

2020

The Cross-Florida Canal and the Politics of Interest-Group Democracy Caherine Prescott Lecture, 2008

Wayne Flynt



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.

Recommended Citation

Flynt, Wayne (2020) "The Cross-Florida Canal and the Politics of Interest-Group Democracy Caherine Prescott Lecture, 2008," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 87: No. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol87/iss1/3>

RECEIVED
UCF LIBRARY

SEP 29 2008

SERIALS

The Cross-Florida Canal and the Politics of Interest-Group Democracy

by Wayne Flynt

Polluted water. Hurricanes. Ship-wrecks. Drowning sailors. Land developers. Cheap transportation. U.S. presidents willing to invest federal funds in order to court Florida voters. Presidential advisors who attempt to clear the minefields of conflicting local interests in order to implement presidential policy. Public expectation that powerful congressional leaders will bring home the bacon. The ever escalating tension between economic developers/civic boosters on one hand and environmentalists on the other. Typical Florida boondoggles and screwups. If the cast of characters and issues sounds familiar, it is because few patterns of human conduct are entirely new, nor are our current debates entirely foreign to our collective history.

I could begin this story in the sixteenth, nineteenth, or twentieth centuries. Each point of origin conveys its own context and meaning. The argument for the sixteenth century is in some ways the simplest and purest. In the 1570s Pedro Menendez de Aviles, designated "Captain General of the West" by Spanish King Phillip II, thought a canal from the Gulf to the Atlantic would assist Spain's conquest of America. So in its earliest manifestation, the dream of a cross-Florida canal was a geo-strategic effort conceived amidst great power rivalries.

Wayne Flynt is Professor Emeritus in the Department of History at Auburn University. A Ph.D. from Florida State University, he is the author of many books on southern culture, religion and rural poverty. He is a past president of the Southern Historical Association.

[1]

Two and a half centuries later, the first Florida territorial governments considered canals the best solution to inland transportation problems. Navigating the Florida Straits was no simple matter. Sudden storms, barrier islands, reefs, and pirates played havoc with maritime routes along the Gulf of Mexico, in the waters off Cuba, and up the Atlantic coast. In 1822 Secretary of War John C. Calhoun dispatched army engineers to study the possibilities of building a canal between the Saint Marys and Suwannee Rivers. Congress authorized such a survey in March 1826, and Brigadier General Simon Bernard (once Napoleon's principal military engineer) completed the project in 1829. He concluded that the idea was flawed because Florida's west coast had no deep water harbor between Tampa and Apalachee Bay. His report did suggest an alternative route from the Saint Johns River via Black Creek to the Santa Fe, thence to St. Marks. This vision of a cross-Florida canal captured the imagination of prominent planters, businessmen, and politicians. In fact, it may have been the first sustained development scheme in Florida history, enlisting many of the state's movers and shakers on various canal boards. At a cost of only \$10,400 for the survey, Congress survived this first contagion of canal fever on the cheap, which was a good thing since railroad mania soon eclipsed canal building as the crusade du jour.¹

Over the next century, the envisioned route for a cross-Florida canal remained a land of primitive grandeur, Florida as the Seminoles had first beheld it. Northerners also came to treasure the terrain between the St. Johns and Ocklawaha Rivers as a welcome relief from northeastern congestion and rapacious development. A Vermonter, Hubbard Hart, came South before the Civil War and following the conflict, was instrumental in developing tourism on the majestic, meandering, tree-canopied Ocklawaha (1870s-1920s). Boats transported northern tourists as well as commerce and rafts of cypress logs across these remote inland waters. In 1878 entrepreneur Hullam Jones built a glass viewing box on the bottom of a dugout canoe and allowed Ocklawaha tourists to glide over the clear waters of Silver Springs located at the end of the river.

