

Florida Historical Quarterly

Volume 15
Number 1 *Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol 15,
Issue 1

Article 5

1936

Letters from East Florida

Dorothy Dodd



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

Dodd, Dorothy (1936) "Letters from East Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 15: No. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol15/iss1/5>

LETTERS FROM EAST FLORIDA

BY DOROTHY DODD

Before the outbreak of the Seminole Indian War in 1835 the northern counties of East Florida¹ were increasing in population at a faster rate² than Middle and West Florida. Although the country was but sparsely settled there were a number of flourishing plantations, but these were laid waste by the Indians during the next seven years and immigration into that section almost entirely ceased. On the termination of the war in 1842, Congress passed a temporary free homestead act to encourage settlers to come into the section that had been the seat of the war in the hope that settlement would prevent further Indian disturbances.

The Armed Occupation Act of August 4, 1842, offered a quarter section of land to heads of families and single men over eighteen years of age,³ able to bear arms, who should, within one year of the passage of the Act, make an actual settlement in that part of Florida lying south of the line dividing town-

¹ The old divisions of West, Middle, and East Florida are followed here, West Florida comprising the territory between the Perdido and Apalachicola rivers, Middle Florida that between the Apalachicola and Suwannee rivers, and East Florida all territory east and south of the Suwannee river.

² East Florida had a population of 8,749 in 1830 and of 19,556 in 1840, an increase for the ten years of 123.6 per cent. as compared with an increase of 56.8 per cent for the whole Territory. In view of general testimony that the Indian wars practically stopped immigration into East Florida, it is reasonable to assume that most of this increase occurred prior to 1835. It must be noted, however, that there was a marked increase in the sales of public lands in East Florida in 1837, 1838, and 1839, as compared with preceding years, although sales decreased almost to nothing in 1841 and 1842. Sen. Doc. **No. 2, 30** Cong., 2 Sess., Chart. 3.

³ Residents of Florida who owned 160 acres of land at the time of passage of the Act were excluded from its benefits.

ships nine and ten.⁴ No more than 200,000 acres were to be granted under the Act. Prospective settlers must obtain permits from the register of the land office, but they might settle in advance of survey. A homesteader was required to reside in Florida south of the stipulated line for five years, to erect a dwelling house, clear, enclose, and cultivate at least five acres of land, and reside on his homestead for four years following the first year after the date of his permit of settlement.

It was expected that most of the settlements would be in the Alachua country, and by Act of August 30, 1842, the Alachua land district⁵ was established with an office at Newnansville. No permits were granted in the Alachua district until December, 1842, when thirty-three were issued. A steady flow of applications followed, and a total of 948 permits had been issued by August 4, 1843. Of these, forty-one were later cancelled for technical reasons,⁶ leaving a total of 908 effective permits in the Alachua district.⁷

⁴ This line ran east and west about three miles north of Palatka and about ten miles south of Newnansville. No settlement might be within two miles of a military post, on lands bearing live oak or red cedar, or in conflict with existing private claims.

⁵ The district comprised all territory east of the Suwanee river and west of the line dividing ranges twenty-four arid twenty-five except that east of the St. Mary's river and north of the basis parallel.

⁶ Number cancelled because locations were not confined within the limits of a technical quarter section, 17; because settlements were on private claims or lands reserved for military purposes, 5; because locations were on keys or islands in the gulf, which were reserved for military purposes, 19. Sen. Doc. No. 39, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., App., 21.

⁷ The Act was construed to permit women, who were heads of families and who "in all instances have either sons or slaves capable of labor, and therefore of bearing arms" to benefit by its provisions [*ibid.*, 14-15] and twenty-one women took out permits to settle in the Alachua district. Eight women took out permits in the St. Augustine district but one later abandoned her settlement and five never occupied their claims.

Although no settlement might be made within two miles of a military post; most settlers selected land near a fort. The largest settlement of some 300 claims was comprised within a radius of twenty miles of Ft. King. Another large settlement was around Ft. Cross, just west of the upper reaches of the Withlacoochee river, while there were smaller settlements south of Ft. Fanning on the Suwanee river, around Hillsborough Bay between the Hillsborough and Alafia rivers, and south of the Manatee river.⁸

A total of 369 permits was granted at St. Augustine under the Armed Occupation Act, but eighty-seven were later cancelled, leaving a total of 242 effective permits. Unlike the locations in the Alachua district, fifty-three claims were never occupied⁹ and twelve claims were abandoned after settlement. The permits indicated a scattered settlement, generally near the coast, from Palatka to Miami river and Bay Biscayne. St. Lucie sound and river was perhaps the most popular locality, but of some eighty-five claims here, thirty-nine were never occupied or were later abandoned. The districts around Ft. Pierce, Lake Worth, Indian river, and Miami river and Bay Biscayne drew some twenty to thirty-five settlers each.

