have died in obscurity; it goes unmentioned in Pritchard's *Encyclopedia of Chess Variants*.

Trabue also authored a novel called *Black Wench* under the same pseudonym, which is available in a small number of libraries. According to Marquis' *Who's Who on the Web*, Trabue wrote a drama called *Hobson Blowing Up the Merrimac in Santiago Bay*, but I cannot find any trace of this play.

And that is all that I currently know about an interesting character. No doubt more can be dug up. In addition to the *Louisville Argus* column, which would be an excellent source for his chess feats, Punta Gorda maintains his house as town founder, and no doubt more information on the Trabue-Plant dispute can be found at their local library.

A few more pieces of somewhat contradictory information regarding Trabue are in circulation. The *Who's Who* article mentioned above calls Trabue a Freethinker and a Socialist, while the article at the Florida Heritage site calls him a faithful member of the Christian church. More fundamentally, the article mentioned above from the *Florida Historical Quarterly* says that Trabue died with an estate worth more than \$500,000, while the websites associated with the town of Punta Gorda say that he died penniless.

Although Trabue's chess tournaments did not survive for very long, there is strong reason to believe that Trabue passed his love of chess to his descendants. Our Colonel Isaac Trabue died in 1907. A game of another Colonel Trabue of Florida is given in the *Washington Post* of January 3, 1915, and will be shown below. On May 16, 1915 the chess column of the *Post* refers to him as Col. Trabue of Punta Gorda, Florida. I believe that this Trabue participated in at least one event involving high quality players, a 1916 quadrangular tournament in Tampa. The tournament was won by Wilbur Lyttleton Moorman (1859-1934), a Virginian who scored five wins and four draws. This younger Trabue (called S.F.J. Trabue in this tournament, perhaps the Steve Trabue mentioned above) tied Jackson Showalter for second; each scored three wins, four losses, and two draws.

The game below is one of two published in a *Washington Post* column. Both feature the same variation of the Two Knights Defense, and had the same first twelve moves. Both were won by F.N. Stacy; in the first game from the *Post*, his opponent was a Mr. Koerner of New York, who played 13.c3 and lost in just nineteen moves. In the second game, shown below, White is S. Trabue, probably the S.F.J. Trabue from Tampa 1915.

I wish I knew if this was an offhand or serious tournament game. If this is a skittles game, I appreciate Stacy's bold sacrificial plan, including the surprising 20...Nxf4. However, if this is a tournament game at slow time controls, the sacrifice is not even close to being sound, and Trabue should have had a long think to consider his options at various points. For example, 23.Ng6 would have taken the sting out of the attack, leaving Trabue comfortably ahead in material. Trabue's last chance to stay in the game was 26.Bxe3, removing the pawn that is so crucial in the final position. If it was an offhand game, Trabue can be forgiven for not realizing that Bxe3 is necessary. I am guessing this was not a tournament game, or Trabue would not be the sort of player who could hold his own against even a past-his-prime Showalter in a serious tournament.

*Colonel S. Trabue – F.N. Stacy, game and notes in Washington Post, January 3, 1915 (notes in italics by Taylor Kingston, assisted by Fritz8):*

**1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.Ng5 d5 5.exd5 Na5 6.Bb5+ c6 7.dxc6 bxc6 8.Be2 h6 9.Nf3 e4 10.Ne5 Qd4**

It is all “book” to this move.

**11.f4**

This also is “regular.”

**11...Bc5 12.Rf1 Qd8**

This is the characteristic move of this variation. *Modern theory seems to prefer 12...Bb6. Nunn’s Chess Openings (1999) then gives 13.c3 Qd8 14.b4 Nb7 15.a4 with some advantage for White.*

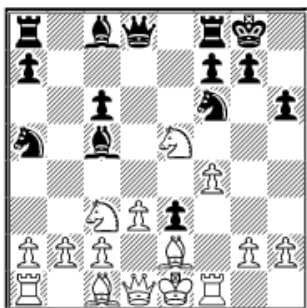
**13.Nc3**

The Colonel realizes it is too dangerous to go after the piece, as was done in the first game. *NCO disagrees, giving 13.c3 Nd5 14.Qa4 0-0 15.Qxe4 with definite advantage to White.*

**13...0-0**

Black can take time to castle without losing his attack.

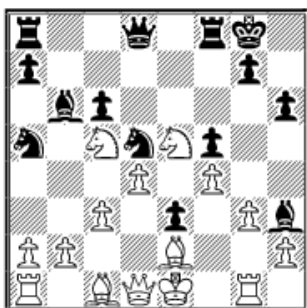
**14.d3 e3**



**15.g3**

This move is frequently made two moves earlier. *Here it seems quite pointless; better 15.Bf3 or 15.Nf3.*

**15...Bh3 16.Rg1 Bd4 17.Ne4 Nd5 18.c3 Bb6 19.d4 f5 20.Nc5**



**20...Nxf4??**

*This should not work, though Black was in trouble in any event, e.g. 20...Bxc5 21.dxc5 Qc7 22.b4 Nxc3 23.Qd6 Qxd6 24.cxd6 Nb7 25.d7, or 20...Qd6 21.Qa4 Rfe8 22.c4 Nf6 23.Bxe3 with a practically winning position in either case.*

**21.gxf4 Qh4+ 22.Rg3 Bxc5 23.dxc5**

*Not bad, but much stronger was 23.Ng6 Qf6 24.Nxf8 Bxf8 25.Rxh3 and White is more than a full rook up.*

**23...Rad8**



**24.Nd3?**

*Throwing away most of White’s advantage. Much better were A) 24.Qc2 Qxf4 25.Bxe3 Qxe5 26.Rxh3,*



or

B) 24.Qa4 Rfe8 (if 24...Nb7 25.Qxc6) 25.Nf3 Qh5 26.Qxa5, or  
C) 24.Ng6 Rxd1+ 25.Bxd1 Qf6 26.Nxf8 Kxf8 27.Rxh3, with a winning advantage in each case.

### 24...Rfe8 25.b3?

Better 25.Qc2 Bg2 26.Ne5 and either 26...Qxh2 27.Rxg2 Qh4+ (not 27...Qxg2?? 28.Bc4+) 28.Kf1 Qh1+ 29.Rg1 Qh3+ 30.Rg2 Qh1+ and a forced draw by repetition, or 26...Be4 27.Ng6 Qxg3+ 28.hxg3 Bxc2 29.b4 Nb7 30.Ne5 with perhaps a slight advantage to White.

### 25...Bg2



### 26.Bb2??

White's cramped position is rather hopeless. Well, it certainly is now, but if he had played 26.Bxe3! considerable hope would have remained, viz. 26...Rxe3 27.Kf2 Rde8 (worse is 27...Rxg3 28.hxg3 Qh3 29.Qg1 Be4 30.Rd1 with advantage for White) 28.Ne5 R8xe5 29.fxe5 f4 30.Kxg2 fxg3 31.h3, with an even position.

26...Qxh2 27.Rxg2 Qxg2 and Black wins (If Kd1 then Qf8 wins).