

1993

## The Advance of Florida's Frontier as Determined From Post Office Openings

Morton D. Winsberg



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### Recommended Citation

Winsberg, Morton D. (1993) "The Advance of Florida's Frontier as Determined From Post Office Openings," *Florida Historical Quarterly*: Vol. 72 : No. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol72/iss2/6>

## THE ADVANCE OF FLORIDA'S FRONTIER AS DETERMINED FROM POST OFFICE OPENINGS

by MORTON D. WINSBERG

**T**HE geographical diffusion of human habitation throughout the United States has long interested social scientists. Unfortunately a paucity of detailed data has always hampered accurate cartographic representation of the advance of the frontier in the nation. Although the United States has conducted a decennial population census since 1790, meaningful cartographic displays of the advancing settlement frontier that might otherwise be derived from census data in the nineteenth century are obscured by changes in the number, area, and shape of counties. Florida provides an excellent example of such cartographic problems as well as one possible solution.

At the time of Florida's first census in 1830 there were only two counties, Escambia and St. Johns. By 1838 the number had risen to twenty, by 1860 to thirty-eight, by 1880 to forty-one, and by 1900 to forty-seven. In 1900 there were still only six counties in the entire southern half of the peninsula, whereas today there are seventeen. The state incorporated its sixty-seventh county in 1925, and that number exists today.<sup>1</sup> Until the most recent censuses, the division of counties into smaller population units (towns, precincts, etc.) varied greatly from one decade to another, making it impossible to use the census to define movement of the frontier.

A number of scholars have attempted to describe the early nineteenth-century advance of Florida's frontier through the use of population censuses. Charles O. Paullin did so cartographically, utilizing censuses between 1830 and 1930. He calculated population densities per square mile for the ever-growing

---

MORTON D. WINSBERG is professor of geography, Florida State University, Tallahassee.

1. Edward A. Fernald and Elizabeth D. Purdum, eds., *The Atlas of Florida* (Gainesville, 1992), 98-99.

number of counties.<sup>2</sup> The *Atlas of Florida* did the same for a period of seven censuses. Unlike the Paullin maps, the *Atlas* used different densities of population for each map, making it difficult to discern advancing settlement.<sup>3</sup> Tebeau did not use maps, but aggregated the state's counties into four broad regions (west, middle, east, south).<sup>4</sup> All three efforts to show the advance of frontier settlement suffered because of the small number of counties during the nineteenth century, especially in the southern half of the peninsula.

A useful alternative cartographic representation of the advance of settlement in the United States, although little utilized, is to plot post offices on a map by the date they opened.<sup>5</sup> The primary reason why researchers seldom consult postal records is that to establish the date when a post office was opened and to locate it on a map are formidable tasks.<sup>6</sup> For Florida, the laborious task of ascertaining the opening date of its post offices and the period (or periods) they functioned has fortunately already been completed.<sup>7</sup> A *Chronology of Florida Post Offices* additionally locates each post office within the sixty-seven counties that exist today, not in the reduced number that existed at the time of their opening. This feature proved of enormous value in utilizing a huge data set.

A *Chronology of Florida Post Offices* lists over 3,500 post offices. Many had such abbreviated lives, however, that their use is inappropriate for plotting settlement patterns. Two defining criteria reduced the number to 1,665. First, this study examines only post offices that functioned for at least five years, even if those years were not consecutive. To limit the scope further, only post offices opened before 1920 are included. This is not a harmful limitation since, as a result of improved transportation, relatively

---

2. Charles O. Paullin, *Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States* (Washington, DC, 1932), plates 76-79.

3. Fernald and Purdum, ed., *Atlas of Florida*, 96-97.

4. Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables, FL, 1980), 183.

5. John A. Alwin, "Post Office Locations and the Historical Geographer: A Montana Example," *Professional Geographer* 26 (May 1974), 183-86, is an example of the use of postal records to establish frontier movement.

6. The National Archives maintains postal records and has available on microfilm the dates post offices were established and closed.

7. Alford G. Bradbury and E. Story Hallock, *A Chronology of Florida Post Offices* (Palm Beach, FL, 1962).

few post offices were established in Florida during the twentieth century and many older ones were closed.

