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FLORIDA IN 1855

by HERBERT J. DOHERTY, JR.

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO when the Florida Historical Society was founded at St. Augustine the members of that organization lived in a region and a society which was vastly different from that which is known to millions of twentieth century Americans as "Florida." In those ancient days tourists were a rarity and resort hotels south of St. Augustine were even rarer. The cities were mere hamlets by present-day standards and almost all of the population was concentrated in the extreme northern part of the state. Industry was virtually non-existent and the mass of men were farmers. Negroes were held in slavery, and the aristocracy of the state was based upon and much of the wealth of the state was represented by this human chattel. The political scene was enlivened by two vociferous political parties but the grim sounds of sectional conflict which would mark the death of the two party system were already being heard. Yet in those early Floridians there was a pride and self confidence familiar to Floridians of the present-day.

Floridians of 1856 were not dismayed by the primitive conditions surrounding them. As they travelled the state the sandy rut roads, the unbridged rivers, the bouncing stage coaches, the circuitous steamboat voyages were uncomfortable and trying hardships but Floridians could forget them and, indeed, compliment themselves that they lived in a forward looking state which was rapidly moving to end such primitive means of transportation. The year 1856, they could boast, was a year of great beginnings for railways in Florida. Up in Jacksonville, work was started in March on the Florida, Atlantic, and Gulf Central Railroad which was to run west to Alligator (Lake City) where it would connect with the Pensacola and Georgia Railroad which was getting under way eastward from Tallahassee. The eventual aim of these two projects was to connect Jacksonville by rail with Pensacola. From Fernandina work had been underway since late 1855 on the Florida Railroad which was to connect with Cedar Keys on the west coast. In the far western end of the state Pensa-

cola too had its railroad boom. In February, 1856, contracts were signed for construction of the Alabama and Florida Railroad which was to link at the Florida-Alabama line with a railroad from Montgomery. All these lines received city, county, and state aid, and gifts of land from the federal government amounting to 3800 acres per mile. Yet in spite of these much heralded beginnings there was only 56 miles of railroad in the state at the end of 1856 and the only complete line was the Tallahassee to St. Marks road which had been operating since 1836. However, 1856 was an important year for that little road for it was acquired by the Pensacola and Georgia Railroad, was rebuilt, and replaced its mules with a locomotive. With these improvements complete, the road boasted that trains of eight to ten cars daily made the twenty-one mile trip to St. Marks in only two hours.¹

Inadequate transportation facilities undoubtedly hindered the tourist trade in Florida one hundred years ago. Although the state was becoming known as a haven for invalids and travelers and as a sportsman's paradise because of its abundance of game, many travelers left with bitter memories of the primitive accommodations and means of transport. Perhaps some of these bitter travelers had run into the 1856 spells of bad weather. The winter had been unusually cold. In most un-chamber of commerce-like fashion, the *Pensacola Gazette* complained in January that it had been raining for three weeks and that the weather had been extremely cold. In February the papers carried the news that J. J. Arnow of Palatka had frozen to death while crossing Lake George in an open boat. As if the winter had not been bad enough, the fall brought an extremely destructive hurricane which swept the coast from Key West to Apalachicola, causing extensive crop damage and slightly injuring the capitol building in Tallahassee.²

The leading tourist city was St. Augustine where the Magnolia House and the Florida House were popular hotels. The ancient city seems to have been attractive largely because of its old world atmosphere. Other regions could base their appeal only on the beneficial character of their climates for invalids. The Bayport House in Hernando County was one of the southernmost

1. Jacksonville *Florida News*, February 23, April 26, December 11, 1856; Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, February 2, August 30, December 11, 1856; *Pensacola Gazette*, February 16, 1856.