At first, natural beauty was its own reward. But the emergence of a Barnum and Bailey world required something perpetually new. And the zany 1920s required ever greater exertions to maintain

1. Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), pp. 34-38, 142.

interest in canal country. Silver Springs added to its glass-bottomed boats a man who milked rattlesnakes, plus monkeys, a trolley, and a deer ranch which featured a section inexplicably called "Santa's South Pole." Johnny Weismuller made Tarzan movies, and in time pretty girls in swimsuits skied across the pristine waters of the Spring. Palatka, an old St. Johns River town, could not be content with one title. So claimed three: the "Gem City of the St. Johns"; the "Bass Capital of the World"; and the "Official Mural City of North East Florida" (actually there wasn't much competition for the latter title).

Yankeetown on the western end of the future canal began with the immigration of folks from Indiana who named their settlement Knotts, after themselves. But the local mail carrier, an unreconstructed Confederate still smarting over the outcome of the Civil War, preferred to designate the place by the origin of the newcomers rather than by their family name, insisting on calling it Yankeetown. The Hoosiers retaliated later by calling one of the town's subdivisions "crackertown."

Inglis, at the far Gulf end of the canal route on State Road 40, later became famous when Elvis Presley made a movie in the vicinity. A mayor some years afterwards also banned Satan from the city limits, although it is uncertain whether or not the presence of Satan was a residual effect of the hip-twisting popular music icon. Enshrining both the celluloid dreams of Hollywood and the enduring vision of cross-Florida canal enthusiasts, a stretch of State Road 40 was named "Follow That Dream Parkway."²

If all this sounds a bit theatrical, remember that marketing Florida had become the consuming passion of many boosters by the 1920s. The canal idea was resurrected in the frenzied context of George Merrick, who built Coral Gables and the American Riviera, where real estate agents promoted "Manhattan Estates" near "the prosperous and fast-growing city of Nettie," which turned out for buyers wary enough to investigate before signing a check to be an abandoned turpentine camp.

2. For a clever spoof of "canal land" U.S.A., see Diane Roberts, "A boondoggle's wake," *The St. Petersburg Times*, January 11, 2004. For excellent studies of the canal, see Sally Rowe Middleton, "Cutting Through Paradise: A Political History of the Cross-Florida Barge Canal," Ph.D. dissertation, Florida International University, 2001; and the forthcoming book from the University of Florida Press by Steven Noll and David Tegeder, *Ditch of Dreams: The Cross-Florida Barge Canal and the Fight for Florida's Future*.

As marketing abuses became better known in the Northeast, an active anti-Florida press developed, and Gov. John W. Martin led a contingent of state business leaders to New York City's Waldorf Astoria Hotel in 1926 for a "Truth About Florida" meeting.

Unfortunately, not all the anti-Florida stories were untruthful. Overbuilt, underfunded, over-promoted, and uncritical, the "Florida boom" collapsed in 1926 like the proverbial stack of cards. During July 1926, 117 banks in Florida and Georgia failed; 150 closed their doors by end of year. Between 1926 and 1929 Florida bank assets declined by sixty percent. The banking collapse devastated the state's economy and plunged Florida into depression.

As if in divine retribution for the prefabrication, hyperbole, exaggeration, and outright lies of its promoters, a fierce hurricane struck Miami on September 19, 1926 (the first major direct hit on the peninsula since 1910). What warnings newcomers received, they largely ignored, with the result that nearly 400 died, 6,300 were injured, and nearly 18,000 families lost their homes. Two years later, on the night of September 16, another hurricane with gusts up to 130 miles an hour plowed into Palm Beach before moving inland, killing as many as 3,000 mainly black workers engaged in seasonal labor along Lake Okeechobee (an event that became the climactic setting for Zora Neale Hurston's searing novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*). By November 1933, 85,000 Floridians were hunting work.³

