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Michael David Tegeder



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## **Economic Boom or Political Boondoggle? Florida's Atlantic Gulf Ship Canal in the 1930s**

*by* Michael David Tegeder

**I**n the 1930s, the federal government began construction on one of the grandest public works projects in Florida. More than twice the length of the Suez and four times larger than the Panama Canal, the Atlantic Gulf Ship Canal was “perhaps the most opulent single symbol of the New Deal.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, despite the labor and massive expenditures on the part of state and federal officials, the project ended within a year of its groundbreaking. Plagued by political controversy from start to finish, the Ship Canal can be seen as a dress-rehearsal for the decades-long debate over the Cross-Florida Barge Canal that followed the Depression-era project. Canal boosters asserted that, because the canal would be part of a regional trade network, the project would expand economic growth and guarantee prosperity for the nation as well as the state. Amid the Depression, that promise seemed at least partially fulfilled with the Ocala construction boom that accompanied the dig. The canal prompted a wave of criticism, however, as opponents tried to block future funding for the project. Nationally, anti-canal forces saw the project as one of many examples of New Deal profligacy and government waste. Locally, the canal pitted region against region and interest against interest over the conservation of one of the state's most precious natural

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Michael David Tegeder is associate professor of history at Santa Fe Community College, Gainesville. He thanks the Department of Environmental Protection's Office of Greenways and Trails for its support for the research of this project.

resources—Florida's freshwater aquifer. The result was a contentious debate that, while ending the Ship Canal, entrenched interests and produced a bureaucratic inertia that continually pushed for a canal for much of the rest of the twentieth century.

For almost a hundred years, the Army Corps of Engineers conducted nearly a dozen surveys to determine the efficacy of a canal across Florida. Stemming from an effort to improve the nation's rivers and waterways as an alternative to an increasingly dominant railway industry, the Federal Rivers and Harbor Act of 1927 initiated the movement that finally resulted in the groundbreaking of that century-old dream.<sup>2</sup>

With this latest round of legislation came greater public interest and the call for another survey; one that would finally determine the canal's route. Completed by the early 1930s, the Corps's comprehensive assessment considered twenty-eight possible canal routes from one across southern Georgia to another traversing the Florida peninsula at Lake Okeechobee and all points in between. After determining that only seven were economically feasible, the Corps asserted that among the choices, "Route 13-B" was most desirable, practical, and economical. That path proposed to follow the St. Johns from its mouth to Palatka, and then along the Ocklawaha River to a point near Silver Springs, and cut westward across land below Ocala to Dunnellon and finally along the course of the Withlacoochee River until it entered the Gulf of Mexico near Yankeetown.<sup>3</sup> The Corps recommended that a lock canal be constructed along the route to avoid "seriously disturb[ing] the natural ground-water table." Although engineers reached a consensus regarding the important issue of the canal's location, they were not entirely convinced of the project's practicality, concluding that "the construction of neither a barge nor ship canal is economically justified at this time."<sup>4</sup>

Boosters remained in a quandary: they now had the route but lacked the wherewithal to pursue their dream. New lobbying efforts centered on securing federal funds for the canal's construction. In 1932, proponents organized the National Gulf-

1. *New York Times*, 24 November 1935, 10.

2. H. E. Barber, "The History of the Florida Cross-State Canal" (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 1969), 119.

3. *Ibid.*, 120-24, 139; U.S. Congress, House, *Atlantic-Gulf Ship Canal*, 75th Cong., 1st sess., H. Doc. 194 (5 April 1937), 2, 7.

4. Congress, House, *Atlantic-Gulf Ship Canal*, 2, 8.

Atlantic Ship Canal Association, a regional effort to press their case in Washington. Well organized and well funded, this group proved crucial to convincing the government to build the canal. Heading the lobbying effort was the Association's president, native-Floridian General Charles P. Summerall, recently retired Army Chief-of-Staff. The organization succeeded where others had failed because it sought allies beyond Florida's boundaries, presenting a strong, unified regional push to complete the canal. Support from such other shipping concerns as the Mississippi Valley Association, the Alabama State Docks Commission, and the Atlantic Deeper Waterways Association negated claims that the canal was simply a local boondoggle.<sup>5</sup>

Amid all this national activity, the state of Florida, driven by canal proponents' persistent demands, began to secure land for the project and made plans to operate and maintain the canal once it was completed. In 1931, the legislature established the Florida State Canal Commission, a strictly voluntary non-profit organization empowered to acquire lands for a canal. Most of the Commission's support stemmed from city and county governments interested in the waterway.<sup>6</sup> Two years later, the Commission was superceded by the Ship Canal Authority, authorized by the legislature to "acquire, own, construct, operate, and maintain a ship canal across Florida."<sup>7</sup> Later the state formed a special tax district—comprised of the six counties through which the canal would pass—to issue bonds and impose taxes to purchase rights-of-way. All of these measures created a local infrastructure to build a canal; they also inspired long-term vested interests, at once public and private, to perpetually lobby for the project's completion.<sup>8</sup>

With an established route and a variety of governmental and private associations in place, local advocates concentrated on getting the canal built. Across the peninsula, from Yankeetown to Jacksonville, both public and private civic leaders accelerated the drumbeat for construction. On the west coast, longtime Yankeetown mayor A.F. Knotts tirelessly crusaded for the venture,

5. Nelson M. Blake, *Land into Water—Water into Land: A History of Water Management in Florida* (Tallahassee, Fla., 1980), 151-52.

6. Barber, "History of the Florida Cross-State Canal," 131-32.

7. *Ibid.*, 135.