The use of postal records to define the advance of Florida settlement poses problems, although they are not the same as those present when only population data are employed. During the first half of the nineteenth century, for example, the opening of post offices was only loosely based on population.<sup>8</sup> Post roads, river postal routes, and offices normally received authorization by petitioning Congress. Political influence and not need commonly guided the success rate of petitions. Furthermore, Congress believed that revenues generated by post offices were supposed to at least equal expenditures. David Yulee, during the period he represented Florida in the United States Senate, was an especially vocal advocate of self-sustaining post offices. This policy shortened the lives of many post offices, not only in Florida but throughout the nation. It also is the reason why this study only uses post offices that remained open at least five years. Following the Civil War, service and need began to take precedent over the ability of a post office to be self-sustaining, and new post office openings throughout the nation were more closely associated with population growth.

A second problem regarding the use of post office openings stems from the fact that during the nineteenth century the diffusion of people throughout Florida usually proceeded at a faster rate than the postal service. For example, census records found hundreds of woods ranchers in southwestern Florida before the first post office (Manatee) opened in 1850 to serve them.<sup>9</sup> For the purpose of this study these pioneers are regarded as having advanced beyond the settlement frontier.

A fundamental difficulty experienced by all who have endeavored to represent a frontier cartographically has been the need to define the term itself. This study, like most examining the frontier, uses the word to refer to the line of settlement that separates territory into two divisions based on its level of social and economic integration with other places. At one end of the continuum rests places that are totally unoccupied; on the other

---

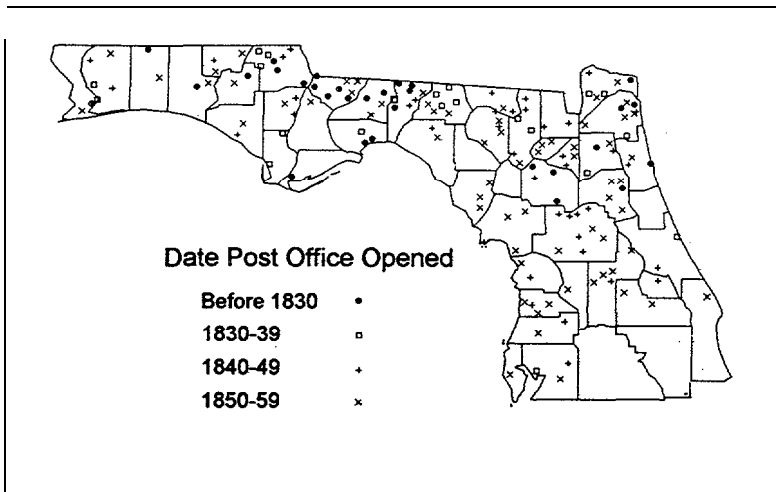
8. Wayne E. Fuller, *The American Mail: Enlarger of the Common Life* (Chicago, 1972), 42-78.

9. John S. Otto, *The Southern Frontier, 1607-1860: The Agricultural Evolution of the Colonial and Antebellum South* (New York, 1989), 135-36.

are locations that are settled and well integrated. Although there may always be disagreement as to where exactly the frontier line should be placed between these poles, this study employs post offices as a locating tool.

Especially close cartographic scrutiny has been devoted to the period 1821 to 1859 during which 184 post offices opened that survived at least five years. The location of each post office has been plotted on a map, and a specific symbol identifies the decade in which it began operations (Figure 1).<sup>10</sup> Although this map depicts the advance of settlement far more accurately than changes in population density by county, the results are disappointing to anyone expecting a contiguous diffusion of settlement from one or more central cores.

The most clearly defined core region is that of middle Florida, in what is today Jackson, Gadsden, Leon, Jefferson, and Madison counties. Here, on the more fertile sandy loams of the Red Hills, but not on the coarse sand flatwoods, settlers established planta-



**Figure 1**

10. There are many useful maps of late nineteenth-century Florida. One of the best is Rand McNally, *Map of Florida* (Chicago, 1876). Also of great value in locating the earliest post offices was Lee Pickett, *Postal History and Postal Markings During the Stampless Period* (Palm Beach, FL, 1957).

tion cotton and tobacco cultivation during the 1820s.<sup>11</sup> Detached from this core region, but intimately associated with it, were the ports created for the exports of the Red Hills. Port areas that had post offices surviving at least five years were Apalachicola, St. Marks, and Newport. The map shows that during the 1830s there was an eastward expansion of the middle Florida core deeper into the uplands of Madison County and that during the 1840s settlement in the county turned south.