Although the offer of free homesteads made in the Armed Occupation Act held only for one year, the public lands in Florida were open to settlement at

⁸ The locations of these settlements, as well as those in the St. Augustine district, were ascertained from charts appended to Sen. Doc. No. 39, 30 Cong., 1 Sess. It was not possible to determine the exact number of settlements in each locality because all claims had not been surveyed at the time the charts were compiled.

⁹ It is possible that these claims were not occupied because the land officials held "that a settlement made by slaves fulfilling all the requirements of the law" did not come within the meaning of the Act. *Ibid.*, 12.

the regular price of \$1.25 an acre. Purchase could not be made in advance of survey, however, and this fact, combined with poor roads, sporadic Indian outrages, and the uncertainties of titles attendant upon the existence of numerous private claims under British and Spanish grants which had neither been confirmed nor denied, retarded the settlement of East Florida. The population of the section increased only 34.9 per cent between 1840 and 1850, as compared with an increase of 60.5 per cent for Florida as a whole. It was not until the turn of the decade that the tide of immigration came which more than doubled its population in ten years.¹⁰ As under the Armed Occupation Act, the great flow of immigrants was to the Alachua country, by this time divided into Alachua, Marion, Hernando,¹¹ and Levy counties. The Tallahassee *Sentinel* of June 3, 1851, remarked that "Marion County, in East Florida, is said to have doubled its population since the first of January. The immigration is almost altogether from South Carolina." In 1850 Marion and Alachua counties were ninth and thirteenth, respectively, in population among Florida counties and sixth and tenth in the cash value of their farms. By 1860 Marion county was fifth in population and second only to Leon county in the value of its farms, while Alachua county had climbed to sixth place in each classification.

It was hoped that sugar cane and tobacco, rather than cotton, would become the cash crops of East Florida. Because of the fluctuating price of cotton in the 1840's there was a general desire to substitute

¹⁰ The population of East Florida was 26,382 in 1850 and 53,923 in 1860, an increase of 104.3 per cent, as compared with an increase of 60.5 per cent for the entire state.

Hernando county was known as Benton county from its creation in 1843 until the name was changed in 1850.

some other and more profitable. 'staple crops, and a writer in the Jacksonville *Statesman*, commenting on a sample of East Florida tobacco, voiced the hope of many planters when he remarked, - "If our planters can succeed in producing such an article as the quality before us, we would be willing to see the cotton plant banished from the state."¹² The soil was thought suitable for both tobacco and cane in many parts of East Florida and those two crops constituted the chief products of the section in 1850. But there was more to their profitable production than the planting, cultivating, and harvesting of the crops. Tobacco must be carefully and expertly cured, graded, and packed if a uniformly high grade product, with a consequent high price, was to be produced, while sugar required not only expert knowledge but expensive machinery for its manufacture. Whether, for these or other causes, by 1860 the production of tobacco and sugar in East Florida showed not only a relative but an absolute decrease and cotton was well on its way to becoming the leading staple crop of the section.

The sources of immigration into East Florida can not be ascertained with any degree of accuracy. It is certain however, that Georgians and South Carolinians constituted a very appreciable element of the population, although all of the older Southern states probably contributed some settlers. The fertile lands of East Florida, so suitable for cultivation by slave labor, were brought to the notice of these people in part, at least, by letters such as those which follow. A settler would write to friends an account of the country and its possibilities. The letter, from which the signature of the writer was usually omitted, would find its way into a newspaper and, once in

¹²Quoted in *Viles' Register*, XLVIII, 378 (Aug. 9, 1845).

print, would be copied by paper after paper, since the editor of that period depended upon his exchanges for the filler which syndicated and "boiler plate" material supply to the modern newspaper.

