



GREEN COVE SPRINGS IN THE NORTHERN FLORIDA PENINSULA, CA. 1880S. COURTESY OF STATE OF FLORIDA ARCHIVES (N041658).

PASSAGE TO THE NEW EDEN

Tourism in Florida

BY PAUL S. GEORGE

Florida's journey from a sparsely settled state with an agriculturally-based economy one hundred years ago to today's mega-state offering a wide variety of economic endeavors, and a stunning demographic mix, has been as exciting as it has been consequential. Florida has become the darling of sociologists attempting to divine the nation's future by studying the demographics of the Sunshine State and its success in absorbing waves of immigrants and exiles, as well as its success in turning America's growing demand for leisure-oriented

activities into a tourist industry without parallel. This development has been closely linked, since the mid-nineteenth century, to tourism.

From the vantage point of the nineteenth century, the specter of a vast Florida wilderness taking its place alongside more established tourist capitals within one century would have been regarded as remote at best. Described by William Bartram, an eighteenth century wayfarer, as "A blessed unviolated spot of earth...(a) blissful garden," Florida remained remote to most northerners until the middle of the

nineteenth century, when a small stream of visitors, primarily persons of means or in quest of a cure for serious disease or infirmity, began arriving in the Sunshine State. For most, the state was difficult to reach. At the time of the Civil War, Florida claimed just 400 miles of railroad track, the least of any state in the South. Visitors venturing to Florida could travel only as far south as Georgia by rail before transferring to a seagoing conveyance for the final leg of their journey.

The chief avenues into this Edenic wilderness were the St. Johns and Ocklawaha rivers, which run through northern portions of the peninsula. Ailing visitors, consumptives, and persons stricken with tuberculosis traveled by steamship to Green Cove Springs to take the cure from the waters of a sulfuric spring described as “glowing in sunlight with prismatic powers in which a light blue prevails, flowing through some buildings created for bathing purposes.” Rheumatics also visited the spring, believing that “by daily ablutions in (its) clear blue waters... and by long inhalations of its sulphuretted fumes, they might restore themselves. The spring continues to be a summertime bathing attraction and the banks of the river are popular for picnics and local celebrations.

Some nineteenth century visitors came for pleasure or sporting opportunities. One of their favorite routes into the scenic interior was by steamer along the picturesque Ocklawaha and Silver rivers navigating through a wilderness of exotic snakes and alligators and other creatures. Silver Springs, the primary destination of many visitors, became a famed tourist attraction. In the words of one Florida historian it epitomized, “the total experience,” especially after glass bottom boats were introduced later in the nineteenth century, allowing sojourners to view beneath magic waters teeming with wildlife.

The influx of tourists rose sharply after the Civil War. Union soldiers stationed in Jacksonville, Fernandina, St. Augustine, Tampa, and Apalachicola, among other places, helped advertise the state’s mild climate and beauty. Railroad lines and steamship companies began bringing visitors to northern Florida, implementing advertising programs to lure vacationers to the state. The government of Florida, moreover, initiated a series of promotional campaigns following the establish-

ment of a Department of Immigration. Tourism received an additional boost from a spate of guidebooks, travel accounts and articles in national periodicals, which marveled at Florida’s assets and its unlimited potential for tourism, real estate development and agriculture. As promoters and land developers disseminated promotional literature throughout the nation, the image of Florida as a new Eden blossomed. During the winter of 1874–1875, one observer placed the number of tourists in the Sunshine State at 33,000 and estimated their expenditures at \$3 million.

Entrepreneurs, as well as white- and blue-collar workers, were beneficiaries of an industrial society that began to place increasing importance on the notion that leisure time activities were the rewards for hard work and material success. The wealthy entrepreneur enjoyed the latest amenities in travel whether it was an ocean voyage to the Continent or a home in exclusive Newport, or both. White-collar workers enjoyed more modest vacations including getaway retreats. The availability of credit, or the payment for goods and services on time, or through installments, was a concept that grew considerably in this era, bringing trappings of the good life to the middle class. By the 1920s, rising numbers of the middle class were enjoying vacations in destinations far away from home.