The expansion of settlement in west Florida was far slower than in middle Florida. Pensacola, the region's only colonial town, received a post office in 1821, the year the United States Congress ratified the annexation of Florida as a territory. Two more post offices, at Almirante and Euchee Anna, were established in the region during the 1820s. The number and distribution of the few post offices opened in west Florida during the three remaining decades before the Civil War suggest that no real frontier movement from a core occurred. The distance between these scattered offices is an indication that most of west Florida during the antebellum period remained lightly populated or unsettled. Cattle ranching on the flatwoods was the primary commercial agricultural activity, and there was some lumbering.<sup>12</sup>

Upon congressional ratification of Florida's annexation to the United States in 1821, the coastal communities of St. Augustine and Fernandina in northeastern Florida received post offices. Neither proved a locale from which settlement spread into the state's interior. Commercial possibilities in the hinterland of St. Augustine were poor in the 1820s. The low fertility of the flatwoods soils made settlement uninviting to most immigrants, and no water route linked the town to the interior. Additionally, Indian hostility to European occupation of the nearby St. Johns River Valley was intense. The soils around Fernandina were little better for commercial crops than those of St. Augustine, and access to the interior of the territory was nearly as bad.

Jacksonville formed the only possible core settlement in northeastern Florida from which settlement could expand. This town's first post office opened in 1824. Nearby St. Johns Bluff

---

11. For a recent history of the Red Hills plantations see Clifton Paisley, *The Red Hills of Florida 1528-1865* (Tuscaloosa, 1989).

12. Sam B. Hilliard, *Atlas of Antebellum Southern Agriculture* (Baton Rouge, 1984).

received one in 1828. Both communities were well situated, resting at the mouth of the St. Johns River. In the period before railroads, when travel on Florida's few sandy roads was slow and difficult, the St. Johns River system was the best route to the territory's interior.<sup>13</sup>

Transportation was vastly improved during the 1830s when steamboats began to ply the river.<sup>14</sup> The dates upon which post offices were established within the St. Johns River basin show that settlement proceeded up the river, but slowly. Indian raids in the basin remained a problem until the end of the 1830s. Once hostilities ended, upriver settlement proceeded more rapidly. By 1845 Sanford opened its first post office, and the following year one opened in nearby Enterprise. Before the Civil War the hegemony of the St. Johns River as a transportation route was such that few settlements of sufficient importance to merit a post office developed along the coast of northeastern Florida.

Three post offices opened in Alachua County— at Newnansville and Micanopy in 1826 and Spring Grove in 1829. Micanopy, in the southern part of the county, served the newly established Seminole Indian reservation which extended far to the south. The other two were near the Santa Fe River. Following the end of the Second Seminole War in 1842, when the Seminole Indian reservation moved farther to the south, new post offices opened along the central highlands into Marion County.

The distribution of new post offices on the peninsula during the 1840s and 1850s reflects the strong desire of immigrants to establish farming in the central highlands and to avoid the low flatwoods. Sandy loam soils are common on the rolling hills of the central highlands, just as on north Florida's Red Hills. The flatwoods soils of the coastal plain are poorly drained since a short distance below their surface a hardpan layer inhibits water penetration. A notable exception to upland settlement before

---

13. The skeletal road system and its contribution to transportation has been described by Burke G. Vanderhill, "The Alachua Trail: A Reconstruction," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 55 (April 1977), 423-38, and Vanderhill, "The Alachua-St. Marys Road," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 66 (July 1987), 50-67.