8. Luther J. Carter, *The Florida Experience: Land and Water Policy in a Growth State* (Baltimore, Md., 1974), 271-72.

giving speeches, and writing large numbers of newspaper articles and letters favoring the canal. In Ocala, *Evening Star* editor R.N. "Bert" Dosh contributed more pro-canal articles and editorials to his paper than any other Florida newspaper. Indeed, Dosh's support for the enterprise was so unwavering that other boosters memorialized his efforts by naming the proposed Ocala lock on the later Cross-Florida Barge Canal after him. Jacksonville's promoters included retired Corps of Engineer officer Gilbert A. Youngberg, who wrote numerous technical reports on the structural and economic viability of the project. Youngberg traversed the state addressing local chambers of commerce and service clubs on the importance of the canal to Florida's future. Yet, despite their best efforts, these advocates and their allies made little progress. In the end, national economic considerations, rather than the merits of the canal itself, determined the project's development.<sup>9</sup>

Ironically, the economic hardship of the Great Depression became the major impetus for canal construction. With the stock market crash of 1929, the United States entered the longest and most severe period of economic dislocation in its history. With hundreds of thousands of Americans unemployed by 1932, calls for government assistance reached a fevered pitch. President Herbert Hoover responded by establishing the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, a federal agency designed to combat unemployment. In August, General Summerall approached the RFC with a request for \$160 million in loans to build the canal and provide jobs for Florida's unemployed, but the tight-fisted Hoover administration rejected the application. Months later, canal advocates put their hopes in a new president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose willingness to support public works was unprecedented. Two months after Roosevelt's inauguration, Florida's legislature sent a message to Roosevelt "requesting the assistance and cooperation of every available federal agency in order to make possible, at an early date, commencement of construction work on a ship canal across the peninsula . . . as an effective measure in relieving unemployment and stimulating industry."<sup>10</sup>

9. Blake, *Land into Water—Water into Land*, 151-52.

10. Joint Memorial of the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of Florida, 27 May 1933, in *Documentary History of the Florida Canal*, ed. Henry Holland Buckman, (Washington, D.C., 1936), 82-83.

Bureaucratic wrangling and other political considerations within the federal government prevented the president from authorizing the project immediately. Caught between the technicalities of legislative funding and the transfer of works projects from the RFC to the Public Works Administration, the project's loan application, now sponsored by Florida's Ship Canal Authority, languished under the review of several federal agencies until an opportune moment could guarantee its success. Hopes for a canal diminished, however, as PWA engineers issued reports in early 1934 that were increasingly at odds with the Corps's cost estimates. To make matters worse, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, who also administered the purse strings of the PWA, had little enthusiasm for the project, primarily because of the expense and potential environmental damage.<sup>11</sup> Frustrated by the lack of administrative support, nine senators from Gulf Coast states appealed directly to Roosevelt in March 1934. Pointing to discrepancies between the engineers' reports, they called for the creation of a special review board to resolve the fate of the Florida canal.<sup>12</sup>

By June 1934, Roosevelt's newly appointed board of Army and civilian engineers issued a report that, though supportive of the project, arrived at a new set of conclusions concerning not only the cost but the entire conceptualization of the canal. The board took exception to earlier plans that focused almost entirely on the development of a lock canal. Instead, it called for a sea-level ship canal, which offered far more advantages, especially with regard to its initial costs and ease of construction. In addition to cheaper operating and maintenance expenses, a sea-level canal also offered greater ease and capacity for shipping. The only possible disadvantage would be negligible damage to local water wells along the right-of-way. Such a trade-off seemed worthwhile, however, when the price of the project came in at a

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11. Blake, *Land into Water—Water into Land*, 153-54; Barber, "History of the Florida Cross-State Canal," 143; Harold Ickes to Franklin D. Roosevelt, 26 August 1935, Office Files, Box 635, folder "Florida Ship Canal—1935," Franklin Roosevelt Presidential Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, N.Y.
  12. Petition to the President by the Senators of All Gulf States for the Appointment of a Board of Review, 2 March 1934, in Buckman, ed., *Documentary History*, 100-101.
  13. Report of the President's Board of Review, June 28, 1934, in Buckman, ed., *Documentary History*, 105-10.

mere \$142.7 million.<sup>13</sup> Florida's canal boosters applauded the recommendation, only to be frustrated once again as Roosevelt delegated the final decision to Ickes, who strictly adhered to the legislative provision that any project receiving PWA funds must be self-liquidating. In other words, the canal's anticipated toll revenues would have to offset the overall costs of construction, maintenance, and operation. After years of delay, Ickes finally rejected the Ship Canal Authority's loan application on January 29, 1935.<sup>14</sup>

Undaunted, canal advocates worked the halls of Congress, seeking legislation that might secure funding from other federal sources. As luck would have it, on April 8, 1935, Roosevelt signed the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act, which allocated federal funds to combat unemployment directly under executive authority. Within the newly established Works Progress Administration, Roosevelt now had the wide latitude to grant money to the Florida Ship Canal Authority without Congressional approval. Moreover, under the auspices of Harry Hopkins, who seemed like a spendthrift in comparison to Harold Ickes, the WPA was much more willing to embrace such large-scale public works projects. By June 1935, everything seemed to be falling into place for the construction of a cross-peninsula canal.<sup>15</sup>

For the most part, Roosevelt was receptive to the project. The Atlantic Gulf Ship Canal was much in keeping with the New Deal's effort to revolutionize the nation's infrastructure. Yet, a primary motivation for such projects was the pressing need for low-cost labor relief. As early as January 1935, the president suggested that he would allocate only as much money that could be spent in a year, with the condition that 50 percent of the funds must go to labor costs on a scale "somewhat below the local scale for common, semi-skilled and skilled labor but above [the] home relief scale." The WPA also had to employ people already on relief rolls.<sup>16</sup> Canal lobbyists like Florida Senators Duncan Fletcher and Park Trammell, and Representatives Lex Green and Claude Pepper emphasized the project's potential to ease unemployment.

14. Blake, *Land into Water—Water into Land*, 154; Second Summary Report of Administration of Public Works, January 29, 1935, in Buckman, ed., *Documentary History*, 125-26.

