

Florida Historical Quarterly

Volume 28
Number 4 *Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol 28,
Issue 4

Article 5

1949

Northern Plans for the Economic Invasion of Florida, 1862-1865

Robert L. Clarke



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

Clarke, Robert L. (1949) "Northern Plans for the Economic Invasion of Florida, 1862-1865," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 28: No. 4, Article 5.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol28/iss4/5>

NORTHERN PLANS FOR THE ECONOMIC INVASION OF FLORIDA, 1862-1865

by ROBERT L. CLARKE

Almost with the beginning of the fratricidal conflict of 1861-1865 far-seeing politicians and interested economic groups from the North began an economic invasion of the South. First, a Confiscation Act made all property used in support of the rebellion subject to seizure by the federal government. Later in 1861, despite Abraham Lincoln's questioning of its constitutionality, Congress passed a second Confiscation Act which made the property of all Confederate officials subject to immediate confiscation by Union officials. The authors of the Act, by a provision that gave people supporting the Confederacy sixty days to drop their support or have their property become liable to federal confiscation, struck below the upper stratum of the southern official family and at the roots of southern life. Then, in the summer of 1862, Congress passed the Direct Tax Set which, once Union troops occupied rebel territory, made southern homes, lands, farms and plantations subject to sale or seizure by the federal government if the owners failed to pay the assessed taxes. The avowed objectives of the laws were to relieve "rebels" of their war producing materiel and to finance the war; but under them northerners could transfer southern wealth to themselves at the same time they emasculated the South politically.

Among the most frank in expressing their desire to exploit the South and to guide southern political development were the directors of the New England Emigrant Aid Company. This company had already experimented with sending emigrants to Kansas in an effort to flood that blood stained territory with abolitionist settlers. Now, with the war hardly more than a year old, the directors saw the South as a land of opportunity for northerners and northern ideals. To them the war presented the opportune time for settling in the South northern workmen in numbers large enough

to "support presses, schools, and churches true to their own principles and to the interests of freedom". Land for the emigrants would be no problem since the government was sure to acquire considerable quantities through confiscation and defaulted direct taxes. The job was too big for individuals to attempt; but an experienced company like theirs, "with a comprehensive view of all the objects to be attained" . . . "might profitably" direct the emigrants to their new homes. The implications of these plans were great. Should they succeed, southerners would lose both their wealth and their voice in the national political arena.¹

These far-reaching plans of 1862 came to naught because the company lacked sufficient capital, but early the next year the Executive Committee considered the idea again. In April 1863 the members discussed the advisability of planting a colony in Florida and appointed a special committee, including a surgeon on active military duty, to solicit the national government for official help in a project which would have increased the promoters' personal finances.²

Shrewdly, the ambitious northerners spoke only of the benefits that would accrue to the nation. The Executive Committee hoped to marshal its entire force to exert pressure on "some of the congressmen and others in Washington". They omitted any mention of their plans to secure confiscated land and evaded discussing the effects of their schemes on native southerners. Rather, they sought to convince government officials that the Confiscation Acts could provide land for northern settlers who were needed in the South. They were

1. T. M. Forbush, *History of the New England Emigrant Aid Company with A Report on Its Future Operations*, (Boston, 1862) ; C. J. Higginson to S. Cabot, Jr., April 16, 1862, New England Emigrant Aid Company Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

For other angles and details of the general subject of this paper see an article in this *Quarterly*: "Carpetbag Imperialism in Florida 1862-1868" by George Winston Smith (xxvii, 99-130, 260-299. Oct. 1948, Jan. 1949).

2. Samuel A. Johnson, "The New England Emigrant Aid Company," p. 401. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, dated 1935, in the library in the University of Wisconsin.

willing to strip every southerner of all of his property except his homestead and 160 acres in order to provide homes for settlers who, in the heart of the South, would be firm supporters of the general government. This, they argued, was both necessary and just. All influential southerners were hostile to the government and their antipathy would inevitably lead to repeated conspiracies against it for power within it. With official help the company could forestall conspiracy by directing northern emigrants to southern states where the hostility appeared.

Like the earlier plan this one of 1863 did not materialize. But the company continued to plan for the economic control and exploitation of Florida. Through the summer of 1865 the company kept an interested eye on the state. Finally, in the winter of 1866-1867 it began a new move. In November 1866 the directors heard a Colonel Scott of Florida tell of opportunities which whetted their appetites. They bought space in newspapers, reopened their closed offices, held frequent meetings with Florida as the main order of business and sent a representative to look over the state. In the following January their Florida agent, Edward M. Cheney, who was to become a prominent Republican and support carpetbag rule, gave the company an on-the-spot organ when he purchased the Jacksonville *Florida Union*.⁴

For its post-war venture the company once again turned to the government for help and restated its objectives. To overcome the lack of funds which had limited their interest since 1862 to serious talks, the directors dug up a claim against the national government and petitioned Congress for speedy payment. They contended that negligence by federal officers permitted the destruction of a company-owned hotel in Kansas during the hectic days when Emigrant Aid Company settlers had battled foes of the Union there. But these unre-