2. *Pensacola Gazette*, January 12, 1856; Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, February 16, September 6, 1856.

health resorts, but even the Mansion House and the Buffington House in Jacksonville pitched their advertising appeals at the invalid. In Middleburg, on Black Creek, the Middleburg Hotel not only boasted of the beneficial climate but promised that a doctor would be on hand at all times in the winter months. Though it seems an unimportant and out of the way little hamlet today, in 1856 Middleburg had weekly steamer connections with Jacksonville, Palatka, Savannah, and Charleston.³

Although the early tourist trade is interesting, it was not of economic importance a century ago. The major activity was farming and the overwhelming majority of the people were farmers who did not reside in the cities which tourists saw. Less than 20 per cent of the population lived in towns and villages; only about two thousand of the state's 110,000 people were engaged in manufacturing enterprises. The two most important manufactures were lumbering and brick making, with lumbering being the more important. Farming was engaged in by most people all over the state but the richest agricultural areas, engaging the most Negro slaves, were the west Florida counties centering around Leon County. The major crops were cotton, corn, and sweet potatoes.⁴

In the more important agricultural counties the investment in slaves and farm property was naturally very heavy. The slaves alone in Leon County were valued at over four million dollars and numbered 9,120. Leon had the heaviest slave population of any county and interestingly enough had only 3,499 white people. Dade County was the only one having no slaves in 1856, and there were only 69 white people in Dade in that year. In all Florida in 1856 there were between eight and nine hundred free Negroes, about 300 of whom were in Pensacola, 125 in Key West, 75 in St. Augustine, and 70 in Tallahassee.⁵

The decade of the 1850's was one in which Florida's population grew tremendously. From 87,000 in 1850, it had grown to 140,000 in 1860. Most of the migration was to east Florida and was from the older Southern states. More than 50 per cent

3. Jacksonville *Florida News*, January 12, 1856; Jacksonville *Florida Republican*, February 21, 1856.

4. *Eighth Census of the United States: 1860*; Edwin L. Williams, "Florida in the Union, 1845-1861" (Ph.D dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1952), 162.

5. State Census of 1855 in *Florida House Journal: 1855*.

of the newcomers were from Georgia, with South Carolina, North Carolina, Alabama, and Virginia following in that order. The largest city in 1856 was Pensacola with about 2500 people. Key West, Jacksonville, Tallahassee, and St. Augustine followed closely behind. Pensacola was important for its navy yard, port facilities, and brick industry. Key West was an important center for the cigar, salt, and sponge industries and was the site of a newly begun naval depot. It was also the port in which the first large clipper ship in the South was constructed. Under the guidance of John Bartlum, the one thousand ton *Stephen R. Mallory* was launched there in 1856. Jacksonville was a rapidly growing port city and a center of activity in the lumber business, about 12 steam saw mills being in operation in this year. Tallahassee was important chiefly as the seat of government, but it boasted a brick industry second only to that of Pensacola. By 1856, St. Augustine was in decline as a port city because of the better facilities and more strategic location of Jacksonville, but it was the chief city in the small tourist business and had a small lumber industry.⁶

Florida's educational facilities were very limited a century ago. Though there are no figures for 1856, in 1860 there were only ninety-seven public schools and ninety-eight public school teachers, with a total annual income of \$20,000. There were, in addition, 138 private schools having 185 teachers, and an annual income of \$75,000. There were no universities. Nine free Negroes were reported attending school as late as 1860, but whether or not they were segregated is unknown.⁷ The state census of 1855 indicates that most children did not go to school. In that year there were 20,601 children between five and eighteen, but only 4,943 were in school.

As a virtual frontier region it is not to be expected that the cultural level of Florida would be very advanced. There was some opportunity, however, for the literate minded person to better himself. There were libraries in many communities: 66 altogether, supported by public subscription, schools, or churches. Most larger communities also boasted a bookseller. The most famous of these was probably Jacksonville's Columbus Drew who

6. Jacksonville *Florida News*, April 3, 1856; *Eighth Census of the United States: 1860*; Williams, *op. cit.*, 164 *passim*; Jefferson B. Browne, *Key West, the Old and the New* (St. Augustine, 1912), 74, 113, 125, 173, 183-184.