15. Blake, *Land into Water—Water into Land*, 153-54; Barber, "History of the Florida Cross-State Canal," 150-53.

Fletcher, in requesting an initial allotment of \$25 million, persistently reminded Roosevelt that construction plans called for 25,000 workers for six years. The president was working with a more modest budget, however.<sup>17</sup> With the unified support of Florida's Congressional delegation, and presumably most of the citizenry of the Sunshine State, Roosevelt finally allocated \$5 million on August 30 to begin the construction of the canal. Always the consummate politician, he took advantage of a natural disaster off the coast of Florida to rally support for his decision. Following the grounding of the cruise ship *Dixie* in a hurricane on September 2, 1935, he announced that the canal "would forever make it unnecessary for sea goers to risk their lives in the circumnavigation of Florida's long, hurricane-blistered thumb."<sup>18</sup>

After a hundred years of countless surveys and bureaucratic foot-dragging, work began immediately on a project of extraordinary scale. When completed, the 195-mile passageway would dwarf its closest rivals, the Panama and Suez Canals. Far from merely cutting a 90-mile path directly through the Central Florida Ridge, the project also included significant alterations to the St. Johns, Ocklawaha, and Withlacoochee Rivers. While initial designs recognized the need to preserve "the beauty of Silver Springs" as well as the absorption of the heads of the Ocklawaha, Withlacoochee, and Blue Springs, the project called for "much straighter cuts and the elimination of the sinuosities in the present channel" of the St. Johns River.<sup>19</sup> Construction would similarly involve dredging a channel—five hundred feet wide at the shore line and one thousand feet wide at its mouth—nearly twenty miles into the Gulf of Mexico to make a navigable entrance for the cross-peninsula passage. Ancillary structures included four spillway dams and between ten to twelve highway and railroad bridges with horizon-

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16. Franklin Roosevelt memorandum for Secretary of War, 21 January 1935, Box 635, folder "Florida Ship Canal—1935," Roosevelt Papers.
  17. Duncan Fletcher to Marvin H. McIntyre, Secretary to the President, 14 January 1935; Memorandum for the President, 25 August 1935, both in Box 635, folder "Florida Ship Canal - 1935," Roosevelt Papers.
  18. Blake, *Land into Water—Water into Land*, 154-55; George E. Buker, *Sun, Sand, and Water: A History of the Jacksonville District U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1821-1975* (Fort Belvoir, Va., 1981), 165.
  19. Tentative Program for the Construction of the Atlantic Gulf Ship Canal Across Florida, War Department, Corps of Engineers, (Washington, D.C.) 1934, Box 635, folder "Florida Ship Canal—1935," Roosevelt Papers; Congress, House, *Atlantic-Gulf Ship Canal*, 46.

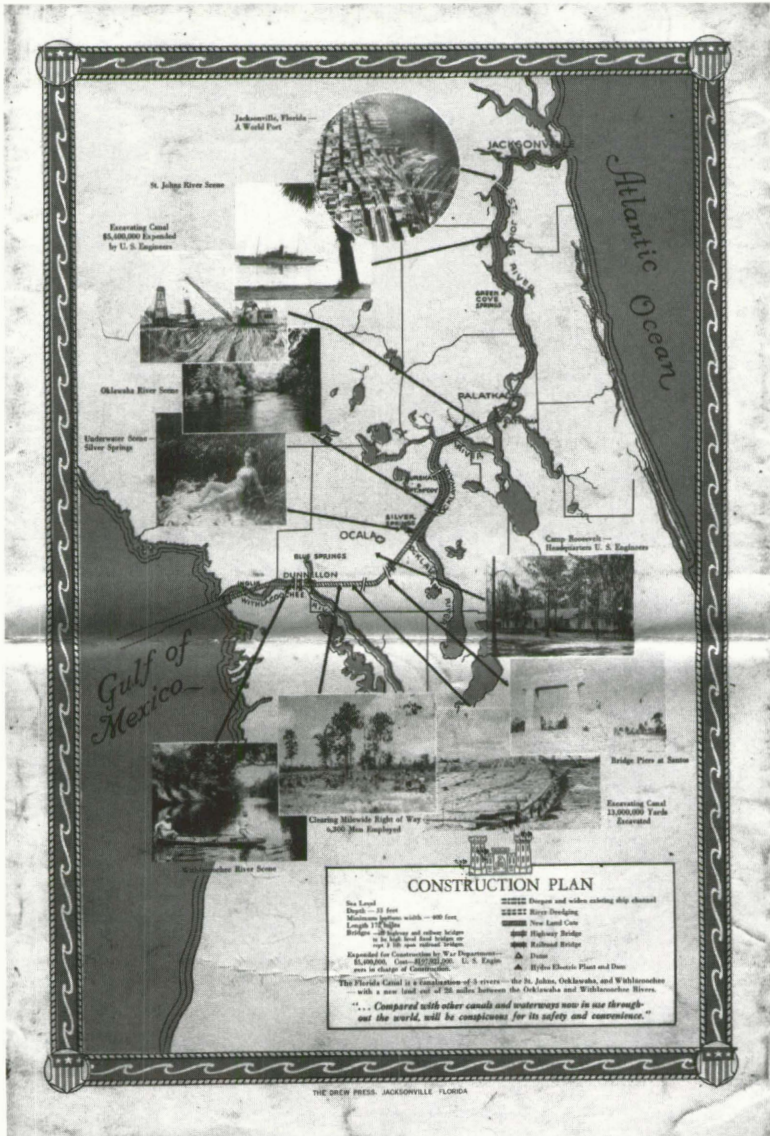


tal clearances of 300 to 500 feet and a minimum vertical clearance of 135 feet.<sup>20</sup> The undetermined number of bridges is notable; plans were flexible and even included an additional canal cut across the south Jacksonville peninsula.<sup>21</sup>