3. Higginson to Cabot, April 11, 1863, Company Papers.

4. Johnson, "The New England Emigrant Aid Company," 401-414.

strained conquerors were not content to press their claim solely on its merits. They added the value of the project on which they would spend the \$25,000. They explained that "the present conditions of various parts of the United States . . . would be a call upon your petitioners for the use of all its resources and abilities to promote the purpose of its incorporations." Spokesmen for the company denied any desire to secure benefits for stockholders and proclaimed only the public good that would result from settling northern workers in Florida. There the emigrants would settle the rich soil, open resorts for invalids, and build permanent homes for "those whose delicate constitutions cannot endure the severe weather of the North".

The officials of the New England Company promised other national benefits from their plan to transplant friends of the Union. They wanted "to make Florida a truly loyal State" by flooding it with "Energetic, loyal, liberty loving colonists" who would be a wholesome influence in press, school and business. The promoters' sole avowed aim was to aid in the political, industrial and social "regeneration" of the South.⁵

Despite their claims of altruism there were obvious benefits in organized emigration to northern settlers, financiers and manufacturers. The Radical Republican political program would have kept native southerners from active participation in politics ; and Negro suffrage, coupled with the Republican votes of the new settlers, would have made the South a Republican pocket borough. Settlers would have profited by being able to acquire lands and homes for the ridiculously low unpaid direct taxes plus small charges. Thus indebted to the dominant party, the settlers would have been a further check on the planter-dominated ante-bellum Democratic Party ; they would unite with a southern yeomanry freed from subservience to the planter class.

Paralleling the advantages to the politicians were

5. New England Emigrant Aid Company petitions to Congress, January 4 and February 4, 1867, John A. Andrew Letterbooks, Massachusetts Historical Society.

others to the merchants, bankers and textile manufacturers who guided the New England Emigrant Aid Company. They foresaw a larger southern market in the emigrants and freedmen who might produce more cotton for New England mills and bring increased business and profits for all northern moneyed classes. By the winter of 1865 they had seen the necessity of cooperating with the Radicals. After their victory in 1866, politicians and merchants moved to consolidate their positions and gain the spoils.

Northerners who were neither politicians nor stockholders in the New England Company were also interested in the working of the Direct Tax Act in Florida. Lands sold for defaulted taxes could be bought cheaply. Moreover, the prospects of organized emigration made the easily purchased land a potential money maker for speculators. Whatever their interest, Nesmith and Sons of New York City reading that some Florida lots were scheduled for sale, sought information on their location and the terms of the sales.⁶

In New England there were patriotic Bostonians, Union lovers and industrialists, who had no desire to establish colonies or buy land in Florida. But they did spread propaganda that would make the state attractive to settlers who would increase the market for goods produced in New England factories. Through the New England Loyal Publication Society, voice of the exclusive, pro-administration Union League,⁷ the men bargaged the Army and newspapers with anti-Confederate broadsides. In 1862 John Murray Forbes conceived the idea of supplying newspapers all over the country with

6. Nesmith and Sons to Salmon P. Chase, December 7, 1863, Florida Direct Tax Papers, Treasury Department Annex, Washington.

7. George W. Smith, "Generative Forces of Union Propaganda: A Study in Civil War Pressure Groups," Chapter 6, unpublished doctoral dissertation, dated 1939, in the library of the University of Wisconsin, contains a full account of the origin, aims and work of the Union Leagues and the companion publication societies. Frank Friedel, "The Loyal Publication Society: A Pro-Union Propaganda Agency", in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 26:361-2, has an account of the New York agency and shows its connections with those in Boston and Philadelphia.

reprints and articles for editorial material to mold public opinion. Forbes began the job independently after his associates refused to adopt his proposal, but they soon joined him and organized and financed the New England Loyal Publication Society to continue his work.⁸ Far from being just an organization satisfying some rich men's whims, the Society sent out publications that wielded influence.⁹

The early broadsides revealed the industrialists' economic interest in a South filled with free settlers which was similar to the radicals' political interest. While the politicians were interested in maintaining supremacy in national councils the manufacturers wanted to create an expanded market and reap new and greater profits. Edward S. Philbrick, a pioneer Yankee exploiter of southern wealth made available by the national government, told northerners what they could expect. In an article bluntly entitled "A New Market for Manufacturers" he wrote: "It may readily be seen that a considerable demand may arise for the articles above named [flour, molasses, rice, corn, salt, nails, etc.] and others of kindred nature, when a population of some millions shall be in a position to apply their earnings to the supply of their increasing wants. Should not the manufacturing interests of the North be awake to this?"¹⁰ The cotton manufacturer, Edward Atkinson, soon to head a group that would take over direction of the New England Emigrant Aid Company,¹¹ reminded the

8. Smith, "Generative Forces . . .", 289-290.

9. Arthur C. Cole, *The Irrepressible Conflict, 1850-1865 (A History of American Life)*, edited by Dixon Ryan Fox and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr. vol. 8, New York, 1934), J. G. Randall, *The Civil War and Reconstruction*, (New York, 1937), 638; H. T. Tuckerman to editor of Society, June 13 (?), 1864, among broadsides in Boston Public Library.