14. Eric E. Elliott, *Paddle Wheels on the St. Johns: An Analysis of the Impact of Steamboat Technology on a Southeastern Region of the United States* (Ann Arbor, 1987).

the Civil War was Tampa, located in the flatwoods that surround Tampa Bay. Its first post office opened in 1850, as did that of the community of Manatee a short distance to the south. These towns were isolated from the main areas of antebellum settlement: Their primary function was to serve woods ranchers who grazed cattle on the poor grasses of the flatwoods. By then a cattle trade had been established between Florida and Cuba.<sup>15</sup>

As already noted, before the Civil War few coastal communities with post offices developed in northeastern Florida. Only a small number developed along the Gulf of Mexico as well. Within the panhandle, Apalachicola and St. Marks had grown to dominate the exports of middle Florida, and the latter quickly overwhelmed trade through Newport. Even before the Civil War, however, it became obvious that the Gulf ports would lose much of their trade importance to railroads entering middle Florida from the east.<sup>16</sup> Although Tampa had established links with Cuba, Pensacola's trade languished, awaiting the production of export goods in its hinterland.

Settlement of the southern half of the peninsula had barely begun by the Civil War. Both Europeans and blacks lived south of Tampa before the Civil War, but their numbers and density were so low that they lived beyond the population frontier. Only five post offices endured for at least five years prior to the war. Three were in the Keys, serving settlements that had mainly military or navigational functions— Key West, 1829; Indian Key, 1833; and Fort Jefferson, 1851. Miami's first post office opened in 1850.

Following the Civil War the state's population began to grow rapidly, posing new problems for analysis. At least one hundred post offices were established in each five-year period between 1875-1879 and 1905-1909. The number peaked in the 1885-1889 period at 249 (Table 1). Since so many post offices opened during so short a period, the use of their location to show frontier movement is impossible. As an alternative approach, this study determined the decade in which the first three post offices opened for

- 
15. John S. Otto, "Open-Range Cattle Herding in Antebellum South Florida (1842-1860)," *Southeastern Geographer* 26 (May 1986), 55-67.
  16. William W. Rogers, *Outposts on the Gulf: St. George Island and Apalachicola from Early Exploration to World War II* (Pensacola, FL, 1986).



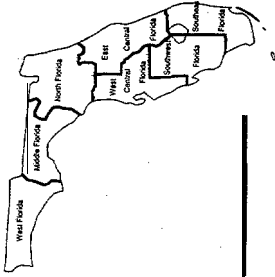


TABLE 1. POST OFFICE OPENINGS BY 5-YEAR PERIODS 1820-1919.

5- Year Period

Florida	1820	25	30	35	40	45	50	55	60	65	70	75	80	85	90	95	00	05	10	15	1824	29	34	39	44	49	54	59	64	69	74	79	84	89	94	99	04	09	14	19									
West	1	5	6	3	2	6	6	3	0	3	7	13	25	23	40	40	34	28	20	3																													
Middle	0	14	9	1	5	5	5	11	3	2	9	14	13	14	25	32	22	21	3	4																													
North	3	8	3	3	12	13	11	19	2	11	18	48	70	87	55	47	40	22	8	7																													
E. Central	0	0	1	0	0	5	3	3	1	5	14	31	60	56	32	15	7	9	9	11																													
W. Central	0	0	0	0	0	4	5	5	1	1	2	20	49	48	49	26	27	15	17	10																													
Southeast	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	3	5	13	14	7	7	8	12																													
Southwest	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	5	7	16	10	12	6	14	12	3																													
Total	4	28	20	7	19	33	32	41	7	22	54	131	227	249	217	186	143	116	77	51																													

At least 18% of all post offices established during 5-year period.

each Florida county. The figure three was chosen by trial and error— the advance of the frontier seemed too rapid when less were used, but too slow when there were more. The decade in which each county attained three post offices is identified on four maps (Figure 2). This method sacrifices a detailed description of the advance of settlement, but it does clearly indicate the time and direction of population movement.