Restricted by financial considerations and a five-year completion schedule, engineers redesigned the canal at sea-level rather than using locks as had been planned. This meant cutting a 30-foot deep, 250-foot wide swath across Florida and its freshwater aquifer. The project also entailed doubling the depths of more than 105 miles of existent waterways. Along the St. Johns, for example, the channel's bottom width would reach as far as 400 feet. Such a massive undertaking demanded the removal of nearly 571 million cubic yards of rock and earth, three-quarters of which would involve underwater dredging. The effort would be worth it, however, as planners anticipated the Atlantic Gulf Ship Canal to accommodate 94 percent of ocean-going commercial vessels from both sides of the peninsula. With a transit time of roughly twenty-five hours, ships would pass at least once an hour. Even in its narrowest sections, the canal's width would enable two cargo ships to pass with relative ease. When compared to the carrying capacity of its predecessors, the proposed Ship Canal allowed for twice the traffic and nearly twice the tonnage as the Suez and Panama canals.<sup>22</sup>

Though boosters applauded the rapidity and decisiveness of Roosevelt's support, they soon rued the relative lack of planning and forethought in making the project a sea-level venture. Cost-cutting measures may have guaranteed success among Washington's decision-makers, but in the long run such decisions led to the project's downfall. Ironically, a more modest lock-barge canal would have been more expensive but also would have been less intrusive and less controversial.<sup>23</sup> For despite its proposed economic benefits, the audacious vision of the Ship Canal quickly gal-

20. Buckman, *Documentary History*, v; Brehon Sumervell, "Atlantic-Gulf Ship Canal," *Military Engineer* (May-June 1936), in Buckman, ed., *Documentary History*, 411-12; "Work on Canal Across Florida to Start Immediately," *Engineering News-Record*, 12 September 1935, 376.
21. William G. Grove, "Some of the Bridge Problems in Connection with the Atlantic-Gulf Canal," *Florida Engineering Society Bulletin* 11 (August 1936): 11.
22. Sumervell, "Atlantic-Gulf Ship Canal," 409-12; "Beginning the Florida Canal," *Engineering News-Record*, 2 April 1936, 480.
23. Congress, House, *Atlantic-Gulf Ship Canal*, 2, 8.



1935 Army Corps of Engineers plan for the Atlantic Gulf Ship Canal illustrating the economic expectations for the completed canal. *Courtesy of Department of Archives and Special Collections, Olin Library, Rollins College, Winter Park, Fla.*

vanized a backlash opposed to the potential salt-water intrusion into the state's water supply, threatening both the life and livelihood of all Floridians.

While critics began thinking through the implications of Roosevelt's decision, the Army Corps of Engineers—even before the official groundbreaking—was hard at work to complete the project. Appointed as head of the project, Lieutenant Colonel Brehon B. Somervell proved to be an eager taskmaster. An ambitious officer whose later career included building the Pentagon and playing a key role in the Manhattan Project, Somervell arrived in Ocala on September 6 and announced that he would employ four shifts to work day and night.<sup>24</sup> Acutely aware that a *fait accompli* was perhaps the best argument to secure more governmental funding, Somervell proclaimed, “we are going to push the canal right along as long as the money holds out. It's up to the other fellows to provide us with additional funds.”<sup>25</sup>

Somervell and the Corps had to act fast, for the Ship Canal was far more than a single public works project; it was an opportunity to fulfill a larger institutional imperative that saw the canal as only part, though a crucial one, of a vast waterways project involving numerous rivers and large expenditures of money. Rivers were not distinct entities but potential networks for a wide-ranging inland waterway system connecting the Mississippi River to the entire east coast. When completed, the Florida Ship Canal would be part of what the Corps consistently called “The Missing Link,” the final connection between the Midwest and the Atlantic coastline.<sup>26</sup> Fueled by the Corps's historic mission to facilitate internal improvements and helped by a federal government committed to public works projects to relieve unemployment, such large-scale water projects as the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Grand Coulee and Hoover Dams, and the Atlantic Gulf Ship Canal were situated for success in the 1930s.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, given those conditions, it is striking that the Atlantic Gulf Ship Canal was *not* completed, which underscores the importance of both local and national politics to the project's fate.

24. Barber, “History of the Florida Cross-State Canal,” 165.

25. *Ocala Evening Star*, 5 September 1935, 3.

26. Address by Walter F. Coachman Jr. before the National Rivers and Harbors Congress, 9 December 1931, in Buckman, ed., *Documentary History*, 25; Sumervell, “Atlantic-Gulf Ship Canal,” 413-15.

27. David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York, 1999), 146-49.

In the shadow of an impending debate about the efficacy of the canal, construction started at 6:00 am on September 6, 1935 as thirty men began building a camp to house engineers and workers. Located about two miles south of Ocala on Highway 441, Camp Roosevelt consisted of “quarters for officers and barracks for enlisted men and laborers, complete with canteens, mess-halls, and all the other appurtenances of an army post, including guard-house.”<sup>28</sup> Initial plans called for an elaborate complex that included a school, hospital, baseball diamond and other recreational facilities, as well as community gardens. Such amenities remained on the back burner, however, as the Corps scrambled to establish a base of operations. Within three weeks, the Corps had employed more than three thousand men to build the main camp and portable bunkhouse sections that were later established as six clearing camps along the canal right-of-way. Within ten weeks much of the infrastructure was in place, and the Corps turned its attention to the rest of the project.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to commencing construction of Camp Roosevelt, workers immediately began clearing underbrush along the canal right-of-way seven miles south of the city. The official ground-breaking was held on September 19, as Franklin Roosevelt, through a telegraph link at his Hyde Park estate, set off fifty pounds of dynamite to inaugurate the project. With stores and schools officially closed by noon, several thousand enthusiastic supporters gathered at the sight of the blast to hear prominent Floridians extol the virtues of the project. Among them was Ocala newspaperman “Bert” Dosh, who saw the moment as the fulfillment of a dream to make his inland town a bustling port city from which “a vast part of the water commerce of the world will move. . . . Ocala will be at the connecting crossway of the inland water courses of America.”<sup>30</sup> Senator Duncan Fletcher, credited with securing the funds for the project, gave the principal address, claiming the enterprise would “make the Gulf of Mexico the Mediterranean of the western world. It will be an improvement for