* * *

(From the Florida Journal, April 22, 1843)

Enterprise, Mosquito Co., E. F.,
March 28th, 1843

E. A. WARE,¹³ Esq.-My dear Sir: Having recruited somewhat from the fatigue of my travel, I shall now attempt to fulfil the promise made you at Tallahassee, and write you a short letter. I could find sufficient to fill a dozen sheets, were I to enter into a minute detail of all that has presented itself to me worthy of notice since I left Tallahassee. You must, however, content yourself with the outline. After ten days hard riding through mud and water, I arrived at Enterprise,¹⁴ situated on Lake Monroe, one of the many enlargements of the St. Johns River; at this place the lake is four miles wide, by eight miles long, skirted on every side by extensive bodies of very fertile land. The beauty of the scenery is much enhanced by the forest bordering it; from the margin of the lake, extending back for a mile or more, is covered with the cabbage palmetto, live oak, hickory, yam, &c., together with shrubbery, a variety of plants and vines, which at this time in full foliage, offer a most imposing view from the lake. Situated on an elevated plain of ten or twelve

¹³ Ware was editor of the *Journal*.

¹⁴ Enterprise was located on the north side of Lake Monroe, near Ft. Kingsbury, in what is now Seminole county. As late as 1887 it was the county seat of Volusia county, with a population of 500, a post office, winter hotel, and large saw mill, but it is not now listed in the postal guide. George M. Barbour, *Florida for Tourists, Invalids, and Settlers*, 121; John R. Richards, comp., *Florida State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1886-7*, I, 139.

feet from the surface, of the lake, is the prospect for the new town of Enterprise, the county site of Mosquito county.¹⁵ This place was colonized last year by Major Taylor,¹⁶ during the time of so much Indian alarm on the St. Johns. There are some twenty-five families residing around the lake, who seem to be well blessed with the country, and are making very substantial improvement. Major Taylor has erected him a commodious and pleasant dwelling on a mound or hillock near the lake, has a farm in fine cultivation, and a promising young orange grove.¹⁷ Enterprise, situated at the head of good steamboat navigation, together with the large body of rich hammock¹⁸ and prairies immediately surrounding it, which must ship their produce from this place, is destined borne day to become one of the most important inland towns in the Territory. In another point of view it will claim no little attention: being in the direct route to Tampa Bay, the great south western mail route must some day pass through this part of Florida. From Savannah or Charleston to this place there is a safe communication for steamboats;

¹⁵ Mosquito county was created in 1824 from old St. Johns county. The name was changed to Orange in 1845.

¹⁶ On Feb. 8 1843 a permit was issued, under the Armed Occupation Act, to a Cornelius Taylor for a quarter section of land on the north side of Lake Monroe. If this is the Major Taylor referred to, he apparently had settled in 1842 without title to the land he occupied. Some nine or ten permits were granted under the Act for homesteads in this vicinity.

¹⁷ Trees of the sweet orange, found in Orange, St. Lucie, Dade, Hillsborough and other East Florida counties, were mostly destroyed during the Indian wars. "There is now, however, in progress of growth, several young and thrifty orange groves at Indian River, Tampa, Manatee, and other places." "Report of the Joint Committee on the Climate, Soil and Products of South Florida," Florida Senate *Journal*, 1850, 330.

¹⁸ The soil [of hammock land] is a black, loose, sandy loam, from ten to twelve inches deep, resting on stiff compact clay." *Niles' Register*, LXVIII, 25 (March 15, 1845), quoting *Mobile Register*.

the remaining distance to be carried inland by coaches does not exceed seventy-five miles, (to Tampa Bay), through a country over which excellent roads may be easily made. As to the health of the country, this must be all speculation as yet. In all new countries more or less sickness may be expected, consequent upon the decay of vegetable matter, and the exposure which all settlers of new countries must undergo. Should, however, the hammocks¹⁹ and lands adjoining on the lake prove unhealthy, the pine lands are situated sufficiently near for summer residence. Even the sea coast is not too far distant for a summer retreat, being only eighteen miles²⁰ from the lake to Smyrna, situated near the mouth of Halifax river, on the Atlantic coast. Of the productions of this part of Florida, it is scarcely necessary to say anything, as much of the country around this place has been in the possession of the whites for years, and in a high state of cultivation Corn, cotton, (long staple), sugar, and most of the tropical fruits, may be cultivated here to great advantage. I must not omit something of the mineral springs. There are two, known as the Salt and Basin Spring. The first is situated seventy or eighty yards from the margin of the lake, is one hundred and twenty yards in circumference, and sends off a cold stream, which flows into the lake; the other, the Basin spring, is two hundred or more yards in rear of the Salt spring, in circumference eighty or ninety yards, perfectly transparent, and of great depth; the stream from it, united with that from the Salt spring. These waters have never been analyzed; they are, however, cer-

¹⁹ According to John Lee Williams, "Hammocks usually occupy high and pleasant situations, on the borders of rivers and lakes, delightful sites for country residences." *The Territory of Florida*, N. Y. 1837, p. 304.

