

Florida

(Historical Essay on Agriculture and Rural Life)

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FLORIDA

The unique significance of Florida's agricultural history and past rural life is rooted in the peninsula's distinctive geography, its subtropical crops and the conjoined histories of its varied peoples. Floridians, from the pre-contact indigenous peoples, through the Spanish, the British, the crackers, planters, slaves, Seminoles, and Yankees, have wrestled with the often bewildering Florida environment. Like rural folk and agriculturists everywhere, they were often hobbled by blind prejudice, benighted traditions, and false prophets, yet unlike the peoples of more familiar places, they were challenged by a subtropical, year-long agricultural environment that seemed to promise all yet delivered little. From these circumstances arose an extraordinary epoch of agricultural experimentation that continues to the present day.

Florida's first farmers were the Tumucuan, the Appalachees and other indigenous peoples who significantly modified the natural landscape through the use of fire. Thus the first Europeans found a relatively open forest criss-crossed with footpaths and broken by fields of native plantings of maize and tuberous crops. With the Spanish settlement of St. Augustine in 1565, European livestock, crops and agricultural methods began their slow but inexorable spread across the face of Florida. Oranges were among the first fruits to be planted along with other, ultimately less successful, Mediterranean crops. Spanish agriculture was severely limited, however, as the Crown had no wish to reward colonials for doing that which could lead to self sufficiency. Only hardy cattle were allowed to thrive in the interior scrub and marshlands.

A twenty-year period of British control (1763-1783) saw the establishment of more extensive plantations of rice, long-staple (sea island) cotton, indigo, and oranges along the St. Johns River and the tidewater bays and estuaries of the upper east coast. With the return of the Spanish, agriculture was once again stymied by the centralized bureaucracy of a flagging empire along with the economic realities of Spanish mercantilism. In 1819 Florida was acquired by the United States, but even under U.S. control the population of Florida grew slowly. Native Americans from the Southeast region, along with escaped slaves, were now amalgamated into a new group, the Seminoles, who fought a series of debilitating wars against the white settlers and the United States Army. Because of this and the wilderness nature of the Everglades, the southern two-thirds of the Florida peninsula was a sparsely settled area at the advent of statehood in 1845.

Documentary resources chronicling the decades of the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s reveal that the panhandle and northern counties of the state came under the control of a landed class whose members migrated, often with their entire entourage of slaves, from South Carolina, Virginia, and other areas of the Southeast. They brought with them the slave/cotton planter culture, and along with cotton, cultivated other crops associated with that culture such as tobacco for cash and fodder corn for hogs and cattle. The published record shows that they also began to experiment with crops which they believed were suited to the lower latitude of their new home, chief among these being sugar cane, in which some planters invested heavily but with few rewards. These early U.S. settlers, like the Spanish and English before them, were beguiled by the seemingly mild climate into planting crops that sooner or later succumbed to unexpected and devastating freezes.

The Civil War resulted in relatively minor damage to Florida's farms and infrastructure and, in fact, stimulated the cattle industry as the state came to be a major supplier of salted beef to the Confederacy. The general destruction of the Southern economy, however, retarded the growth of Florida's agricultural development during Reconstruction. It was not until 1884 that the state's first land grant college was established at Lake City. The Florida Agricultural College, representing the core of what was to become the University of Florida in 1902, was relocated in 1906 to Gainesville and thereafter vigorously supported the state's farmers and farm communities through publications, research, demonstrations, and educational outreach.

The literature of the post-Reconstruction era documents considerable growth and change in the development of Florida agriculture--a portend to the twentieth century agricultural economy. As the population of the middle peninsula grew, oranges began to emerge as a significant crop. Previously restricted to waterfront locations, orange groves were now planted inland as railroad entrepreneurs tentatively extended lines southward down the peninsula. Unperturbed by the ominous freeze of 1886, growers, many fresh from the North, succumbed to orange fever and planted thousands of acres of orange trees. After a nine-year honeymoon, the double freezes of the 1894/95 season killed trees deep into the peninsula. Though some growers struggled on, most either left the state in disgust or moved further south onto the high central ridge which in the next century was to become a virtual Masabi Range of citrus production. But for a time, the open country of Central and South Florida was left largely to the cattlemen whose annual forays into the scrub were more akin to the hunting of wild animals than cattle round-ups.