If you travel to Hyde Park, New York, you can read about those years that the locusts claimed in the clergy files at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library. Responding to a September 1935 invitation from the president asking them to describe conditions in Florida at the time, ministers related a tale of human tragedy and woe that was Jobian in scale. The pastor of Live Oak Presbyterian Church described the terrible suffering among Suwannee County sharecroppers. A Methodist minister in Madison, whose circuit consisted mainly of poor people, complained that many of the hardest hit could obtain no help from New Deal agencies. Many clergymen praised the Townsend Plan for old age pensions while criticizing the New Deal from left of center, arguing that Roosevelt had done little to mitigate the effects of the Depression.⁴

3. Tebeau, pp. 386-388.

4. Rev. Laurence Williams to FDR, October 21, 1935; Rev. D.L. Jones to FDR, October 9, 1935; Box 6, PPF 21A, Florida, Clergy Letters, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and Archives, Hyde Park, New York. These are represen-

Stung by such criticisms and fearing a full scale revolt against him in the fall of 1936 led by Louisiana's demagogic U.S. Senator Huey Long, Roosevelt scurried to shore up his left flank.

Implementing the so-called Second New Deal, Roosevelt moved quickly toward three main goals: improved economic opportunity through the better use of national resources; security against unemployment, old age, illness, and dependency; and slum clearance and improved housing. A flurry of New Deal legislation gave shape to these objectives, including transformation of the Civil Works Emergency Relief Act into the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

In Florida's senior U.S. Senator Duncan U. Fletcher, Roosevelt found a faithful ally to implement his agenda. Having always tacked his sails to the prevailing winds of Florida politics, Fletcher had first risen to prominence as part of Napoleon Bonaparte Broward's progressive Democratic faction in Jacksonville. But after his election to the U.S. Senate in 1908, he followed Florida's political currents to the right during the teens and early 1920s. Then the state's economic collapse sent him moving back in the direction of his origins. Roosevelt carefully cultivated Fletcher in the runup to the 1932 presidential election, with the result that Fletcher broke with conservative Florida Democrats desperately seeking an alternative to the liberal New York governor. The newly elected president summoned Fletcher to a conference in January 1933 and persuaded him to forego the chairmanship of the Senate Commerce Committee in favor of a similar post as head of the powerful Senate Banking and Currency Committee. Already planning an assault on Wall Street and America's banking industry that would eventuate in the most sweeping financial reforms in U.S. history — the Banking Act of 1933, the Securities Act of 1934 ("Truth in Securities" Act); the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 ("Fletcher-Rayburn Act"); the Public Utility Holding Company Act of 1935; the Banking Act of 1935 — Roosevelt needed the services of the shrewd, meticulous Floridian in order to outmaneuver conservative Virginia Senator Carter Glass and insure a majority on the committee favorable to the president.

tative of dozens of other letters (see especially letters critical of the New Deal for doing too little from Rev. H.W. Blackshear of Ocala, October 19, 1935; Rev. T.O. Barber of Fletcher, October 9, 1935; Rev. W.C. Sale of Jacksonville, September 27, 1935; Rev. L.R. Anderson of Crystal River, October 7, 1935; Rev. L.M. Reid of Waukeenan, September 30, 1935; *op.cit.*)

If Fletcher had something the president needed, the president was in a position to reciprocate. Through the WPA and other relief agencies, Roosevelt could put tens of thousands of Floridians to work. And Fletcher had just the project in mind on which to employ them.

Since early in his senatorial career, Fletcher had been a proponent of a cross-Florida ship canal. Jacksonville area businessmen, farmers, and civic boosters had long claimed that water transportation permitted cheaper movement of projects than did monopolistic railroads. The Mississippi to Atlantic Inland Waterway Association had met at Columbus, Georgia in 1908, the year Fletcher was elected to the senate. Its leaders planned an inland route from the Mississippi River to the mouth of the Appalachian River, thence east across the peninsula to Jacksonville. Delegates elected Fletcher president of the Association, and he responded to the honor with a substantial donation to the cause. Fletcher envisioned the canal as a way to shave 1,000 miles off U.S.-Latin American trade routes, opening lucrative markets by reducing transportation costs.⁵ A 107 mile long, 30 foot deep ship canal for ocean-going vessels would make Ocala the largest inland port in America. The canal he envisioned would be twice as large as the Suez and four times larger than the Panama Canal.