²⁰ Barbour, *op. cit.*, 316, says that Enterprise was thirty miles from Smyrna.

tainly strongly impregnated with sulphur. In cutaneous diseases and rheumatism, I doubt not they will be found very efficacious-in one instance of a case of rheumatism, the use of the water effected a cure. What is more strange, near the Salt spring some forty or fifty yards, is a spring of fresh clear water, entirely unlike the mineral water, very cool and palatable.

* * *

[From the New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, August 24, 1843, quoted from the *North Arkansas*.)

East Florida, June 28, 1843.

Sir-You will expect me to say something about the country. I have now been here seven months, and have enjoyed good health. This is the finest farming country I have ever seen. The good lands and hammocks are much like and equal to the bottom lands about Morgan Magness. The production are Sea Island cotton, sugar, corn, oats, potatoes, &c., but the most valuable staple will be sugar. It is easily cultivated-more so than corn. A poor produce is 2,000 lbs. sugar and 4 barrels molasses to the acre. The trouble and expense of making it is about equal to that of making cider. Sugar to the amount of 4,500 lbs. was made from one acre near this place last fall. The quality of the sugar is superior to that of New Orleans, and equal to Santa Cruz. One bale of Sea Island cotton to the acre is the average product; but more can be made by good cultivation. From 200 to 500 bushels of sweet potatoes is the produce of an acre.

We have good water. Where I now am is in lat. 30°²¹ I shall settle one degree farther South, in lat.

²¹ Probably in Columbia county some fifteen miles south of Lake City.

29.^{o22} Now you would say 'It must be very hot!'- but it is not so: the peninsula is only one hundred miles wide. I assure you it is not so hot here as it was this time last year in North Carolina, and not near as hot as it was two years ago at Memphis.- The country is healthy, and being about half way between the Gulf and the Atlantic, we regularly have a breeze from ten o'clock in the morning to three in the afternoon. The nights are cool and airy.

I saw a lady yesterday, who left Savannah ten days ago. She says she had no idea it could be so much cooler here than there. I am told by the oldest citizens we will have no hotter weather.

The winter is very pleasant. Our peaches were killed by frost in the spring. I was told it was the coldest weather ever known.-The thickest ice I saw was three-fourths of an inch. On the 1st of February we had the coldest weather, and some snow was seen flying, but it did not lie on the ground. Now you have a description of our climate. Cattle are never fed nor salted; - the dew of heaven gives them salt. Raising stock is very profitable ;-I heard of one man who had 8,000 head. We can ship them to Mobile, Pensacola, New Orleans, Havana, Charleston or Savannah, by driving forty or fifty miles to a shipping port.

The lands are light and easily cultivated. I have about twelve hands farming and two in the blacksmith shop, that do not work on the crops. I have about 90 acres in corn, nearly laid by, as fine as you ever saw; 40 in Sea Island cotton, very good; 3 in sugar; 10 in potatoes; and 1 in rice. I am now living on rented land. Next week I will go to my own

²² Probably on the southern fringe of the settlement around Ft. King.

lands, 60 miles South, where I expect yet to plant 50 acres in corn, peas, pumpkins, potatoes and pumpkins [sic].

Corn is now worth one dollar per bushel, and will be for two or three years, as there will be many moving in.²³

Yours, &c.,
R

* * *

(From the Apalachicola **Commercial Advertiser**, September 9, 1843, quoted from the **Savannah Republican**)

St. John's Bluff,²⁴ (E. F.) Aug. 22, 1843

The crops in this section of country, although we have had too much rain, are so far very fine; provision crops particularly. We have been threatened with that voracious worm, the caterpillar: and many planters apprehend serious consequences from these ravages. I have yet a doubt as to their being the real (simon pure.) If, however, they should prove to be the real cotton caterpillar, which time will soon develop [sic], there will not be seed enough made, to plant the ensuing year, as our crops are three weeks later than usual. I have but recently returned from the Alachua country, where the best lands in Florida are located. It is certainly a beautiful country, one in which the labor of the farmer is sure to, be well rewarded. I visited several plantations, while on-my route, among others, Mr. Clarke's, formerly of St. Marys; and Mr. Madison's. The former gentleman with sixteen hands, all told, will

²³ A high price for corn was a sign of a rapidly growing frontier community where newcomers generally had to buy provisions until they could raise a crop.