28. Frank Parker Stockbridge and John Holliday Perry, *So This is Florida* (Jacksonville, Fla., 1938), 191.

29. Sumervell, “Atlantic-Gulf Ship Canal,” 413.

30. *Ocala Star Banner*, 5 May 1996, 12; Barber, “History of the Florida Cross-State Canal,” 169-70.

all the country. It will bring prosperity to Florida."<sup>31</sup> While the ceremony proved to be an auspicious start for the canal, those persons suspicious of omens had good reason to feel ill at ease. Unable to keep an eye on the clock, the long-winded Fletcher found his speech interrupted by a deafening blast as Roosevelt precisely triggered an explosion at 1:00 pm. The disruption halted the ceremony as thousands began to scream and blow their car horns, rushing to the site of the new ten-foot crater.<sup>32</sup> In spite of the blunder, boosters were confident that they were on their way to building "one of the wonders of the world."<sup>33</sup>

Following the groundbreaking, work began in both clearing the land and excavating the canal. Crews of 80 to 120 men removed timber and underbrush by hand for eventual excavation. While project managers established portable camps from Palatka to Dunnellon, much of the work centered on nearly five thousand acres of land between the Ocklawaha and the Withlacoochee. Other workers followed land clearers, excavating the canal. Earth removal, again, concentrated on the central section crossing the Central Florida Ridge.<sup>34</sup> Given the work-relief requirements of a WPA project, the Corps's excavation procedures mixed modern technology and old-fashioned muscle: "Working alongside the modern, powerful excavating machines were men loading trucks with shovels and mule teams dragging old-fashioned scrapers. Huge tractor-scrappers, draglines, belt conveyers, tractor-hauled wagons, and trucks all played a major role in the excavation process, but always there were scores of men chopping and digging with shovels and trimming the slopes of the canal by hand."<sup>35</sup> The use of relief workers came at a cost, however, as significant turnover resulted from "many of the relief laborers . . . lacking in physical stamina."<sup>36</sup> Despite the preference for men over machines, the Corps made considerable progress by mid-1936, excavating nearly ten miles of land across the Central Florida Ridge with no cuts into the underlying limestone.<sup>37</sup>

31. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 20 September 1935, 1.

32. *Ibid.*; *Ocala Star Banner*, 5 May 1936, 12.

33. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 20 September 1935, 6.

34. Barber, "History of the Florida Cross-State Canal," 168.

35. *Ibid.*, 171; *Engineering News-Record*, 2 April 1936, 479.

36. *Engineering News-Record*, 2 April 1936, 483.

37. Barber, "History of the Florida Cross-State Canal," 170-72.

Canal construction, of course, brought a sudden burst of prosperity to Ocala as “money [was] easier to get and business generally [was] better.”<sup>38</sup> Recruited from Florida’s relief roles, more than six thousand men—far fewer than the twenty thousand the Corps had envisioned for completion of the project—had been put to work by mid-1936. By Depression standards, pay was good, with workers making thirty cents an hour. Laboring only six days a week in six-hour shifts, the men cleared \$10.80 weekly. With deductions for camp meals at fifty cents a day, workers brought home \$7.80, enough to live on and spend freely in Ocala’s burgeoning entertainment district.<sup>39</sup> New restaurants, hotels, and theaters opened as business increased between 25 to 50 percent. Native Ocalans recognized the economic importance of the project and conveniently looked the other way as bars and slot machines proliferated in their community. In one county meeting, ten applications for liquor licenses appeared on the agenda.<sup>40</sup> While Ocala boomed, however, officials of other Florida cities publicly complained that the ship canal drained labor from their municipalities. Within the county itself, farmers and employers complained about hired labor, especially African Americans, being siphoned off by the project’s lure of higher wages and shorter hours. One crate mill, for example, had to close operations because of the sudden labor shortage.<sup>41</sup> Despite this and other problems, Ocala gladly accepted the workers and the economic boost they provided.

With the advent of construction, the Ocala area soon filled with more than nine thousand new residents, including “itinerant peddlers, preachers, medicine men, sooth-sayers, beggars, acrobats, and musicians” who crowded into “large and small side shows and tent meetings” in efforts to cash in on the project.<sup>42</sup> In spite of the carnival atmosphere of Ocala and Camp Roosevelt, few major disturbances occurred. Vagrancy became a considerable

38. *New York Times*, 24 November 1935, 10.

39. Barber, “History of the Florida Cross-State Canal,” 171.

40. Kenneth Van der Hulse, “A Report on Conditions in Marion County Resulting from the Gulf-Atlantic Ship Canal Project,” 3, Box 30, Florida Ship Canal Papers, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville; Benjamin F. Rogers, “The Florida Ship Canal Project,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 36 (July 1959): 15-16.

41. Van der Hulse, “Report on Conditions in Marion County,” 4.

42. *Ibid.*, 1, 4.

problem as transients, arriving with little or no money, put pressure on local relief rolls. Anticipating only seventy-five cases per month, the Salvation Army reported it actually provided lodging for an average of 416 cases per month. Fighting, public drunkenness, and petty larceny were commonplace enough that the Marion County sheriff's office tripled its workload since canal construction started.

Local city and county law enforcement officials expanded forces, and the Army Corps of Engineers hired four officers, deputized by the county, to maintain order in the camp. In addition to guarding against illegal gambling, which proved difficult to prevent, camp patrols kept an eye out for confidence men on the prowl for easy marks among the workers. With so many laborers, prostitution became a perennial problem. "Questionable women" routinely drove to temporary camps looking for "prospects for their trade." African American prostitutes often lingered in nearby woods without fear of arrest "so long as they do not bring any liquor with them." While not legally sanctioned, prostitution was tacitly approved as community officials encouraged a local doctor to combat venereal disease at an established "disorderly house."<sup>43</sup>

While local officials and camp administrators overlooked minor legal transgressions, they could not ignore signs of what they considered a far greater source of disorder: union organization. Officials thought that since workers were well compensated for their labor, especially in the Depression-era South, labor advocates were troublesome intruders. Union organizers raised the specter of strikes and other labor unrest that jeopardized timely completion of the project. In March 1936, thirty-year-old St. Augustine bricklayer George Timmerman was found "nailed to a cross, in a heavily wooded section near [Camp Roosevelt] . . . his lips were sewn shut and a heavy hunting coat was tied over his head to muffle his groans. . . . Officers said he had been engaged in labor difficulties on the cross-state canal."<sup>44</sup> Instead of investigating the incident, local law enforcement officials blamed Timmerman himself, claiming that he had staged the fake crucifixion to gain publicity for an ostensible sideshow career.<sup>45</sup> Ocala Police Chief J.H. Spencer further accused Timmerman of "allow-

43. *Ibid.*, 5, 12.