7. *Eighth Census of the United States: 1860*.

in 1856 was publishing as well as selling books. On his shelves could be found the works of Longfellow, Dickens, Scott, Irving, Prescott, and even Thomas Babington Macaulay. Macaulay's *History of England* which was appearing in the 1850's was so popular with Jacksonville readers as to win notice in the columns of a local newspaper. That paper asserted that 73,000 volumes had been sold in the United States within ten days after its publication. On Drew's shelves in June could also be found the last work of a Florida novelist, Caroline Lee Hentz. Though a native of Massachusetts, Mrs. Hentz had long lived in the South and at the time of her death resided in Marianna. Many of her novels were set in Florida locales and her death in February had been mourned as though she had been a native Floridian.⁸

Literate Floridians also had a score of newspapers available to them, although those in the smaller communities were poorly written, carried little news, and were badly printed. All were weeklies and since they were usually partisans of a political party, political news often dominated their pages. The more influential papers were in St. Augustine, Jacksonville, Tallahassee, and Pensacola. St. Augustine's paper was appropriately called *The Ancient City*. Jacksonville boasted two papers, the Democratic organ *The Florida News*, and the spokesman of the American party, *The Florida Republican*. The two papers in Tallahassee were the *Democratic Floridian and Journal* and the *American Florida Sentinel*. Pensacola boasted the *Pensacola Gazette*, which was American in politics, and the *Florida Democrat*, devoted to its namesake. All the papers followed a general style of organization in which news and editorial comment were indiscriminantly mixed on the inside pages. Usually there were four or six pages. On page one came the text of presidential or gubernatorial messages or important political speeches. When the legislature was in session, its proceedings and laws filled page one. When none of this type of material was available the front page was usually filled with fiction and poetry. On pages two and three came local news and comment, and letters to the editor. Important national and world news was also copied here from other papers. The remaining pages were usually devoted to classified advertising.

The advertising in these early papers is often more rewarding

8. Jacksonville *Florida Republican*, February 2, March 6, 1856; Jacksonville *Florida News*, June 28, 1856.

to the social historian than the news. In the Florida papers, for instance, if we judge by the number of advertisements there were more lawyers in the state than members of any other profession. Another frequently printed advertisement was for runaway slaves, and often such advertisements carried the information that the slave had some identifying bodily mutilation. Lotteries quite often were advertised, and the Royal Havana Lottery which offered a grand prize of \$100,000, seems to have been particularly popular. Circuses were another form of amusement and in December the "Great Southern Circus" which visited Tallahassee sought to take advantage of sectional jealousies with its advertisement which proclaimed, "Southern Men, Southern Horses, Southern Enterprise against the World." Patent medicines were frequently advertised and were embarrassingly detailed in description of the maladies they would cure. One of these popular remedies was called Dr. Holloway's Ointment. Its makers solemnly declared that some of the world's most scientific surgeons relied solely upon their product. It would cure bunions, burns, chapped hands, chilblains, fistulas, gout, lumbago, piles, rheumatism, skin diseases, sore legs, sore throats, sore breasts, sore heads, sprains, scalds, swelled glands, stiff joints, ulcers, venereal sores, and wounds of all kinds. Anything not covered could probably be fixed with Dr. Holloway's Pills, which healed a long alphabetized list of ills starting with asthma and ending with worms of all kinds.⁹

Floridians of 1856, however, were probably less interested in reading about patent medicines than about two important news items which affected their everyday lives. In west Florida, the early part of the year brought disappointment to many citizens who felt that their section was being dominated by other parts of the state. Many of these people wished to be annexed to Alabama, where they seemed to think they would fare better. In 1855, they had succeeded in getting a bill through the Florida Legislature providing for a referendum on annexation, but their short-lived hopes were dashed by Governor James E. Broome's prompt veto of the measure. The *Marianna Patriot* was bitter in its protest and the *Pensacola Gazette* observed, "The people of

9. Jacksonville *Florida News*, January 12, June 28, 1856; Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, December 6, 1856.

west Florida are not over much pleased with Gov. Broome's veto."¹⁰

In east Florida the most exciting news in January papers was news of new Indian troubles. Officially the Seminole war was over but several hundred Seminoles still remained in the depths of the Everglades where they successfully resisted all efforts to transport them to the far West. Late in 1855 these Indians had attacked military outposts and government explorers and surveyors working in south Florida.¹¹ Although there were only about one hundred warriors the newspapers set up a great hue and cry for federal action to remove them from the state, and skittish Floridians reported seeing signs of this small band as far north as Levy County.¹² Secretary of War Jefferson Davis promptly ordered coercive measures to remove the Indians and rewards of up to \$500 per head were offered by the Federal Indian Agent for the capture of warriors. Davis' order was published in January, 1856. Today the Seminoles still remain in Florida. Why did the Indians cling so tenaciously to their Florida homes? The editor of the *Florida News* thought he knew why. The Indians were lazy and had sense enough to know that nowhere else in the world could they live so easily. If need be, he said, they can stand like a flock of flamingoes on the beach and subsist from the shoals of fish along the shore. "It is the lazy man's 'snug haven,' the industrious poor man's paradise."¹³