Two Missouri editors were hostile to the broadsides. In response to a questionnaire they answered:

	Want documents continued?	Do you print as you like	Do you print them?	See any in exchanges?	Suggestions?
Columbia	as you like	not at all	never	seldom	will not
Warrenton	No	Sir	never	very few	burn them

10. *New England Loyal Publication Society Broadside* #95, July 28, 1863. Hereafter cited as Broadside

11. Johnson, "The New England Emigrant Aid Company," 392.

producers that "The impetus to be given to northern manufacturers when a slave population of four millions shall increase its wants . . . is obvious".¹²

To make the potential market an actual one the men behind the broadsides envisioned a yeomanry composed of various available groups, white southerners excepted. Following Atkinson's lead they proposed that freedmen be permitted to preempt land. Such a policy, they argued, would make the former slaves industrious and teach them some things that they could not learn in school.¹³ This apparently altruistic policy included unmentioned benefits to the men who were buying confiscated estates and raising cotton with black labor.

The manufacturers found another deserving group to set up as beneficiaries when they recommended that Congress pass a law allocating lands of states in rebellion to honorably discharged Union veterans.¹⁴ Organized emigration was another means to settle the South and fill the population void left by the war.¹⁵

Since the economic invasion of the South that the industrialists had in view was a long-range program rather than short-sighted land grabbing, they aimed at the entire section. They did, however, distribute material designed to make Florida attractive to northerners. When military victories convinced them that the Administration intended to apply the ten per cent proclamation there, they urged citizens of other states to migrate to Florida and help the local Unionists erect a government. If the army did no more than hold the points already won, good beef supplies would become available and the valley of the St. Johns river would be open to northern settlers. They told potential settlers to discount stories of alligators, swamps and mosquitoes and remember that it was rich with southern pine. Once the Florida Unionists began to rebuild their state the

12. *Broadside* #97, August 1, 1863.

13. *Broadside* #162, February 6, 1864.

14. *Broadside* #195, June 7, 1864.

15. *Broadside* #156, January 16, 1864 and 274, June 22, 1865.

Society predicted that a flood of emigrants would join them in their work.¹⁶

Two weeks later the picture of a Florida filled with advantages for men willing to take them continued with a letter from a Union officer. Up the St. Johns he had seen "very productive country; rich in all the tropical fruits." The healthfulness of the climate was evident from the river hotels that accommodated convalescents and the exceptionally good health of his comrades while their unit was in the state. Jacksonville looked just like a New England town and Fernandina had a good harbor and railroad connections. The officer concluded his first-hand observations with the expert opinion that the plan to colonize Florida would find "ample success".¹⁷

The avalanche of propaganda was not in vain for the manufacturers convinced themselves of the opportunities open in Florida and, leaving nothing to chance, proceeded to seek additional profits as they provided the state with the necessary Union minded population. Forbes, who had started the propaganda movement in industrial New England, wanted a paying proposition under the guise of a philanthropic venture; one that would "do more good than anything *purely* benevolent". He and Atkinson were particularly anxious to have the experienced Philbrick handle the Boston end of the project since he would "give confidence to capitalists". To get their backing Forbes meant to emphasize the fact that land was cheap in the West and the South but labor, "the Dear point", was cheaper in Florida than anywhere else they could find cheap land. He wanted large scale action to begin promptly and show a moderate profit. For additional aid Forbes thought that some emigrant aid society should spread information through the North, send agents into the South and provide officers to direct emigrants to desirable areas. To drama-

16. *Broadside* #170, March 3, 1864.

17. *Broadside* #174, March 17, 1864.

tize the situation he wanted the publication of some facts about the southern treatment of the labor question.¹⁸

The Forbes-Atkinson scheme, like the other colonization emigration plans, whatever corollary benefits to the Union they included, displayed an interest in the South that was far from any publicly stated war objective. To the men who proposed the migrations to settle northerners on land legally taken from southerners the Civil War was more than the climax of a humanitarian anti-slavery crusade, or a clash of ideologies over theories of the nature of the Union; it was a battle between the economic systems that dominated the sections. They saw the conflict as a glorious opportunity to grasp cheaply, legally, and with clear consciences, hitherto unavailable wealth while their adversaries were helpless to prevent the theft. War provided not only the opportunity but permitted them to camouflage their personal motives with claims of patriotism while they used federal revenue acts to press their economic invasion of the South.

18. Forbes to Atkinson, August 26, 1865 and September 1, 1865, Edward Atkinson Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.