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## "FLORIDA AND THE BRITISH INVESTOR" REVISITED: THE WILLIAM MOORE ANGAS PAPERS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

by FRANK ORSER

I n his 1954 article Alfred P. Tischendorf discussed briefly the role of fifteen British-owned companies in Florida around the turn of the century.<sup>1</sup> He concluded that these enterprises were devoted to development and attracting British immigrants. Generally little is known about British business practices in Florida since very few records exist in the United States. Details about two of the larger English companies, the Land Mortgage Bank and the Florida Syndicate, can now be examined through their business files, recently acquired by the George A. Smathers Libraries at the University of Florida and accessioned as the William Moore Angas Papers.

Angas, an Englishman, came to Jacksonville in 1895 as resident agent and manager for a group of British-owned companies interested in Florida real estate. For more than a half century he and his son Robert Moore Angas represented these concerns in more than twenty Florida counties, while at the same time becoming involved in smaller Florida real estate and finance companies. The principal activities in which the businesses engaged included real estate sales and financing, brick production in Jacksonville, citrus farming, forestry, and phosphate mining. The British companies represented by Angas were the Land Mortgage Bank of Florida, Ltd., the Florida Syndicate, Ltd., and the Indian River Association. An examination of these records suggests that Tischendorf's conclusion is less applicable than previously thought.

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1. Alfred P. Tischendorf, "Florida and the British Investor," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 33 (October 1954), 120-29.

The oldest of the companies, the Land Mortgage Bank, was founded in 1889 exclusively to lend money for Florida mortgages. As a result of hard times following the freeze of 1895 and poor, if not fraudulent, management by its agents prior to Angas, the company foreclosed on many properties throughout Florida, making it a large landowner by default. The same adverse conditions ultimately forced the company into liquidation. When properties were foreclosed they usually reverted to the company's English liquidators, Robert Thomas Heselton and Benjamin Septimus Briggs. Technically the bank never owned property at all, but officials erroneously made some deeds to it rather than to the liquidators.

Angas's major activities consisted of collecting mortgages and rents due the company, selling repossessed property under the best terms possible, and managing affairs until a sale could be made. In addition to many lots and homes in Jacksonville, the bank controlled commercial properties and "wild lands" throughout the state. Although the papers do not show that Angas participated in large-scale plans to develop these properties, he did support improvements such as road building to make the properties more saleable. Sometimes he built new houses on the land if he thought it would encourage sales. Much of the company's Jacksonville property was in poorer, often black, neighborhoods where likely buyers lacked funds even during boom times. Once sold the property often had to be repossessed. The constant inability of both Angas's buyers and renters to keep up with payments is a recurring theme in the correspondence. Many of the properties had clouded titles, and the company was continuously engaged in title litigation. The most voluminous correspondence came from the bank's legal firm, Fleming, Hamilton, Diver, Lichtler, and Fleming.

Some formal subdivision of the bank's Jacksonville property did occur, as in the Westbrook, Avondale, and Heselton & Payne's subdivisions. The planning and selling of these properties was generally turned over to professional real estate companies. The bank also owned some out-of-state properties. Rural holdings included several orange groves. The correspondence includes detailed information about the management and production of these groves as well as attempts to sell them. By the time of William Angas's death in 1932 most of the property had been sold. His son Robert conducted whatever business was

necessary for twenty more years. By the end of this period a few properties were still unsold, and Robert agreed to buy them, concluding after sixty years the activities of the Land Mortgage Bank of Florida.

Until William Angas came to Jacksonville in 1895 the affairs of the bank were managed by a company owned by three men— J. C. Greeley, John Rollins, and Harwood Morgan. Affairs were in a very bad state. In the hope that business could be improved they formed a new company, the Florida Finance Company, and Angas became president. When conditions failed to improve the Land Mortgage Bank liquidators foreclosed on the Florida Finance Company, adding to the Land Mortgage Bank property. Apparently the old Land Mortgage Bank agents had been lending money on poor security to dummy buyers and using the money for their own speculation. After 1895 the Florida Finance Company existed only as a shell, and the Land Mortgage Bank conducted all actual business.

The Florida Syndicate, unlike the Land Mortgage Bank, was formed for the purpose of land speculation. The hope of finding phosphate-rich property was apparently the prime motivation. In addition to land speculation, the Florida Syndicate engaged in four distinct types of industry— brick making, mining, timber, and hotels. The syndicate purchased the Jacksonville Brick Company and the Hotel Montezuma in Ocala. Its land holdings included phosphate mines— leased principally to the J. Buttgenbath Company— and 75,000 acres of “wild” or undeveloped land. The hotel was soon sold and does not figure prominently in the papers.

The company acquired the brickyard in the 1890s and apparently it operated without much success. The fire of 1901 found the yard inoperative, but soon thereafter a flurry of activity took place to get it back into production. A few years seem to have been profitable, but the enterprise was always troubled. The principal problem seems to have stemmed from the difficulty of finding foremen who knew how to work with Florida clay and how to manage the extremely high temperatures required to burn it. The kiln was in constant need of repair, perhaps as a result of the high temperatures. Although Angas was not manager of the brickyard, he took great interest in it. He believed it would operate much better if he were the manager, and an “I told you so” attitude is barely disguised in his correspondence.