Like 1956, the year 1856 was important to Floridians as an election year. In addition to local races, there was an important gubernatorial race and an exciting three-cornered presidential election. For the entire year news of these campaigns filled the papers. In 1856, however, Florida was a genuine two party state and the contesting sides were the Democratic party and the American, popularly called the Know Nothing party. The American party was composed in Florida of men of wealth and property with conservative leanings plus those who hated Democrats and had in the past worked with the now defunct Whig party. Nationally, the Americans had two notable issues: opposition to foreigners and opposition to Catholics. Some felt that the advant-

10. *Pensacola Gazette*, January 19, 1856.

11. *Jacksonville Florida News*, January 12, 1856.

12. *Tallahassee Floridian and Journal*, January 9, April 17, 1856.

13. *Jacksonville Florida News*, January 26, April 5, 26, 1856.

tage of their emotional program was that it might overshadow the emotional slavery issue and serve to unite all native Americans. In Florida the American party did not emphasize the anti-Catholic issue and it generally nominated sound conservative men who were Union supporters and opposed to the disruptive tendencies of secessionists and abolitionists. Even the Democrats admitted there was little to criticize in the major candidates the Americans nominated for state offices except that they would not repudiate the platform of their party.¹⁴

Early in 1856 the national American Convention was held in Philadelphia and Florida was represented by former Governor Richard Keith Call, who received prominent notice by the press of the North and the South because of the conspicuous part he took in the proceedings. After the convention nominated Millard Fillmore, a former Whig president, for the presidency with Andrew Jackson Donelson as his running mate, Call returned to Florida and presided over the state American Convention. Afterward, with the vigorous assistance of his nephew Wilkinson Call, he stumped the state for the American candidates. The state convention named Call's cousin David S. Walker for the governorship and James M. Baker for Representative in Congress.¹⁵

In the presidential race the Democrats named James Buchanan with John C. Breckinridge as his running mate. Interestingly enough, of the three Florida Democratic presidential electors one, George W. Call, was former Governor Call's nephew and one, Medicus A. Long, was his son-in-law. In the Democratic State Convention held at Madison, Madison Starke Perry was named for the governorship and George S. Hawkins for Representative in Congress.¹⁶ In 1856 the Republican party also appeared on the scene for the first time, naming John C. Fremont for president. There was no Republican organization in Florida, however, and no Republican votes were cast in the state.

The American party proved to be strong where the old Whig party had been strong, in the west Florida counties centering

14. *Ibid.*, February 23, June 21, 1856. See also Arthur W. Thompson, "Political Nativism in Florida, 1848-1860," *Journal of Southern History* (February, 1949), XV, 39-65; and Herbert J. Doherty, Jr., "The Florida Whigs" (M.A. Thesis, University of Florida, 1949).

15. Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, April 8, 1856; Jacksonville *Florida News*, June 7, 1856.

16. Jacksonville *Florida News*, April 26, 1856.

around Tallahassee. In the east, Duval County was its stronghold and the Jacksonville city government was completely under its control. Because of its anti-Catholic associations, it did not organize in St. Augustine, but its followers there organized as Whigs and endorsed the American candidates. The Democrats retained control in St. Johns County and their candidate George R. Fairbanks was elected mayor of St. Augustine in 1856.¹⁷

Despite their inheritance of the Whig following the Americans did not win the state government or Florida's presidential votes. In November Buchanan was elected president and in October Perry had been elected governor. Despite the fact that the Democratic majority had been only about two thousand out of a total vote of around twelve thousand, the American party did not survive its defeat and many members announced their switch to the Democrats in the late days of the year. The hard core of opposition to the Democrats remained aloof, however, and organized the state Constitutional Union party in 1860.