In the late nineteenth century, Henry M. Flagler and Henry Plant, Gilded Age princes, began building extensive transportation networks in Florida, changing forever the state and its tourist industry. By the 1880s, Florida experienced a flurry of railroad building, which accelerated in the following decade. By 1900, the state possessed more than 3,500 miles of track. This figure surpassed 6,000 miles by 1930.

Flagler, Plant and others extended their rail systems deep into the southern environs of the Sunshine State. Along the way they constructed new cities, harbor facilities, and grand tourist hotels in an effort to build a complete system whose components operated in symbiotic fashion. Thus, their most important impact was opening a wilderness area to rapid development.

Examples of the innovations of these magnates abound. Flagler’s magnificent hotels dotted Florida’s east coast from St. Augustine to Miami—



PORCH, HENRY FLAGLER'S ROYAL POINCIANA HOTEL, PALM BEACH, EARLY 1900S. COURTESY OF STATE OF FLORIDA ARCHIVES (PR08211).



MUSICIANS SERENADE A FLORIDA VISITOR DISEMBARKING FROM THE FLORIDA SPECIAL. COURTESY OF STATE OF FLORIDA ARCHIVES (N038732).

and even beyond to the Bahamas. The grandest of Flagler's hotel palaces included the Ponce de Leon Hotel in St. Augustine, the Royal Poinciana Hotel in Palm Beach (which contained more than 1,100 guest rooms!), and the Royal Palm Hotel in Miami. These offered a ratio of one attendant to every one or two guests and the final word in amenities, including health spas, swimming pools, and a rich array of recreational programs, from boating and sports fishing on crystal clear waters to golfing on nearby greens. Dining, dancing, and celebrations of various kinds were eagerly indulged in, as were the frequent opportunities of well-heeled clients to see and meet such illustrious guests as John D.

Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and members of the Vanderbilt and Astor families. Many of these wealthy northerners arrived in private rail cars with sizable entourages to assist them. Their stays typically took them through winter.

Plant's most important work centered in Tampa, a tiny community as late as 1880. Lured by its coastal location, its centrality on the peninsula, and, even more importantly, its prominence as a burgeoning railroad nexus, Plant invested extravagantly in the community, building the great Moorish-styled Tampa Bay Hotel, deepening the harbor on Tampa Bay, and spending lavishly on promotional programs. In the process, Plant transformed this

west coast settlement into an important city. While as a tourist capital it never achieved the success of Miami Beach, nevertheless, tourists drawn to Tampa and especially the Tampa Bay Hotel filled an elite registry, boasting profiles similar to the guests of Henry Flagler.

Since the Spanish conquest of the New World, Cuba has had a special relationship with Florida. More than one hundred years ago, tourism between the two began on a regular basis with Flagler's steamboats plying the waters between Miami and Havana. In the early 1900s, Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway promoted a New York-Havana Special that carried tourists by rail from New York to Key West. There they embarked by steamship for the final leg of their journey to Havana. From the 1930s through the 1950s, a brisk two-way traffic took place between Tampa's Ybor City, a thriving cigar manufacturing district with a large Cuban population, and Havana. By then, many wealthy Cubans, including President Fulgencio Batista, had invested heavily in Florida real estate and businesses.

Even more than the rail, the automobile brought great change to the Sunshine State. With the introduction of Henry Ford's Model T automobile in 1907, distances were reduced, both socially and geographically, between rural and urban Florida. Rural folk joined townspeople on Saturdays by virtue of the automobile, enhancing the importance of downtowns with their retail and entertainment offerings. The automobile also democratized tourism in the 1920s, since it brought the attractions and amenities of Florida, once the preserve of the wealthy, to the burgeoning middle class, which increasingly sought out the Sunshine State as a favorite vacation destination.

Construction of highways and roads accelerated the development of twentieth century Florida. In 1906, the state possessed just 300 automobiles, and a small number of paved roads. A nationwide "Good Roads" movement led to the construction of increasing numbers of roads and highways. By the early 1920s, roads connecting Florida cities were linked to highways that reached parts of the northern United States. By 1925, more than 500,000 tourists were arriving annually in Florida by automobile. By 1930, the

state possessed more than 3,200 miles of paved highways. Tourists traveled north and south along the Dixie Highway, crossed the state via the Tamiami Trail, and by the end of the decade, traveled through the Florida Keys on the Overseas Highway. During the post World War II era, mobility was dramatically enhanced in Florida by the construction of the state turnpike system and in the 1960s the interstate highway system. These new highways lifted tourism to new heights and opened up areas of Florida to business and residential development.