During his long career, no U.S. senator was more effective in passing local river and harbor bills than Fletcher. Florida possessed the nation's longest coast line, and most of its population lived in Atlantic or Gulf port cities or along inland rivers. Fletcher thoroughly understood the possibilities that this fortuitous geography afforded him. During the Sixty-Second Congress, he guided through two million dollars for Florida projects; the March 1913 Rivers and Harbors Bill contained \$800,000 for work on the St. Johns, Indian, Crystal, Withlacoochee, Caloosahatchee, and Boca Grande Rivers, as well as expenditures for harbors in Key West, Sarasota, and Tampa. Before facing reelection in 1914, Fletcher won an appropriation of \$730,000 for a trans-Florida canal.⁶

Shortly after FDR took office in March 1933, water projects also played a pivotal role in Florida's bitter 1934 senatorial primary

5. D.U. Fletcher to N.B. Broward, September 14, 1909; pamphlet in Napoleon B. Broward Papers, P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida.

6. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, March 3, 1913.

between challenger Claude Pepper and incumbent Park Trammell. Jacksonville's boosters pushed both aspirants to endorse the cross-Florida canal. When Trammell hesitated, they endorsed Pepper. Fletcher, who never cared much for Trammell personally or worked closely with him in the senate, assured Pepper of his neutrality in the race, assurance that Pepper used to good effect in order to undermine Trammell. So concerned did Trammell's organized labor backers become that they lobbied Fletcher furiously to endorse his junior colleague. Fletcher reluctantly responded with an innocuous endorsement hedged with qualifications and urging Florida voters to decide for themselves whom to support.⁷ However tepid and unenthusiastic his endorsement, it probably made the difference in Trammell's paper-thin 4,000 vote victory margin.

Obsessed with putting people to work, Fletcher countered a gradual reduction in New Deal relief jobs by proposing a quasi-permanent Public Works Administration funded for five years at half-a-billion dollars, with the cross-Florida canal a major beneficiary of this federal largesse.

By 1933 the government had conducted no less than 28 engineering surveys of possible routes. But the Public Works Administration had rejected the proposed cost of the canal, which engineers estimated at \$208 million. Fletcher and his allies persuaded FDR to conduct one additional survey which miraculously reduced the estimated cost to a manageable \$146 million.⁸

If the first vision of a canal was born in global geo-political power struggles, the second in concern for the safety of mariners, ships, and their cargoes, and the third in civic boosterism / economic development, this newest attempt mainly involved Depression-era job creation. Ironically, the fateful decision finally to launch the canal project occurred at a time when train and truck transportation had largely eclipsed maritime commerce.

The president's decision, popular as it was with Fletcher and north Florida canal proponents, met withering criticism in both populous south Florida and Washington, D.C. The U.S. Geological Survey reported that a sea-level canal would create serious prob-

7. Eli Futch to Joe, June 11, 1934; R.L. Glenn to Duncan U. Fletcher, June 11, 1934, Park Trammell Papers, P.K. Yonge Library, *op.cit.*

8. Benjamin F. Rogers, "The Florida Ship Canal Project," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXXVI (July 1957), 14-23.

lems for south Florida's fresh water supply by cutting through the southern sloping aquifers. In late August, 1935, the Associated Citrus Growers and Shippers condemned the project. Roosevelt at first dismissed these objections and under prodding from Fletcher appropriated five million dollars of federal relief funds on August 30 to begin digging. Enthusiastic north Florida residents credited Fletcher with success when excavation began that September. Within months, an army of 6,000 workers assaulted the land, knocking down ancient live oaks, ripping out palmetto, displacing 16,000 cubic yards of soil, and clearing 4,000 acres.