²⁴ St. John's Bluff was east of Jacksonville on the south side of the Ft. Johns river.

realize alone from his corn crops, over three thousand dollars; corn being worth all the season through, one dollar per bushel. Emigrants from every section of the Union are pouring in daily. All of them require more or less corn. I see no impediment to East Florida, becoming in a few years, the garden of the South.

H.

* * *

(From the Tallahassee Floridian, February 2, 1850, quoted from the Charleston Mercury)

OCALA,²⁵ Dec. 29, 1849.

DEAR SIR: At your request, I will make a brief statement of facts relative to my success in planting since I came to Florida. I landed at Ocala, January 27, 1847, not having selected any spot for a settlement, and in making a selection I occupied two weeks, which brought the 12th day of February. At this period I went into the woods, and commenced clearing land, and we had every pole to cut, and every board to split, to erect cabins to shelter us from the weather. We cleared and fenced about sixty acres of land, and planted it about the 1st of April, and rented about twenty acres more, about twenty miles from our settlement, there being no land that we could get any nearer. Our crop this year was barely sufficient to support us and provide for the ensuing one.

At the commencement of 1848, we began to clear in good earnest, and succeeded in reducing to a rough

²⁵ Ocala is three miles west of old Ft. King. The fort was abandoned as a military post in 1843, but a trading post and small cluster of settlers remained. In 1846 the county board of Marion county, which had been created from parts of Alachua, Mosquito, and Hillsborough counties in 1844, resolved that the county site should thereafter be known as Ocala. Eloise Robinson Ott, "Ocala Prior to 1868," *Fla. Hist. Soc. Quart.*, VI, 88-91.

state of cultivation about ten acres to each hand, a large portion of which was hammock, the rest was pine, oak and hickory land, and finished planting it on the 7th day of April. The result was that we raised full supply of provisions, made some improvements, and were able to clear a net profit of \$40 to each hand, though we lost at least half of our Corn and Cotton crop by two storms or gales, one in September, the other in October.

The present year we have been more successful. Our provision crop has been abundant, having raised and hoisted enough of Corn to supply the wants of the farm for two years, and leaving to each hand 100 bushels to sell, which at 50 cents per bushel,²⁶ would make \$50. Our stock of pork Hogs is very nearly sufficient to supply [sic] the wants of the farm as to meat, as Hogs do well here with proper attention. Our Cotton crop is about 1350 pounds of clean Long Cotton to each hand, worth in Savannah at present from 20 to 25 cents per pound, but we will estimate it at 22½, and the aggregate will be \$303 75. In addition we have Short Cotton and Tobacco enough to pay all the expenses and contingencies of the plantation, such as Overseer's wages, Doctor's bill, clothing, taxes, bagging, freight, &c. We have further cultivated two acres of Sugar to the hand; one we have put by for seed, the other we will work up, but have not yet completed the machinery for doing so. This acre we will put down as a clear profit of \$35 per hand.

Thus we have	
Of Corn	100 bushels per hand, at 50 cents.....\$ 50 00
Cotton,	1350 lbs. at 22½.....\$303 75
Sugar and syrup.....	\$ 35 00
	<hr/>
Total produce of each hand.....	\$388 75

²⁶The decrease in the price of corn since 1843 is indicative of the growth of population.

This product has been gathered from newly cleared land, on which the large timber was all left, and of which at least forty trees have fallen this year on the land cultivated by each hand, thereby, to some extent, lessening the product.

These results have been produced on a farm of 217 acres of cleared land, part hammock, part pine, and some hickory and oak land, and cultivated by fourteen hands, or 15 1/2 acres to each hand.

Our Physician's bill in 1847 was about \$20; in 1848, about two dollars and fifty cents; this year I am not able to name the amount, as he has been absent for some time, and I have not been furnished with it. There has [sic] been two deaths, among the negroes, both infants--one from worms, and the other from a fall.

Very respectfully, yours.