The first two maps show an advance of population between 1821 and 1860 from the middle and northeastern Florida cores southward along both the central highlands and St. Johns River. Following the Civil War the movement southward was more rapid toward the southwest, but by the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth it was advancing swiftly down the southeastern coast. The last large area of the state to be settled was the extreme southwestern portion of the peninsula, especially its interior. Infertile, poorly drained flatwoods cover much of the region, as do wetlands in the Everglades. Until

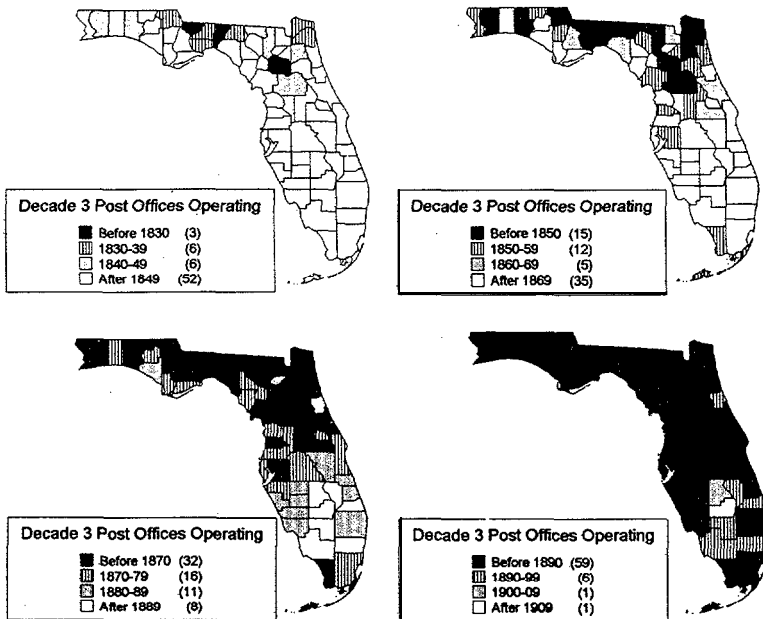


Figure 2

recently, extensive cattle raising was southwest Florida's major economic activity, but today intensive agriculture has risen in importance, as have tourism and retirement communities. These latter two developments, however, became important to the gold coast of southeastern Florida several decades before they did to the sun coast on the southwest.

Although it is impossible to represent cartographically the expansion of settlement by locating all 1,665 post offices by opening dates, the data is easily manipulated statistically. This is revealed in a table that divides Florida's sixty-seven counties into seven regions (Table 1). The number of post offices opened in each region for each twenty-five-year period beginning in 1820 appears in Table 1. The five-year period in which one region had at least 18 percent of all post office openings is also identified.<sup>17</sup>

If the establishment of post offices can be used as a surrogate for the growth of settlement, west Florida grew more rapidly than most other regions of the state between 1820 and 1854. Following a long hiatus, and with the lumber boom of the late nineteenth century, it enjoyed a second period of relatively rapid growth extending from 1910-1914. Middle Florida's period of rapid growth began early but was confined totally to the antebellum period. Northeastern Florida had the longest period of rapid settlement, largely due to the excellence of the St. Johns River system as an artery of transportation. Its period of relatively high growth began in the 1820-1824 period and extended into the twentieth century. East central Florida had a spurt of unusually rapid growth between 1865 and 1889, in large part a consequence of the arrival of railroads from the north, accompanied by the establishment of commercial citrus and vegetable farms. West central Florida's period of relatively rapid settlement followed that of east central Florida but lasted well into the twentieth century. In addition to cattle and crops, the region's growth stemmed from phosphate mining. Southeast and southwest Florida, regions of rapid settlement since 1950, were largely ignored by people in search of new economic opportunities during the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth centuries.

---

17. The figure 18 percent is somewhat arbitrary, but statistical analysis shows that figures below this sum make geographic interpretation very difficult.

It is doubtful whether a more accurate surrogate to define cartographically the southern advance of Florida settlement will ever be found, but there certainly will be other methods that merit testing. The use of post office openings has distinct advantages for defining the frontier over the conventional method of using the population of counties. If one accepts the year when three post offices functioned in a county as the time when the frontier passed through, the maps do show a contagious diffusion down the peninsula, ending in southwest Florida, which even today is one of the emptiest areas of the state. Readers might not agree that this approach gives a fully appropriate indication of a county's incorporation into the state's settled area. Nonetheless, post office openings do have substantial explanatory power to define frontier movement.