Unfortunately for Fletcher, the state's most formidable canal foe resided in the U.S. Capital. Secretary of Interior Harold L. Ickes was a Pennsylvania-born progressive Republican who had entered national politics as a disciple of Theodore Roosevelt and the environmental-friendly Bull Moose Party. Disillusioned by the Republican administrations of the 1920s, Ickes cast his lot with FDR in 1932. During his term of office, Ickes not only sided frequently with environmentalists within Interior, he also filled one hundred volumes of closely typed copy — a total of approximately six million words — of a truly secret diary. Few knew of its existence and virtually no one saw other than selected entries. The diaries furnish an unparalleled, uncensored account of interior matters and debates within the New Deal comparable to a paper version of the infamous Nixon audio tapes.

One major index entry in the published diaries concerns the "trans-Florida canal." The first entry occurred on December 19, 1935, three and a half months after Roosevelt released relief money to begin construction. Convinced that Congress would make no additional significant appropriations to the WPA, Ickes informed the president that his greatest anxiety about relief projects concerned the Florida canal. Ickes noted in his diary that for the first time Roosevelt carefully listened to his objections, perhaps signaling that the president was having second thoughts. Ickes repeated the opposition of geologists that the canal might contaminate the state's fresh water supply. At the conclusion of the meeting, the president vowed to transfer the entire matter to Congress and let that body make the decision and take the heat.⁹

9. Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes: The First Thousand Days, 1933-1936* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953), pp. 488-489.

On a visit to Miami a month later, Ickes met with the owner of the *Miami Herald* who lobbied against the canal and announced that he planned to take his case to Washington. Conveying to Ickes that Floridians south of the canal bitterly opposed the project, he prodded the secretary to reveal that though he could not publicly oppose the canal because of Roosevelt's position, he privately agreed entirely with opponents. Another south Florida Democrat confided to New Deal administrator Steve Early that local party stalwarts were "sore as boiled owls."¹⁰

Three days later back in the capital, Ickes was cornered by Roosevelt about cost overruns on relief projects. Ickes confided that he always kept his "fingers crossed with respect to ...Army engineers" estimates, adding that he particularly doubted their computations on the Florida canal, which he described as "cockeyed."¹¹

On March 3, 1936, the president related to Ickes a "brainstorm" that he had worked out as a way to "let go of the bear's tail." Ickes congratulated Roosevelt on finally recognizing that the ship canal was a "bear's tail" and that he was willing to let it go. But the president clarified that he planned to build a barge canal with locks over the highest section of land that would otherwise require a deep cut. A disappointed Ickes cautioned the president not to commit to even this modification. Instead the president should suggest that building locks was merely a possibility based upon "a careful study of its geologic and economic effects." Ickes concluded his diary entries about the canal with a cryptic postscript: "This is certainly one bad mess that the President rushed into over my protests."¹²

The president, following up on his "brainstorm," wrote Fletcher that future action on the canal would have to originate in Congress. The senator tried unsuccessfully to reverse Roosevelt's decision or at least win his active support for a congressional appropriation. In February he warned that it would take Roosevelt's "every effort" to move the bill through Congress and predicted that without additional funds, 800 to 1,000 men would be laid off. Powerful Jacksonville Democrats contested the arguments of their south Florida counterparts, warning of a "very bad political effect"

10. *Ibid.*, p. 502; Dudley V. Haddock to Steve Early, February 14, 1936, OF 300, Roosevelt Papers.