44. *New York Times*, 19 March 1936, 3.

45. *The Ocala Banner*, 20 March 1936, 1.

ing himself to be nailed to the cross for communistic reasons."<sup>46</sup> After taking the man to the hospital for medical attention, officers forced him to immediately leave the area. Workers were now warned: labor organization would not be tolerated along the canal.

The threat of unionization represented only a minor irritant, however, as increasing statewide and national opposition provided a much more significant impediment to the canal's future. Locally, a loose coalition of railroad executives, citrus growers, central and south Florida shipping interests, and numerous municipalities raised a chorus of concern over the canal's long-term impact. Their efforts resembled a nascent environmental movement. While some of the anti-canal forces, particularly the railroads, clearly pursued self-interest, the opposition's objections to some degree presaged questions later raised with the construction of the Cross-Florida Barge Canal in the 1960s. During the Depression, conflict over the canal was less a struggle of preserving Florida's environment than conserving a precious natural resource: fresh water. Without it, the Sunshine State's preeminent industries—agriculture and tourism—would eventually come to ruin.

Criticism of the Ship Canal began long before its groundbreaking as a group of railway executives, in a Jacksonville hearing before the Army's special board of engineers in February 1933, leveled charges that a proposed canal would destroy the Florida aquifer.<sup>47</sup> Canal excavation, they asserted, "may have a very decided effect on the underground flow in the Ocala limestone, and on the wells and water supply remote from the canal, and on the Silver Springs Run, as well as many of the streams that come to the surface" in central Florida.<sup>48</sup> This assertion gained further credence with the release of a U.S. Geological Survey report in late August 1935. According to Harry Slattery, Personal Assistant to the Secretary of the Interior, the deep cut of the Ship Canal, "unless it could be effectively sealed throughout many miles of its course, a procedure presenting difficulties that appear to be practically insurmountable," would "inevitably drain enormous quantities of

46. *New York Times*, 19 March 1936, 3.

47. Barber, "History of the Florida Cross-State Canal," 159-62; Report of Proceedings of Hearings Held in Jacksonville, Florida by the Special Board of Army Engineers, 10 February 1933, in Buckman, ed., *Documentary History*, 70-80.

48. *Ibid.*, 74.



water from the limestone” and thus significantly lower the area’s water table. More important, the sudden loss of fresh water would allow salt water to rise and seep into the limestone, eventually contaminating the remaining deposits of fresh water, consequently corrupting underground water supplies along the immediate route and across “a wide zone extending outward from the canal.”<sup>49</sup>

By the end of summer 1935, as boosters from such north Florida cities as Jacksonville, Palatka, and Ocala seemed to be securing Roosevelt’s support for the canal, opposition from the central and southern parts of the state began an organized campaign to halt proposed construction.<sup>50</sup> Battle lines hardened as the issue pitted Floridians against each other. The Hillsborough Board of County Commissioners best summarized the opposition’s argument: “Incited by selfish interests and from a purely mercenary motive, an effort is now being made, through the construction of a cross-state canal, to mar and at least in part to destroy” the region’s “beauty, fertility, and health.”<sup>51</sup> Growers saw the project as a direct threat to their livelihood. The editor of the *Florida Grower* declared in June 1935, “in its pollution of our fresh waters, it would be a greater calamity than any freeze or hurricane which has come to this State.” Indeed, the opposition portrayed the Ship Canal as evil incarnate. For if Mephistopheles himself “wanted to make Florida a part of the kingdom of the devil and to visit some cruel and lasting punishment upon its people,” he would build a “big ditch” and poison the waters to leave rotting “oranges and carcasses on the parched sands of an empire once abundant in plant and animal life.”<sup>52</sup> Fearing lost water supplies as well as tourism and trade, Tampa, St. Petersburg, and Miami joined the protest.<sup>53</sup>

The Army Corps of Engineers soon countered critics with the appointment of a special board of geologists and engineers to

49. Communication from Harry Slattery, Personal Assistant to the Secretary of the Interior, to Representative J. Hardin Peterson, in Buckman, ed., *Documentary History*, 154.

50. Blake, *Land into Water—Water into Land*, 155-57.

51. Resolution by the Board of County Commissioners, Hillsborough County, 24 June 1935, in Buckman, ed., *Documentary History*, 149.

52. Address by Marvin H. Walker, editor of the *Florida Grower*, The Stygian Canal, at Winter Haven, 12 June 1935, in Buckman, ed., *Documentary History*, 144, 148.

