

FLORIDA in the New South

Part II



Lighthouse at Key West

Chapter 8: *Rebuilding the State*

After the Civil War, Florida and other southern states had to adjust to a new form of social structure. Defeat by the Union forces meant that the South could not continue its distinct way of life. Rather, the South had to remain within the United States and adjust to rules established largely by the North. About 5,000 Floridians had been killed fighting in the Civil War, at a time when the state's estimated population probably exceeded 150,000. The coastal areas were heavily damaged, farming land and equipment were worn out, the few existing roads were destroyed, and the large labor force of slaves necessary for plantation agriculture no longer existed.

Before the Civil War, Florida had been well on its way to becoming another of the southern cotton states. Afterward, the lives of many residents changed. Freeing of the slaves was a severe economic blow to the state. Life after the war was hard for most Southerners. The cotton planter's wealth was severely reduced and his influence as a political and social leader declined. Former slaves needed food and clothing, housing, jobs and education to learn to survive and function as free persons.

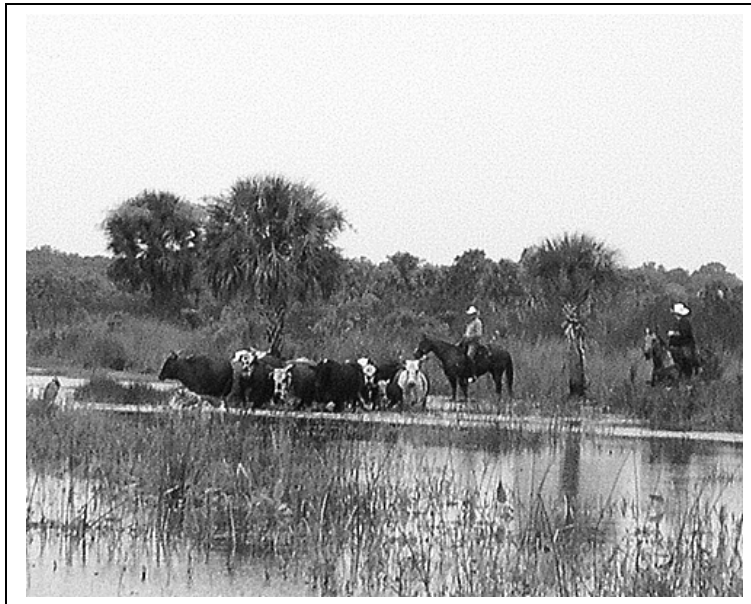
During the war, large farming areas and plantations had begun to shift from cotton production to food crops, to supply food for local and military needs. To rebuild the state's economy, it would be necessary to strengthen food production and find ways to export crops to northern markets. Rebuilding and expanding a transportation network across the state was a necessity for exporting crops, for lumbering, and for a growing tourism industry, all important sources of income for Florida.

Florida owed a large debt after the Civil War. It had sold bonds to finance its war efforts and to keep the railroads operating. When the railroads could no longer pay their debts, they were seized by the state and sold to help pay off the mortgages on public lands. When these sales were insufficient to cover all the debts, Governor Bloxham sold four million acres of land in 1881 to a northerner named Hamilton Disston for 25 cents per acre, giving the state adequate funds to clear the state debt. This sale has been described as the "Great Land Grab," because huge areas of land were purchased for extremely low prices. Disston developed the land he had purchased, draining swamps

and building communities where he assisted settlers in acquiring land and in producing crops which had not previously been cultivated in Florida, including sugarcane.

By the end of the 19th century, conditions necessary to continue development in Florida had been put into place, establishing its economy in the American mainstream. Fruits, sugarcane, vegetables and other agricultural products replaced cotton as the main agricultural product for both local use and shipment out of state. Railroads and river steamers were opening new areas for settlement, development, and transporting goods to markets. Cities sprang up in former swamplands and opened new opportunities for industry, for immigrants, and for tourism.

Citrus was becoming a major crop; cigars were being produced by Cuban immigrants in Tampa and Key West; Greek immigrants were harvesting sponges on the west coast; and lumbering was providing pine sap for turpentine and cedar for pencils. Phosphate rock was discovered to be a primary ingredient in fertilizer, and raising cattle for market became a major industry.