11. Ickes, p. 514.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 541.

if the president deserted the canal project. Rumors even circulated in Florida that the president refused to confer with Fletcher about the canal. Under pressure from north Floridians, Fletcher, and even the liberal *New Republic*, which had endorsed the canal, Roosevelt wavered, allocating an additional \$200,000 from relief funds to extend the project temporarily. But he vowed to end canal work in the absence of congressional appropriations.¹³

Fletcher lumped a \$29 million canal appropriation with four other scattered waterway projects designed to cobble together a package with maximum political leverage. To make the case even stronger, he tied the package to the War Department's appropriations bill. Roosevelt — pressured on one side by Fletcher, north Florida Democrats, and Fletcher's southern congressional allies, and on the other side by Ickes, congressional Republicans, and south Florida Democrats — opted for caution. Refusing to intervene either way with proceedings, Roosevelt watched the subcommittee reject the canal bill by a 6 to 5 vote. Fletcher took his case to the full committee where he lost 12 to 11. Before the senate, the bill failed 39 to 34. Upon reconsideration, the bill lost again, 36 to 35 when critically ill Park Trammell could not attend (but for his 4,000 vote loss in 1934, Claude Pepper would no doubt have furnished the tying vote, which vice president John Nance Gardner probably would have broken in favor of the bill). Roosevelt, under unrelenting pressure from Fletcher, finally intervened in late May, pushing the measure through the senate 35 to 30.¹⁴

Neither Fletcher nor Trammell lived to see the canal project collapse. Exhausted by two years of nearly constant banking committee hearings, added to the enervating efforts necessary to keep the canal alive, Fletcher died of a heart attack on June 17, 1936, a month and nine days after the death of his colleague Park Trammell. The following day, June 18, the House of Representatives paid mock homage to the Florida senators by

13. *Memorandum*, January 1, 1936, PPF 1358, in Roosevelt Papers; Duncan U. Fletcher to Franklin D. Roosevelt, February 19, 1936 and December 23, 1935; *Memorandum* to James Farley from Harlee Branch, March 5, 1936, OF 635, in Roosevelt Papers; Harry Hopkins to Franklin D. Roosevelt, January 31, 1936; *Memorandum* for James A. Farley, March 20, 1936, OF 635, in Roosevelt Papers.

14. Duncan U. Fletcher to Franklin D. Roosevelt, February 27, 1936, OF 635; *Memorandum* from Marvin H. McIntyre, February 10, 1936, OF 635; in Roosevelt Papers.

killing the ship canal on a vote of 108 to 62. When the final merger relief funds were expended, work on the canal ceased.

In the final political analysis, job creation during the nation's worst depression served the canal's friends little better than had any of the earlier defenses of it. The powerful intervention of Senator Fletcher moved the canal further than ever before, but Ickes' opposition, Roosevelt's ambivalence, and the senator's mortality combined to defeat the effort. The decade of the 1930s ended as it had begun, with quiet tranquility along what was left of the pristine Ocklawaha.

Like the legendary phoenix, however, the canal refused to stay dead. In fact, it proved to have more lives — and its defenders more rationales — than a Jacksonville alley cat on steroids.

During the early to mid 1930s, three powerful elements had conspired to drive the canal forward: the predominant economic interests of some of the state's most powerful leaders; an influential politician with access to resources; and a responsive national administration. After 1936, this constellation of interests dissipated. Fletcher died. South Florida outstripped north Florida in population, economic clout, and political influence; after 1936 conservative Democrats allied with Republicans to checkmate the New Deal. Influential Michigan Republican Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg became an effective critic of New Deal waste and environmental destruction. In Florida, racial change during the 1960s and 1970s further divided the Democratic party and opened the way to major gains by Republicans. Whereas the Democratic party earlier had waged intramural war over the canal based on regional and economic differences, Republicans were free to troll in the vote-rich waters for new targets of opportunity upset by both Democratic positions on the canal: national party foot-dragging on one side and local environmental opposition on the other.

The beginning of the Second World War brought a brief renewal of interest in the canal, this time because of military and strategic concerns. German U-boats prowled Gulf and Atlantic waters searching for easy maritime targets. So in July 1942 Congress authorized construction of the Cross-Florida Barge Canal, though it appropriated no money to implement the project. A proposal to use locks and dams to prevent salt contamination of the water supply mitigated some south Florida opposition, but by the end of the war, the project remained pretty much where it had been at the end of 1936: unfunded and generally forgotten.