By the latter part of the twentieth century, commercial air travel had come to rival automotive travel in importance. More than most states, Florida has benefited significantly from advances in aviation. With its mild climate, ample waterways, and flat topography, Florida became one of the first states to embrace this new mode of travel in the early 1900s. In World War I, Coconut Grove's Dinner Key became the site of one of the nation's first naval air stations. By the 1930s, Miami had become the home base for Pan American Airways and Eastern Airlines, while National Airlines claimed St. Petersburg as its home. By the 1930s, these airlines were employing the new DC-3 airplanes, or, in the case of Pan American Airways, the Sikorsky flying clipper ships, to carry tens of thousands of passengers monthly to Florida from U.S. and Latin American cities. After World War II, commercial air travel replaced rail and automotive as the backbone of Florida's soaring tourist economy.

The capital of tourism shifted over the century. One hundred years ago, Jacksonville, St. Augustine and other communities in northeast Florida were the centers of tourism. By the early 1900s, however, the extension of railroads into the southern portions of the state, especially along the east coast, opened up new areas, with milder winter climates, sparkling beaches, and splendid fishing opportunities.

A forlorn, swamp-ridden island as late as the 1910s, by mid-century, Miami Beach claimed the mantle as the capital of tourism in the eastern United States. It had come under the magic of Carl G. Fisher, one of America's pioneers in the automotive industry. Fisher's resources were surpassed only by his vision, a hardheaded belief in



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his ability to accomplish any task before him, and a genius for generating publicity. Fisher invested millions into drainage, construction, and marketing of Miami Beach and by the mid-1920s it was quickly becoming the tourist Mecca that Fisher had envisioned. Miami Beach offered sleek hotels, exclusive Lincoln Road for shopping and promenading, facilities for water-based and land oriented sports and a liberal policy toward alcohol and gambling.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Greater Miami and southeast Florida declined in popularity as Orlando and Walt Disney World became the state's preeminent resort destination. In fact, by the 1980s Walt Disney World had become the world's greatest tourist attraction, with over twenty million annual visitors entering the sprawling resort kingdom. This fantasy landscape seems to meld perfectly with modern notions of the culture of leisure and consumption.

The explosive growth of the Orlando area in the last quarter of the twentieth century has been based largely on the popularity of Walt Disney World, but other nearby theme parks have attracted more than sixteen million visitors annually. These artificial worlds and elaborately contrived environments allow visitors to experience outer space on Space Mountain or Africa of the Animal Kingdom. The state's huge theme parks offer tourists a "sanctuary" where history, culture, and technology blend. Gary Mormino, a Florida historian, believes Americans seem to prefer history with a spoonful of sugar and the synthetic experiences of a theme park. Additionally, Mormino notes: "More people have experienced the Pirates of the Caribbean than live in the United States today!"

Instant popularity exceeded even the highest expectations of Disney officials. The success of the Magic Kingdom led to the creation of three additional theme parks, the futuristic EPCOT

(Experimental Prototype City of Tomorrow), the nostalgic MGM Studios, and the exotic Animal Kingdom. By the end of the 1990s, more than 400 million persons had visited Walt Disney World. Disney enterprises opened numerous smaller attractions, a vast array of thematic accommodations, and a bustling shopping, dining, entertainment, and nightclub complex. Recently, Disney enterprises began development of a residential suburb of Orlando named Celebration, which aims to incorporate aesthetics, security, and sentimental architecture to create an old fashioned front porch community.

Unfortunately, Florida's "mom and pop" attractions of yesterday are a vanishing breed. Many have suffered the impact of mega-theme parks, and the opening of super highways that have re-routed travelers away from secondary roads and highways where these attractions are located. This genre of attraction includes landmarks such as Weeki-

Wachi, Cypress Gardens, the famed Homosassa Springs north of St. Petersburg, storefront amusements on St. George's Street in historic St. Augustine, the Miccosukee Indian Village west of Miami, and Sarasota's Circus Hall of Fame.