The brickyard finally ceased operation in 1913, and more than twenty years of effort to sell the property ensued. Angas concluded that it was unsalable as a business, and the Jacksonville School District ultimately purchased the land for a technical school. Although the brickyard business was owned by the syndicate, the Land Mortgage Bank owned part of the property on which the yard was located, making it one of the points on which the interests of the two companies overlapped and possibly conflicted. The Florida Syndicate file is rich in information on brickmaking. In fact, it is specific enough to reconstruct the production and financial history of the company as well as many of the technical aspects of production. Both Florida Syndicate and Land Mortgage Bank files contain material on the brickyard site itself, which contained its own clay pit.

The principal objective in forming the Florida Syndicate appears to have been acquisition of land for phosphate prospecting. Some of the properties did have the valuable mineral in sufficient quantity for mining, principally at Holder in Citrus County. Reports on the amount of phosphate extracted and the royalties paid are regular features of the Florida Syndicate correspondence until depletion of the mine after 1910. A curio of the collection is a small group of letters from 1891—preceding other correspondence in the papers by ten years—regarding phosphate prospecting in Florida. A letter from Albertus Vogt, pioneer of the Florida phosphate industry is included. Written even before Angas came to America, the survival of the letters is something of a mystery since no other correspondence prior to 1901 exists.

The Florida Syndicate purchased 75,000 acres in Florida in 1892 of which more than 60,000 were in Levy County. The property, part of the parcel Hamilton Disston had acquired from the state, was sold to the syndicate by phosphate prospector John Dunne.<sup>2</sup> In time the syndicate set about to sell the property, and most of the resulting transactions can be traced in the company's records and correspondence. Disposing of 60,000 acres in Levy County was a particularly daunting task, requiring many years of effort. The policy of the Florida Syndicate was to remove the resources from the land, in this case timber, and then sell the

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2. T. Frederick Davis, "The Disston Land Purchase," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 17 (January 1939), 200-10.

property. Divided into roughly 20,000- and 40,000-acre tracts, the deforested property proved difficult to sell and to keep sold, especially as cash became a scarce commodity in the late 1920s and 1930s.

Finally, a group of investors interested in professional forestry successfully acquired the larger tract. The Forestry Managers were led by S. J. Hall of Jacksonville and included noted forester Dr. Austin Cary. Although the story of this transaction is not included in the annals of the Florida Syndicate, this tract was reforested and resold in 1992 to the State of Florida under its Preservation 2000 land acquisition program. Far from being the story of land development, in this instance the Florida Syndicate was part of the history of land preservation.<sup>3</sup>

In 1931 the stockholders of the Florida Syndicate liquidated the company and formed the Keighley Land Company to take over its assets and liabilities. The company was so named for the Yorkshire town in which several of the directors lived. The Keighley correspondence and business were simply continuations of the Florida Syndicate until operations ceased in 1942 with the satisfaction of the Levy County leases and sale of the brickyard property.

The Indian River Association began operations in 1892— the same year as the Florida Syndicate— and it contained several of the same principal stockholders. The company, whose existence Tischendorf overlooked, acquired the assets of the Indian River Pineapple & Coconut Association, a Florida company formed around 1885. Principal stockholders of the older company included former lieutenant governor William H. Gleason and several members of his family. By the time the Indian River Association obtained the property its officers included Harwood Morgan and John Rollins. The land consisted of prime Florida real estate, including Hobe Sound and other parts of Jupiter Island, prop-

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3. Hall sold the property in 1942 to sawmill operator J. T. Goethe. It was resold to the state in 1992 as part of the Levy County Forest/Sandhills Conservation and Recreation Lands (CARL) project. A current description and map of the property may be found in the *Annual Report of the Conservation and Recreation Lands Program* (Tallahassee, 1991). A videotape of an interview with Goethe from the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Information Network describes the history of the property during Goethe's ownership. A copy of the videotape and a legal description of the property are housed with the Angas Papers.

erty known as the Gomez Grant on the opposing mainland, and the Riverside division of Jacksonville.

The correspondence files preserved for the Indian River Association cover the period 1924-1937 and primarily concern liquidation of the company and the controversy over the name of Hobe Sound. Investors to whom the Indian River Association sold the property around Hobe Sound had changed its name to Olympia. The alteration displeased old-timers, including Angas himself who wintered there. Angus felt that the new owners had introduced an undesirable and possibly criminal element to the area. A subsequent sale of the property resulted in both restoration of the old name and return of the inn there to its former management.

An interesting aspect of the Indian River Association records is the documentation concerning title to the Gomez Grant. In order to ensure a clear title the owners had a completely new abstract prepared in 1916.<sup>4</sup> This resulted in a rash of correspondence between attorneys over procedures for preparing the abstract and the title itself. The attorneys gathered as much historical documentation as possible, some extending back to the land grant from the Spanish sovereign to Esuebio M. Gomez in 1821. They also acquired new quit claim deeds from Gomez descendants whenever possible. Unfortunately, Angas's files do not contain all of these documents.

