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## Florida's Mysterious Personality

Alfred J. Hanna  
membership@myfloridahistory.org



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## FLORIDA'S MYSTERIOUS PERSONALITY

Seventeen years ago Florida entered the fifth century of her history under European influence. Her past four centuries have been full to overflowing with conquests and colonization schemes fairly reeking with romantic adventure, and constitute a period difficult to rival in the colonial history of any commonwealth. Many fortunes, beginning in 1513 with that of Ponce de Leon and to a much larger extent in 1539 with that of Hernando de Soto, and including the fabulous sums of the boom in 1925, have been lavished on its shores. Great aspirations, untold struggles, and heavy human sacrifice have written the annals of Florida. The flags of five nations that have waved over the coquina battlements of old San Marcos have left a rare impress of old-world civilization. St. Augustine, now celebrating its 365th anniversary, was a century old before Charleston was founded. Forty-three years before there was a settlement in Virginia, Fort Caroline and its settlement existed on the St. Johns River. Fifty-six years before the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth, French Huguenots, under the courageous Ribaut, had established the principles of religious freedom in America through a Florida colony sponsored by the great French Admiral Coligny. More than a century before missions were established in California, a Franciscan monk had written a grammar of the language used by the Indians, with whom he and his brother friars worked in a chain of 45 missions that extended along the Atlantic seaboard of Florida and Georgia. Almost two hundred years ago the agricultural possibilities of Florida were abundantly proved when an English company sold in one year "above 5,000 bushels of corn", being the overplus

necessary for the settlement of 1,500 people in the indigo plantations near New Smyrna.

Of such is the heritage of Florida. Her natural, civil, political, literary and ecclesiastical history possesses a variety and a strange admixture of elements from the many governments that have in years past incorporated Florida within their colonial holdings. Discovered by the Spaniards, coveted by the French, threatened by the British, preyed upon by the buccaners of all nations, formed into small and temporary "republics" a part of 'early American expansion, a bloody battleground in 1864, the scene as revolting for the persecutions of Indians as by the massacres by them, out of all these unique and fascinating periods Florida presents a long line of deeds which should inspire wholesome curiosity. What has been done to reveal this mysterious personality of Florida?

#### *Rich Source Material Neglected*

Edmund Burke by his famous remark, "He only deserves to be remembered who treasures up and preserves the history of his ancestors" points the finger of scorn with increasing emphasis to Floridians. There has been, with few exceptions, apparently an utter lack of curiosity on the part of one generation regarding the life, manners, customs, and achievements of the preceding one. Until recently there have been no champions of Florida history. Consequently, many interesting and worth-while events have remained unrecorded, manuscripts of untold value have been carelessly destroyed or neglected, there has been no effort to disseminate information about the wonderfully rich background of the commonwealth of Florida and there have been no sweet bards to sing the personality of Florida into American literature.

This is a situation which is not only deeply unfortunate but an actual hindrance to the higher progress

of Florida and to her full development. No one would hesitate to place high valuation on California's missions as a cultural or income-producing asset. No one would think of criticising Massachusetts for her advertisement of Plymouth Rock, of Lexington, or of Bunker Hill. Every tourist sooner or later visits Mount Vernon.

While the significance of ancient landmarks in Florida cannot equal many of those that have become shrines of America, yet their relative importance to American history as a whole, and to Florida especially, is of such a high degree that information about them, and the events which created them, ought to be generally known and should be properly appreciated by Floridians and by visitors to the Land of Flowers.

### *A Solution*

How is this problem to be solved. If the most effective methods of disseminating historical information, of encouraging its study and the stimulating the writing of its records are to be used as a guide, then collections of materials from which may be gathered pictures of by-gone days should be started in each town and made available. For the earlier periods, beginning in 1513 with the discovery of Florida and covering the explorations by the Spaniards, continuing with the aspirations of the French, the English occupation, and the second Spanish colonial period down to 1820, reference must be made to the archives in Spain, England, Mexico, and Cuba where have been assembled the original documents describing early Florida conditions in the form of narratives by explorers and official reports by governors, royal officers, viceroys, secular and ecclesiastical persons. These documents, which are gradually, being translated and made available by the Florida State Historical Socie-

ty open a rich field of endeavor to the historian, or serious student of Florida history.

*More Modern Times*

But, for an accurate and fuller knowledge of more recent times a search must be made in public buildings, in closets and attics of private homes, in storage rooms and outhouses for books, letters, diaries, newspapers, and manuscripts of every nature. These sources must be preserved and "treasured up," as Burke suggests, so there will grow in the public consciousness a deeper appreciation of the hardships, sacrifices, and noble efforts that have made the history of Florida.

Florida possesses a powerful appeal. There is mystery in the swamps, the rivers, the bayous, the inlets and the still lakes. There is a spell in the gleam of the sandy, sparkling beaches, memories of prosaic Anglo-Saxon colonizer, of French crusader, of Spanish grandee, lurk in every prairie, bay, ancient oak, and coquina ruin. There is an air of old-world antiquity mixed in the tropical breeze. Life in Florida has not always been, safe, but it has been picturesque. Is this mysterious pulsating personality of Florida not worth preserving for posterity?

ALFRED J. HANNA