The cold war of the 1950s and 1960s with consequent development of the space program and its launching facilities at Cape Canaveral provided yet another rationale for canal construction. Rocket engine components departed Huntsville on barges that moved along the Tennessee River system to the Ohio, down the Mississippi to the Gulf, thence along the Gulf coast and around the Florida peninsula to the launch site. A cross-Florida canal could reduce the journey by hundreds of miles. By the 1960s, a friendly Democratic administration preoccupied with Florida's pivotal geographical position vis-a-vis Cuba occupied the White House. Once more a powerful Florida Democratic senator held court in Washington. President John F. Kennedy struck a deal with Senator George A. Smathers to renew canal construction. Privately, Kennedy considered the canal a piece of pork dangled before powerful Florida Democrats. Publicly he defended the project as a boost to the state's economy and the nation's defense.¹⁵

Problem was the Army Corps of Engineers' calculations challenged the canal's economic feasibility. This minor hitch was quickly overcome by yet another Corps recalculation which added the benefit of "land enhancement" to the economic value of the canal.¹⁶

With the problem of economic feasibility thus resolved, President Lyndon B. Johnson traveled to Palatka for the second groundbreaking in 1964. This one went better than the first had in 1935. A special remote hookup had allowed Roosevelt to explode the first charge of dynamite at the construction site. But Roosevelt hit the button prematurely, detonating the deafening explosion during a speech by the canal's most enthusiastic proponent. LBJ took no chances of a repeat, firing the charge on site and on cue (although preparations for the blast turned into theater when workers packed the explosion site with enough peat moss to create a satisfying spectacle for onlookers).

After a 30-year hiatus, contractors were now back at work creating mountainous piles of dirt as new machines called crusher-crawlers flattened thousands of cypress trees along the Ocklawaha. The new Rodman Dam slowly backed up the river into a sixteen mile long lake.

15. Craig Pittman, "Digging Ourselves into a Hole," *St. Petersburg Times*, October 31, 1999.

16. *Ibid.*

Destiny finally seemed to favor the builders, boosters, developers, power brokers, and pro-canal politicians. That is until the appearance of Marjorie Harris Carr, a housewife, environmental activist, and wife of field biologist Archie Carr of the University of Florida. Carr described her first trip on the Ocklawaha as a “dream-like” journey down a “canopy river,” “spring-fed and swift.” “Here, by God,” she vowed later, “was a piece of Florida, a lovely natural area right in my back yard, that was being threatened for no good reason.”¹⁷

In some respects Carr’s standing up that day was as significant to Florida’s modern environmental movement as Rosa Parks’ sitting down on a Montgomery bus was to Alabama’s modern Civil Rights Movement. Mobilized by Carr, environmental groups began to challenge canal construction. At first sneered at, snubbed, and largely ignored by state and federal officials, who accused them of blocking Florida’s economic development for the sake of worthless scrub and palmetto, they turned to the courts. In 1969 the Environmental Defense Fund joined others in filing suit in the U.S. Court for the District of Columbia seeking an injunction against construction of the canal. On January 15, 1971, the District Court granted a preliminary injunction halting further construction. Four days later, President Richard M. Nixon signed an executive order suspending further work on the barge canal, effectively ending the project.

This last phase in the slow demise of the canal involved a Nixonian equivalent to Harold Ickes. Russell E. Train, a presidential aide, examined a number of Corps of Engineers projects and found many of them flawed by high construction costs and adverse environmental effects. As a result, Train recommended freezing funding for the canal. The Corps and the entire Florida congressional delegation opposed Train’s recommendation.