For those who prefer canoe trails to thrill rides, Florida offers increasing numbers of eco-tourists adventures at a wide array of national and state parks. John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park in the Florida Keys is a favorite of snorkelers and divers, while Everglades National Park allows a look at an unspoiled patch of the famed River of Grass. Everglades and Biscayne national parks encompass 181,000 acres stretching throughout the southern half of Biscayne Bay. In the northern Panhandle lies St. Joseph's Peninsula State Park, featuring white sands and the tranquil waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Little Talbot Island State Park, located north of Jacksonville, is notable for unique sand dunes and breathtaking sunsets that

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seemingly hover just above them. Turtle watches and guided night walks take place along the entire length of the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. Farm-rich areas of the state, such as south Miami-Dade County, have also become coveted venues for eco-tourists.

The high-tech space complex at Cape Canaveral is another immensely popular destination for tourists. When the United States entered the space race in the postwar era, Cape Canaveral assumed a place second to none in the drive to surpass the Soviet Union and “conquer” outer space. Astronauts, engineers, technicians and their families poured into the Space Coast in the early 1960s following President John Kennedy’s promise to place a man on the moon by the end of the decade. Thus, a somnolent region of small hamlets underwent an astonishing transformation, one that left it pulsating with energy and rapid development. The Space Coast remains a fascination to tourists who converge on Cape Canaveral in large numbers to witness a spectacular shuttle or rocket launch.

As leisure time activities have grown in importance, sporting and athletic events at all levels have increasingly commanded the attention of Americans. Greater Miami and southeast Florida promote numerous international athletic programs, professional franchises, pari-mutual offerings and many kinds of sporting events. Other major urban centers in Florida including Orlando, the Tampa Bay area and Jacksonville, host a multitude of games and competitions, such as NBA and NFL teams, and popular major league baseball clubs. Florida has hosted many of the crown jewel events of athletics including the NFL Super Bowl, the Lipton Tennis Tournament, pro golf tournaments, high stakes horse racing and baseball’s World Series.

Cruise ships have been operating in Florida since the early 1900s. In the 1920s German and Scandinavian ships were moving passengers in and out of the Port of Miami. Replacing, in a steeply upgraded version, Flagler’s steamboats, cruise ships have emerged in the last generation as a major source of tourist revenue statewide. Today, Carnival, Royal Caribbean, and Norwegian cruise lines entertain millions of passengers

annually, in vessels with capacities upwards of 4,000 people. They depart from the Port of Miami and Port Everglades, the two busiest cruise ship ports in the world, and from Key West, Tampa, Cocoa Beach and other Florida ports, carrying passengers to popular, exotic venues in the Caribbean and elsewhere. In the late 1990s, more than 3 million cruise ship passengers annually were using the Port of Miami.

With its weather, waters, and exotic flora and fauna, nineteenth century Florida was promoted as a lush tourist paradise. Entrepreneurs of means and vision, such as Flagler and Plant, assured Florida’s rise as a tourist haven by century’s end. The sensational strides that the state has made as a twentieth century vacation Mecca are evidenced by the \$40 billion annual tourist industry. This has exceeded even the lofty aspirations of those Gilded Age princes who envisioned modern tourism in the Sunshine State. This phenomenon in part results from the magnificent natural resources that Florida offers to vacationers. It is also the legacy of Florida entrepreneurs who have forecast national and even international trends in tourism, marketing, and technology that have brought the state global attention and produced overwhelming, alluring attractions designed to appeal to a broad spectrum of the public. When one recalls that Florida was but a backwater until the twentieth century, the energy and speed of modern development becomes even more impressive, and the future promises to be astonishing.

Paul S. George is a native Miamian who holds a Ph.D. degree in history from Florida State University. He is currently an associate professor senior at Miami-Dade Community College, where he holds the Arthur Hertz Chair, and historian to the Historical Association of Southern Florida. Author of eight books and more than 100 articles and book reviews, Dr. George has served as president of the Florida Historical Society, vice chair of the City of Miami’s Heritage Conservation Board and executive director of the Historic Broward County Preservation Board, among other affiliations. He is well known for his popular historic tours of Miami-Dade, Broward and Monroe counties.