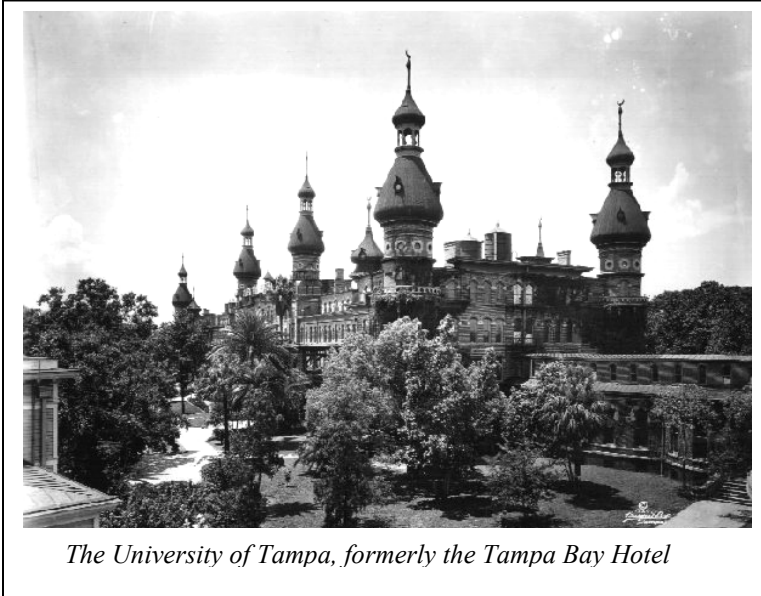
A cattle drive in Brevard County -photo by KC Townsend

Growth of the Railroad

One of the most important changes in Florida was the development of a wide network of railroads. By the 1880s, a major objective of state government was railroad expansion.

With settlement gradually moving southward down the Florida peninsula, the state needed a transportation system to open up interior lands and provide easier access to the centers of economic activity. To encourage railroad companies to build tracks in Florida, the state government gave or sold land to private companies. Four of the most important developers were: Henry M. Flagler, Henry B. Plant, William D. Chipley and John S.

Williams.



In 1882 Henry B. Plant began building railroads throughout the state of Florida. He connected Florida's railways to Georgia, opening the way for interstate trading and travel, and connected the towns of Sanford, Kissimmee and Lakeland to Tampa. He constructed

many hotels along the railways, the most famous of which was the Tampa Bay Hotel, built at a cost of nearly \$3 million. It was the most modern hotel in Florida at the time, with 500 rooms and electric lights. (It is now a part of the University of Tampa.) Plant also owned and operated many steamboats, and he continued building in Florida throughout the late 1800s. His railroad, the Atlantic Coast Line, became one of the largest rail systems in the United States. In 1885 he was honored by having the town of Cork, east of Tampa, renamed Plant City

An entrepreneur named William Chipley built railroads that linked the Panhandle region with the rest of Florida. Goods shipped to Pensacola could be sent to the rest of the state by rail, helping Pensacola become a major port on the Gulf of Mexico. He later became mayor of Pensacola, and the town of Chipley is named for him.

Henry M. Flagler was born in New York City in 1830. He was a partner in John D. Rockefeller's oil refining company when he made his first visit to Florida. He spent the next 30 years building hotels and railroads up and down Florida's east coast. He settled in St. Augustine and built its first big hotel, the Ponce de León, which was the most luxurious of its time. To encourage people to visit, he built railroads to help connect Daytona Beach and St. Augustine to railways that could take guests all the way to and from New York. Flagler also developed the resort town of Palm Beach and connected it, of course, by railroads. His plan was to build hotels all along the east coast of Florida and to connect them by railroad. Eventually the Flagler hotel chain had rooms for more than 40,000 guests. He had invested more than \$40 million in Florida, and he had made Florida's Atlantic coast a resort destination for the nation. Both Flagler County and Flagler College are named for him. The Flagler Museum in Palm Beach is in his former home, Whitehall (a grand mansion which is a National Historic Landmark), and is open to the public today.



Henry Flagler's home, Whitehall, in Palm Beach

Railroad construction brought population and economic growth to Florida. Many towns developed along the railroad and often the founding of the town coincided with laying the railroad tracks through the area. Communities which had no rail service were destined to stagnate or decline if bypassed by the railroads. By 1900, Florida had more than 3,000 miles of railroad with direct connections to distant markets, and thousands of people visited the state each year. Many came to Florida to recover from illnesses. Tourists were attracted to the state because of its warm winters, sunshine, and open lands.

Between 1880 and 1900, the state population almost doubled. Early tourism depended mainly upon wealthy and famous visitors, some of whom kept winter homes in Florida including Thomas Edison, Henry Ford and Harriet Beecher Stowe. With transportation problems solved and its economy thriving, Florida's growth had only just begun.

Student Activity

Choose one of the following two assignments to complete.

1. Imagine yourself as a reporter visiting Florida about 1900. Write a three-paragraph article on the advantages the railroads are bringing to Florida.
2. Make a flow chart listing the changes that came with the building of railroads.