But Republican Governor Claude R. Kirk, Jr. supported Train. Engaged in nearly daily battles with his all-Democratic cabinet and a majority Democratic legislature, Kirk used unconventional strategy to keep his opponents off balance.¹⁸ One example of his maverick streak involved his environmental interests. Although from Jacksonville, he connected not to that city’s historic interest groups that favored the canal but to the city’s growing conservatism, both

17. *Ibid.*

18. Tebeau, p. 447.

racial and political, in which ideology trumped pork. Whether opportunistically sensing the growing grassroots support for Marjorie Carr and her environmental crusade, or a convert to it himself, Kirk made clear to President Nixon how he felt about the canal. Among Democrats, Lawton M. Chiles, Jr. spread discontent with the canal during his 1970 senatorial walking tour across Florida.

Meanwhile, Marjorie Carr's relentless campaign gained traction. The same year that Kirk and Chiles mobilized opposition among Florida voters, *Reader's Digest* reached a broader audience with a negative essay about the canal. Even *Sports Illustrated* published an article trashing the project.

Perhaps President Nixon should be given no more credit for opposition to the canal than FDR should be given blame for his support. As with Roosevelt, Nixon's position reflected more concern about the convoluted terrain of American politics than the undulating course of the Ocklawaha. Four months after his passionate defense of Florida's "natural treasure" (the Ocklawaha, which, incidentally, was misspelled in his statement), Nixon dedicated the Tenn-Tom Canal, on the Tombigbee River between Alabama and Mississippi.¹⁹ That project, sponsored by Alabama Congressman Tom Bevill, the pork king of another era of American politics and a powerful committee chairman of a still Democratic House of Representatives, involved many of the same issues as the Florida canal, cost much more to build than Corps of Engineer estimates, and never realized the predicted traffic or revenue.

When halted, the trans-Florida canal was one-third complete and had cost taxpayers \$74 million.

In May 1990 U.S. Senators Bob Graham and Connie Mack — one a Democrat, the other a Republican — filed a bill providing for a 300 yard wide greenway corridor to be maintained along the former barge route. Demonstrating the shifting sands of maritime politics, the Florida congressional delegation this time unanimously endorsed the bill. The Florida legislature confirmed this Congressional decision on May 31 of that year. On November 28 President George Bush signed a law deauthorizing the cross-Florida canal and changing the nature of the now half-century-long project

19. For Nixon's cancellation statement, see "Statement About Halting Construction of the Cross Florida Barge Canal," January 19, 1971, The American Presidency Project.

to recreation and conservation. Florida's governor concurred on January 22, 1991. To complete the ironic transformation of the "Big Ditch," the Cross Florida Greenway was officially renamed the Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway in 1998 in honor of the woman who spent much of her adult life opposing the canal. She did not live to receive the accolades for her efforts. Carr died one year before the rechristening of the route.²⁰ The 107 mile long pristine greenway now welcomes hikers, bikers, bird watchers, fishermen, and other nature enthusiasts.

So, what lessons can we learn from this instructive Florida story? In democratic America, the fate of mountains, rivers, forests, deltas, swamplands, bird and fish species, pristine coastlines and coral reefs, prized fishing grounds and rich animal habitat, all reside in democratic debate and are often determined by the quality of leadership within each interest group. The public need not concede the issue of natural domain exclusively to people who own the land and seek the highest profit from it, or the right of one special interest group against another to decide the use of national resources for generations still unborn.

Perhaps it would be better if there were some intrinsic, universally recognized value to the features of the natural world. But until such value can be agreed upon, we are relegated to deciding these issues within the messy, conflicted, flawed world of politics. Within that world, the fate of Florida's "big ditch" is one of the environmental movement's most instructive sagas.

Oh, one final word. Never think for a moment that politicians, corporate executives, and powerful special interests always win such contentious battles. It would be simplistic to conclude that the fate of the cross-Florida canal was ultimately determined by Marjorie Harris Carr. But if not for her, the outcome would certainly have been measurably different. Her story reminds even cynics that in America the life of one person really can make a difference.

20. My chronology of the canal comes from "Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway - History," Florida Department of Environmental Protection.