By 1856, of course, the basic reason for the intensity of feeling in elections was the growing sectional conflict over slavery. Candidates were examined for their soundness on the slavery question and any weak spot was magnified and played up to the detriment of the suspect candidate. For instance, the Democratic *Florida News* charged the American party of Florida with "looseness" on the slavery question because one of the American presidential electors was rumored to have said in Philadelphia, "I don't exactly like slavery."¹⁸ By 1856 most of the extreme radical Democrats had already calculated the value of the Union and had decided that if it imperilled slavery the Union must end. These radicals took every occasion to insist that the federal Union was little more than an alliance between sovereign states which could be dissolved by its members at any time. The editor of the *Florida News* went so far as to claim that the Union was merely "a compact of lasting amity and alliance."¹⁹

All democrats were not so extreme but daily evidences of fear and distrust toward the North may be seen. The tenseness of the atmosphere induced the editor of the *Floridian and Journal* in December to give publicity to an anonymous letter, which he

17. *Ibid.*, May 10, December 6, 18, 25, 1856.

18. *Ibid.*, June 7, 1856.

19. *Ibid.*, January 12, 1856.

would have ordinarily ignored, asserting that an insurrection of slaves was in the making. The *Pensacola Gazette* passed on the news and suggested that a system of white patrols should be set up to keep the Negroes under surveillance. In Tallahassee, however, a group of level headed, but indignant large slaveholders in a joint letter to the *Floridian* denounced the mischievous intent of anonymous letter writers and pronounced this letter "a sheer fabrication and an unfounded slander upon the character of our slave population."²⁰

Further evidence of the tension of the times was the pressure being brought to bear upon young men to go to Kansas. By repealing the Missouri Compromise in 1854, Congress had opened Kansas to slavery and by 1856 the Civil War in miniature was being fought in Kansas territory. Settlers from the free states and those from the slave states had set up opposing governments to organize the territory and bring it into the Union as a state. The rival governments engaged in open battles in this year. Every emigrant from Florida was hailed by the Florida press as a hero going to join what was usually referred to as the "friends of law, order, and Constitutional rights" in their struggle against "a lawless, reckless rabble" as the freestaters were often called. The volume of emigration to that grim region, however, was very small and a Tallahassee newspaper flayed what it termed the "singular and culpable feeling of indifference upon this subject" in Florida. It suggested that a public fund be raised to assist those who were unable to finance the trip.²¹

Amidst these growing popular apprehensions the political harangues about state rights, the sovereignty of the states, and the need for severely restricting the power of the federal government went on and popular fears were not allayed by their growing bitterness. It must be noted, however, that these arguments were a rationale to protect slavery from federal regulation. There was no desire to weaken the power of the federal government to aid the states. Every newspaper hailed the laws passed by Congress which made generous gifts of land to the Florida railroads, and they all cried out to the federal government for more and

20. Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, December 6, 13, 1856; *Pensacola Gazette*, December 20, 1856.

21. Jacksonville *Florida Republican*, February 28, 1856; Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, February 9, April 26, 1856.

more action against the Seminole Indians. The rabid *Florida News* pointedly called for federal armies and federal subsidization of the militia to combat the Indians - on the grounds of necessity, of course.²² Though this blustering paper would have Florida use force against the Union to protect slavery, it claimed that the state could not afford to act on its own to fight Indians.

As we have looked back it seems that in detail Florida of one hundred years ago bore little physical, cultural, social, political, or economic resemblance to the Florida of our day. Yet it has seemed to me that there are certain parallels, certain broad similarities between these two Floridas. Then as now there were jealousies between different parts of the state. Then as now Florida had its political charlatans, its highway problems, its school shortages, its gambling, its bigots; and it was also bound up in a great national debate in which the Negro was at the center. As in the present, Florida in 1856 was also in a dynamic phase of its history. Immigrants were flooding in and commerce and industry were experiencing a growth previously unknown. Despite their problems Floridians were then as now buoyantly optimistic, confident of their future. A Floridian of 1956 knows exactly how the Pensacola editor of 1856 felt when, looking forward to the completion of railroad connections to the North, he wrote, "Our magnificent harbor will then be constantly filled with vessels from all parts of the world and trade and commerce will flow in upon us in a perfect golden stream."²³

22. Jacksonville *Florida News*, March 15, 1856.

23. *Pensacola Gazette*, March 15, 1856.