In response to the growth and diversity of agriculture, the University of Florida, as did other land grant colleges nationwide, established the Cooperative Extension Service and developed programs such as the Farmers' Institutes, home economics programs, and 4-H. In separate programs for white and African-American farmers, county agents (both white and African-American) worked with their respective clients to teach the latest methods of growing crops for both cash and subsistence, as well as helping them to can, cook, and sew--thus lending greater efficiency and savings to their often meager crops and earnings.

In addition to pertinent reports from Florida agencies and committees concerned with rural life, the annual reports of the Florida Cooperative Extension Service cover aspects of rural sociology, including agricultural education programs, the introduction of tropical plants, farm demonstration projects for boy's clubs and men, home demonstration projects for girls and women's clubs, farmers and women's institutes, Negro agents cooperative demonstration programs, state agents work, and farm home economics.

Many monographs in need of preservation also deal with the sociological aspects of agriculture in the state; e.g., *Johnson's Crossing, an Institutional Analysis of a Rural Black Community* (William J. Simmons), *Florida Farm Wives: They Help the Family Farm Survive* (Masuma Downie), *Off-Farm Work and the Increase in the Florida Farm Woman's Relative Contribution to the Family Farm* (Christina H. Gladwin), *Florida's Rural Hospitals* (Richard Polangin), *Rural Land Ownership in Florida* (Daniel E. Alleger), *On the Season: A Report of a Public Health Project Conducted Among Negro Migrant Agricultural Workers in Palm Beach County, Florida* (Robert H. Browning),

Subsistence Food Production Among Low Resource Farmers in Alachua County, Florida (John R. Butler), *Financial Stress in Agriculture: Policy Options and Financial Consequences for Farmers in North Florida* (William G. Boggess), *Income, Resources and Adjustment Potential Among Rural Families in North and West Florida* (Lawrence A. Reuss), and *Rural Farm Retirement: A Study of Rural Retirement in Five Florida Counties* (Daniel E. Alleger).

The published literature and primary research resources documenting the history of agriculture and rural life in Florida reveal the major concerns of the day. With the rapid easterly spread of the boll weevil across the face of the South, cotton declined between about 1910 and 1925 forcing many farmers off the land. The World War I era saw the migration of tens of thousands of poor, rural Floridians to the industrial cities to the north. The land boom followed by the bust in 1926 ushered in a long period of rural poverty in the state which was not mitigated until World War II.

The key government publications needing preservation include those of the Florida Extension Service, Florida Agricultural Experiment Stations, the Institute of Food and Agricultural Services (UF), and the Agriculture and Consumer Services Department of Florida, as well as a number of government committees. In addition, over 30 Florida agricultural societies existed in the 1800s and there are currently some 170 societies, all of which have contributed to the agricultural literature of the state.

Publications of the interwar period document the draining of much of the Florida Everglades, a epoch that forever altered the landscape and ecology of the state. These extensive mucklands became the newest area of experimentation with various exotic crops. The capital-intensive character of mucklands farming reserved these lands for corporate agribusiness which by the 1930s had established sugar and winter vegetables upon the drained acreage south and southeast of Lake Okeechobee. Also during this period the satsuma industry of north and northwest Florida lived out its short existence along with the tung oil industry which lasted several decades longer; both crops eventually succumbed to the uncertainties of Florida's climate.

Florida's frontier-like character persisted well into the twentieth century. The freedom of the open range was state law until 1949 when fencing was finally erected along Florida's highways. The darker side of this rough-hewn culture is revealed by documents detailing the state's anachronistic penury laws which assured agriculture and the naval stores industry of a plentiful and often cost-free black labor force until the close of the Great Depression.

World War II represents a watershed in agriculture almost everywhere and no less so in Florida, ushering in the era of agribusiness and encroaching urbanization. The application of chemicals developed in the war effort to agricultural purposes inaugurated humankind's great technological onslaught against pests. It was hoped that DDT would do for Florida crops what ice and air conditioning did for humans--make life more livable in what is naturally a less than congenial environment. The literature shows that high-powered but ephemeral chemical fertilizers entirely replaced animal manures, and chemical herbicides supplanted much hand labor, thus reducing the year-round labor force, but not the harvest labor, assuring that the state's agricultural economy was dependent on migrant workers.

Technological change gave rise concomitantly to changes in the economic structure of agriculture. The new methods were well adapted to large-scale operations and as the average size of Florida farms increased, their total numbers fell. Some family-owned farms were able to adapt to the changes and grow, but many others sold out to corporate farming concerns which capitalized on the multiple advantages of economy of scale; all the while overall farm output increased exponentially. Though this trend was national in scope, the literature documents that in Florida it proceeded at a precipitous pace.