The last company with which Angas was involved was the Hollybrook Company, a Florida business of which he was president and a large stockholder. The company primarily sold lots in the Hollybrook subdivision of Jacksonville. As part of the development the company donated land to the city for Hollybrook Park. A substantial part of the correspondence is devoted to Angas's efforts to have the city develop the park. Angas showed his greatest civic interest in the area of park building and development.

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4. *Abstract of Title to Jupiter Island and Gomez Grant Property of the Indian River Association* (Jacksonville, 1916) is held in the P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, as are two pamphlets: George M. Chapin's, *Hobe Sound, Florida: Winter Home in Summerland* (Jacksonville, 1913) and *Jupiter Island and Hobe Sound, Palm Beach County, Fla* (Jacksonville, 1919), published to promote the property.

Although the Land Mortgage Bank, Florida Syndicate, and Indian River Association were conducting business from the early 1890s, and Angas came to Florida in 1895, none of his correspondence is preserved prior to 1901. Some ledgers do exist from earlier dates. The early records do not appear to have been burned in the Jacksonville fire of 1901. Ironically, the earliest surviving correspondence is an account of the fire which mentions that Angas's office building was one of the few undamaged structures. The fire was a bench mark of sorts for the company as it began a new filing system shortly thereafter. Indeed the file boxes, no longer extant, began from the fire date with number one. It appears that clerks filed every copy and every letter received. Attachments that accompanied outgoing letters are usually not preserved. The oldest of the office copies are in very brittle condition. The great majority of the collection consists of correspondence, but there are a few copies of deeds, abstracts, and other legal documents.

Numerous bound volumes are preserved. Most important of these are the tract books through which it is possible to identify all the real estate holdings of the companies and to identify dates on which they were sold or leased and to whom. Often supplementing these records are copies of correspondence with the actual buyers. These materials reveal the negotiations of the sale. Company officials made constant efforts to clear or improve titles, and although the title work itself does not exist, it is often recapitulated in the correspondence. These documents often include the history of the property and its ownership as well as personal details of former owners, or present buyers.

The papers clearly show the complexity that often accompanied real estate and financial transactions. Many business dealings are told piecemeal through correspondence that continues for years and even decades. Occasionally, interesting vignettes enliven the records. One such story involved a citrus grove foreman who killed an Army of the Republic veteran who was pilfering oranges. Another tells the tale of a man who tried to prove that a deadbeat who was reported deceased was really alive, only to have the individual actually die during the course of his pursuit.

The financial ledgers have been preserved, and they make it possible to reconstruct the financial history of the companies. The correspondence has been purged of some of its most routine and duplicative pieces.



There is virtually no purely personal correspondence in the files, but at times personal observations enter the letters. Some of the more interesting correspondence in this regard emanates from Robert Moore Angas in the later years. After the death of the elder Angas in 1932 Robert continued his father's representation of the companies while operating his own civil engineering practice. Although little actual business was being conducted in the depression years, the younger Angas sent long letters back to England describing conditions in Florida. For example Angas believed construction of the cross-Florida ship canal would revitalize Jacksonville's economy. He gave an eyewitness account of the dedication ceremony at the beginning of construction and carefully followed its progress. He also commented hopefully on the coming of the pulp paper industry to north Florida and south Georgia, and he monitored the number of trains carrying tourists through Jacksonville as a barometer of coming economic conditions. The younger Angas appears to have been more involved with civic affairs than was his father, and he commented on his own role in defeating bond issues for a second bridge over the St. Johns River and for a Duval County seawall.

From the massive amount of correspondence, a picture of the older Angas emerges. Hardworking, frugal, persistent, and extremely meticulous are adjectives that describe him. The companies that Angas managed were very clear in insisting that debtors make some payment on what they owed, but Angas was usually willing to extend time to those who showed good faith. He appeared always mindful of the fact that he was only the agent of the property owners, and he pointed this out to debtors as part of the reason why some progress had to be made on their account. Angas reported that a nervous buyer had once been advised by an abstract company officer to not be afraid of dealing with the Land Mortgage Bank as it was as honest as any company in the state. Angas was honest and likely never cheated anyone nor told a lie, but he was also a firm negotiator and might not volunteer everything that a buyer might want to know.

Angas was clearly not always in agreement with the owners as to the best business course to follow, and at times his employers questioned his actions and judgment. Some of the tension between loyalty to employers and his own judgement was best expressed in letters to third parties, particularly the Jacksonville attorneys with whom Angas worked closely on company affairs. Many of Angas's misgivings proved well founded.

The papers are the gift of the five daughters of William Mack Angas, younger son of William Moore Angas. When received they were in their original file boxes, in most cases apparently undisturbed since they were initially filed. The Angas papers are housed in the P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, George A. Smathers Libraries. A researcher's guide has been prepared.