53. *New York Times*, 20 October 1935, 10(e); Blake, *Land into Water—Water into Land*, 156; Barber, “History of the Florida Cross-State Canal,” 162-64.

further study the issue of Florida's water supply. In December 1935, geologists issued a preliminary report arguing the project's potential damage was negligible. Of the 195 miles of canal, only 27 miles of the cut—roughly 14 percent of the project—would have any “appreciable effect on the level of the ground-water table” and this would affect only the local area. While shallow wells had to be deepened along the right-of-way between Ocala and Dunnellon, the report claimed local agriculture and area vegetation would not be injured. With regard to the concerns of local officials in Tampa, St. Petersburg, Orlando, Sanford, Palm Beach, and Miami, the canal would have no impact on their water supplies whatsoever. Finally, while salt-water encroachment would take place at both ends of the peninsula, it would not pose a direct threat to the underground reservoir of the Florida aquifer.<sup>54</sup>

The assurances and authoritative tone of the report did little, however, to assuage growing concerns of canal critics. With construction well underway by late 1935, the opposition became so strident that many citizens increasingly feared that the Ship Canal's completion would cut the peninsula in half and reduce southern Florida “to the status of an island.”<sup>55</sup> Taking issue with the Corps's report, one geologist complained to Harold Ickes that, in addition to the prohibitive costs, the federal government should not experiment with the state's water table. Drawing a comparison with another New Deal program, the Agricultural Adjustment Act, he remarked that “if killing pigs or plowing up every third row of cotton proves detrimental, the mistake can be corrected the next year.” Damage caused by the Ship Canal, though, would be “irrevocable and there is no way in which atonement can be made.”<sup>56</sup> One observer remarked how the tension between canal supporters in the north and critics from the more populous south was “splitting the people of the state wide open.” Likening the project to “pure dynamite from a dozen angles,” it became “the hottest brick

54. “Report of the Special Board of Geologists and Engineers Appointed by the District Engineer of Ocala, Florida,” December 18, 1935, in Buckman, ed., *Documentary History*, 159-60; *New York Times*, 27 December 1935, 6.

55. “Report of Proceedings of Hearings Held in Jacksonville, Florida by the Special Board of Army Engineers,” 10 February 1933, in Buckman, ed., *Documentary History*, 72.

56. L.H.H. Calhoun to Harold Ickes, 17 September 1935, Box 635, folder “Florida Ship Canal—1935,” Roosevelt Papers.

anyone ever picked up and if we don't have a civil war in Florida with secession of the Florida peninsula there'll be a trick in it."<sup>57</sup>

Sensing growing resistance from across the state, as well as in the halls of Congress, Roosevelt cautiously backed away from the project by year's end. As initial funding rapidly dwindled within months of the groundbreaking, Duncan Fletcher pressed the president for an additional outlay of \$20 million to expedite construction.<sup>58</sup> While Roosevelt had assured more funding would soon be available, by mid-December he stipulated that further support for such a major public works project—unlike the original grant that came directly from the executive branch's general relief fund—would have to come from "some kind of Congressional sanction."<sup>59</sup> According to Ickes, who staunchly opposed the project, Roosevelt's decision was less a matter of deference than serious doubts "about the practicability of the canal." Unwilling to waste political capital over an increasingly controversial issue, the president withdrew his leadership on the project and opted to "let Congress handle the whole thing."<sup>60</sup> The administration did request more funding for the next fiscal year in the War Department's appropriations for rivers and harbors projects. However, canal boosters had to secure future support from an increasingly skeptical legislature.<sup>61</sup>

As Floridians remained profoundly divided over the supposed threat to the Sunshine State's water supply, opposition on the national level centered on the canal as a stunning example of pork-barrel politics. Led by Republican Senator Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan, canal critics viewed the project as "utterly without economic justification" and, perhaps more irritating, "built solely by Executive Decree."<sup>62</sup> The latter point was hardly rhetorical, for Vandenberg saw the canal as a constitutional issue concerning the "very process of orderly government." To him, Roosevelt's initial support under the Emergency Relief

57. Dudley V. Haddock to unknown, 21 September 1935, Box 635, folder "Florida Ship Canal—1935," Roosevelt Papers.

58. *New York Times*, 25 October 1935, 44, and 8 December 1935, 43; Barber, "History of the Florida Cross-State Canal," 183-84.

59. *New York Times*, 18 December 1935, 25.

60. Harold L. Ickes, *The First Thousand Days, 1933-1936*, vol. 1, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes* (New York, 1953), 488-89.

61. Barber, "History of the Florida Cross-State Canal," 184-85.

62. Arthur Vandenberg to Richard H. Mahard, 28 January 1936, Box 2, Arthur Vandenberg Papers, Bentley Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Appropriation Act was a dangerous precedent, not only bypassing Congressional authority, but in so doing committing the “treasury to vast long-time public works” that would transfer “the control of the purse from the Capitol to the White House.”<sup>63</sup> Moreover, what began as a \$5 million appropriation was only the first installment of what would become a massive drain on the federal coffers. While the canal’s estimated cost was roughly \$146 million, Vandenberg claimed it could increase to well over \$200 million before completion.<sup>64</sup>

The canal debate shifted toward Washington when, in early January 1936, Vandenberg introduced a resolution calling for a full investigation of the project.<sup>65</sup> The result was more than a partisan attack on what seemed to be another example of government waste and New Deal profligacy. Through a series of subcommittee hearings, Vandenberg raised doubts about the canal, questioning the legitimacy of the project’s authorization as well as the safety of the state’s water supply. Moreover, he asserted the savings in time and travel costs were marginal at best, providing letters from leading shippers who claimed they would not even use the waterway for “risk of collision and grounding that would be taken in navigating the canal.”<sup>66</sup> Signs of declining support manifested on the other side of the Capitol as a subcommittee of the House Committee on Appropriations reviewed the issue as well. While not abandoning it entirely, House officials suspended canal appropriations, along with funding for four other New Deal water projects, until they had run the routine course of procedure for rivers and harbors projects.<sup>67</sup>

For months the fate of the canal was buffeted about as both houses of Congress debated a series of appropriations bills in the spring and summer of 1936. Canal boosters placed their faith

63. Arthur Vandenberg to Frank B. Shutts, 17 March 1936, Box 2, Vandenberg Papers.

64. Arthur Vandenberg to Sidney Story, 26 February 1936, Box 2, Vandenberg Papers.

65. Senate Resolution 210, 74th Cong., 2nd sess., Authorizing the Committee on Commerce to Investigate Certain Matters Relative to the Florida Ship Canal and the Establishment of Other Waterways, 6 January 1936, in Buckman, ed., *Documentary History*, 163.

66. Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Commerce, United States Senate (74th Cong., 2nd sess.), on Senate Resolution 210, in Buckman, ed., *Documentary History*, 193-97.

67. Barber, “History of the Florida Cross-State Canal,” 187-89.

behind Duncan Fletcher in what soon became a legislative showdown over a \$20 million appropriations bill, \$12 million of which would go to the Ship Canal. On the floor of the Senate, Vandenberg traced the long lineage of the canal and its problems and warned that the issue was “not just a little innocent amendment involving \$20,000,000 . . . that is just the admission fee” for what would eventually cost taxpayers as much as \$200 million.<sup>68</sup> Pleading for support, Fletcher countered Vandenberg’s charges with oratory, asking if the Senate would dare oppose “a mighty stride of progress, the greatest undertaking in this generation on the part of this Government. Is it possible that Senators will block the way of the greatest accomplishment achieved by the Government in this century?”<sup>69</sup>

In March 1936, the answer was clearly “yes” as the Senate voted down Fletcher’s amendment in a narrow vote of thirty-six to thirty-five. The issue did not die, however, as Fletcher and other canal supporters relied upon a variety of parliamentary procedures to attach additional funding to a series of other legislative measures.<sup>70</sup> Vandenberg fought back, working closely with anti-canal forces in Florida to gather petitions and resolutions against the project. The Senator suggested that telegrams and letters of protest from “every Chamber of Commerce and every Luncheon Club and every available political organization and every Woman’s Club” would make for some fine ammunition in the struggle.<sup>71</sup> Regardless, pro-canal forces remained so persistent that, in the words of Frank Kay Anderson, President of the Central and South Florida Water Conservation Committee, the patience of agricultural interests “is wearing thin” after months of “trying to block the attempt to crowd the canal upon Florida regardless of the consequences.” Anderson threatened that unless the issue was quickly resolved, he would call a demonstration of “approximately 60,000 men, women, and children” at the canal’s construction site within

68. “War Department Appropriation Bill for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1937,” 74th Cong., 2nd sess., H.R. 11035, Amendment Proposed in the Senate by Senator Fletcher, *Congressional Record*, 16 March 1936, in Buckman, ed., *Documentary History*, 312.

69. *Congressional Record*, March 17, 1936, in Buckman, ed., *Documentary History*, 338.

70. Blake, *Land into Water—Water into Land*, 159-62; Barber, “History of the Florida Cross-State Canal,” 189-200.

71. Arthur Vandenberg to Edwin P. Thomas, 16 May 1936, Box 2, Vandenberg Papers.

forty-eight hours of “due notice from metropolitan newspapers, news agencies, and newsreels. There would be no arms and no violence, only friendliness and jocularity; but digging operations can be forced into suspension until troops are called out.”<sup>72</sup>

As the debate dragged on, Roosevelt sat on the sidelines. Facing an upcoming reelection, he sought to minimize his risks and avoid alienating more voters by letting the controversy run its course. At a news conference on April 15, he announced that he would not forward any relief funds until Congress resolved the issue. At the same time, Roosevelt offered canal supporters a thin reed of hope by vaguely suggesting that he would consider modified plans to further finance construction.<sup>73</sup> In the June session, however, the House rejected another Senate appropriation, ironically on the same day Duncan Fletcher died of a heart attack<sup>74</sup>

Without further funding, canal work halted in June of 1936. As workers went home, Ocala's boom ended. Only 3 percent of the project was complete, with only one-third of the estimated land clearing finished. For all the money and time expended in canal construction, the only visible reminders were four thousand acres of land cleared along the right-of-way, almost thirteen million cubic yards of excavated soil, and four concrete stanchions marking an incomplete highway bridge over a phantom waterway. As for the 97 buildings on the 215 acres of Camp Roosevelt, they became a school for another WPA program, the National Youth Administration.<sup>75</sup>

The defeat of 1936 did not halt the call for a canal, for the project's boosters continued to advocate their case throughout the federal bureaucracy for years to come. Indeed, just as opponents thought they were finally burying the canal, the Army Corps of Engineers, through the establishment of another special advisory board, initiated one of many other reevaluations of the project. Much like the nineteenth century, when one canal route survey continually followed another, the review of economic projections and construction costs—as well as further consideration of the

72. Frank Kay Anderson to Marvin H. McIntyre, 24 May 1936, Box 635, folder “Florida Ship Canal—1936,” Roosevelt Papers.

73. *New York Times*, 16 April 1936, 1; “Dam Ditched; Ditch Damned,” *Time* 27 (27 April 1936), 10.

74. Barber, “History of the Florida Cross-State Canal,” 199.

75. Congress, House, *Atlantic-Gulf Ship Canal*, 9; Blake, *Land into Water—Water into Land*, 161-62.

groundwater issue—went through several iterations between the interests of the Corps and the influence of Florida politicians involved in Congressional Rivers and Harbors subcommittees. While the costs, and even the depths, of the canal seemed to shift with each report, engineers concluded as early as 1937 that, though they supported the project, the supposed benefits of the Ship Canal would eventually decrease as the size and speed of ships continued to expand. Moreover, few imagined commerce would sufficiently increase to justify the expense of further construction.<sup>76</sup>

Such hedging, even with the dire conclusions regarding the efficacy of the project, did not deter pro-canal forces at either the state or national levels. Under the sheer weight of bureaucratic inertia, the Corps's own Chief of Engineers, for example, rejected the board's 1937 report and automatically called for further construction in the name of work relief and navigation improvement.<sup>77</sup> While the effort achieved no immediate signs of success, it kept the idea of the project alive. And by reopening the canal question, the Corps once again gave hope to boosters, which in turn guaranteed further discord that increasingly stiffened the determination of both sides of the canal issue. Over time such intransigence established a pattern of debate that would continue for nearly three generations as the initial groundbreaking of the Atlantic Gulf Ship Canal took on a life of its own to become the even more controversial Cross-Florida Barge Canal.

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76. Barber, "History of the Florida Cross-State Canal," 199-205.

77. *Ibid.*, 205.