

# Florida Historical Quarterly

---

Volume 34  
Number 2 *Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol 34,  
Issue 2

Article 8

---

1955

## Florida Seen Through the Eyes of Nineteenth Century Travellers

Benjamin F. Rogers



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](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### Recommended Citation

Rogers, Benjamin F. (1955) "Florida Seen Through the Eyes of Nineteenth Century Travellers," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 34: No. 2, Article 8.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol34/iss2/8>

FLORIDA SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF  
NINETEENTH CENTURY TRAVELLERS

by BENJAMIN F. ROGERS

During the first half of the nineteenth century, there were published both in this country and abroad a great number of books written by travellers in all parts of the United States, and especially in the South. As one Southern author observed in 1860: "The fashion has been for several years . . . to write books about the South. Englishmen, Frenchmen, Down-Eastern men, the Bloomer style of men, as well as countless numbers of female scribblers, have not ceased to drum upon the public tympanum (almost to deafness, indeed) in praise or blame - generally the latter - of Southern peculiarities, social habits, manners, customs, observances, and domestic institutions."<sup>1</sup>

The most famous of the ante-bellum travellers, however, all seemed to skip Florida. Charles Dickens travelled widely through the North and West, but he didn't see Florida. Harriet Martineau visited with statesmen in Washington, and went South to Richmond, Charleston, and New Orleans, but she overlooked Florida. Frederick Law Olmsted journeyed through the seaboard slave states, into the back country, and even into Texas, but missed Florida. And neither did the Trollopes nor Basil Hall. Even Lafayette who had been granted a whole township in the vicinity of Tallahassee, did not get to Florida to see his beautiful rolling acres.

Probably the main reason that Florida had so few visitors during the ante-bellum period was that it was off the beaten track and that transportation into the state was difficult. Concerning the trip from Savannah to Jacksonville, one traveller wrote as late as 1875: "There are two ways of getting to Jacksonville, and which ever you choose, you will be sorry you had

---

This paper was a feature of the Annual Meeting of the Florida Historical Society, April 1955.

1. D. R. Hundley, *Social Relations in our Southern States* (New York, 1860, pp. 7-8.

not taken the other. There is the night train by railroad, which brings you to Jacksonville in about sixteen hours; and there is the steamboat line, which goes inland nearly all the way, which may land you in a day, or you may run aground and remain on board for a week."<sup>2</sup> As for the trip from Mobile to Pensacola, William Howard Russell, correspondent for the *London Times*, observed in 1862 that it was "most tedious and exceedingly comfortable in all respects, through a waste of sand, in which we ran the chance of being smothered or lost," and that in the forty miles between Fort Morgan and Pensacola "not a human habitation disturbs the domain sacred to alligators, serpents, pelicans, and wild fowl."<sup>3</sup> If transportation problems were not enough to keep travellers from visiting Florida, there were also the Seminole Indians, who were a problem during much of the ante-bellum period. As late as 1857, James Stirling referred to Seminole attacks on some of the settlements along the St. Johns river.<sup>4</sup> Little wonder that Florida had not yet become a popular stopping point for Northern visitors.

It was really after the war that travellers and immigrants began to enter Florida in considerable numbers. These outsiders had come from a great diversity of places for a great diversity of reasons. Not all of those who came South wrote books about their experiences, but many did, and it is from the observations of some of these that this article is drawn. Represented in this group among others are the reporters, Whitelaw Reid, Edward King, and Julian Ralph; the doctor, Daniel G. Brinton; and two Northerners who eventually came South to live, George Barbour and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Though most observers apparently really tried to be objective, the effort at impartiality is best seen in the title of a book by

---

2. G. W. Nichols, "Six Weeks in Florida," *Harpers Magazine*, XLI (Oct., 1870), p. 655.

3. William H. Russell, *My Diary, North and South* (London, 1863), I, p. 288.

4. James Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States* (London, 1857), pp. 217-9.

one Oliver Crosby: "Florida Facts both Bright and Blue. A Guidebook to intending settlers, tourists, and investors from a Northerner's standpoint. Plain unvarnished truth, without 'taffy.' No advertisements or puffs."<sup>5</sup>

During the late nineteenth century, the customary port of entry into Florida was at Jacksonville, and it was here that the average visitor made his headquarters. Sometime during his stay he would make the trip up the St. Johns River to Enterprise, and perhaps also up the Oklawaha to Silver Springs. Most tourists who took the St. Johns trip stopped at Tocoï or Picolata and went overland to St. Augustine by coach. One of our observers has described this trip for us: "Deep white sand obstructs the stage, and not so rarely as one wishes the wheels strike a pine or palmetto root with a most unpleasant effect on the passengers, especially if they are invalids. After 3 1/2 hours of this torture, the stage is checked by the Sebastian river, over which a miserable ferry boat conveys the tourist who at length finds himself in St. Augustine."<sup>6</sup> Occasionally a truly adventure-some soul would travel down the east coast as far as Volusia county, but beyond that only the most hardened and curious traveller ventured. Miami, of course, was a little fishing village whose sole contact with the outside world was the barefoot mailman who walked along the beach for ninety miles, during which he saw only one house.<sup>7</sup> As time passed, and as settlers began to move into the vicinity of Orlando, which was then called Southern Florida, some travellers visited there, and with the completion of the east-west railroad from Jacksonville to New Orleans, a few visitors made it out to middle Florida to see the state capitol at Tallahassee.

#### *The Climate*

Wherever the visitors came from and however they entered

5. (New York, 1887).

6. Daniel G. Brinton, *A Guidebook of Florida and the South*. . . (Philadelphia, 1869, p. 62.

7. *Ibid*, pp. 80, 102-5.

the state, they were almost unanimously impressed with Florida's climate. They referred to it as "exquisite," "absolutely delicious," Florida's "chief charm," "one continuous spring," "surpassing Italy," "the lotos eater's paradise," "a child's Eden," "the finest winter climate in the United States," and Nathaniel Parker Willis on a first of May picturesquely noted the "morning air by which a new born child would be sufficiently clad."<sup>8</sup> Some Northerners apparently did grumble when they hit Florida during a cold wave, but these were the exceptions, as were those who complained about the hot summers. In the words of Oliver Crosby, "Florida summers are supposed by winter residents or prospective settlers to be our greatest drawback, and it is pleasant to note their surprise as upon experience they declare, 'it is not so hot as in New York.'"<sup>9</sup> If travellers praised the climate, native Floridians were proud of it. As Crosby observed, "How do you like 'our' climate?" was "the universal question asked each new-comer, much as one would say 'our' house, 'our' gun, or 'our' horse, as though the speaker were in some way part proprietor in such a glorious affair, and wanted some of the credit. Sure of an enthusiastic reply in the climate's favor, he pushes the subject forward on every occasion, gloats over the newspaper telegraphic reports of Northern blizzards, or snow blockades, and is even charged with selling the *climate* at so much per acre over worthless land. . . ."<sup>10</sup>

#### Scenery

Florida's scenery came in for somewhat less praise than its climate. As Mrs. Stowe remarked: "Tourists and travellers generally come with their heads full of certain romantic ideas of

8. See for example Edward King, *The Southern States of North America* . . . (London, 1875), p. 398; Whitelaw Reid, *After the War: A Southern Tour* (Cincinnati, 1866), pp. 172, 180; Brinton *op. cit.* pp. 102, 126; Nathaniel P. Willis, *Health Trip to the Tropics* (New York, 1853), pp. 298, 304-5.

9. Oliver Crosby, *Florida Facts Both Bright and Blue*. . . (New York, 1887), p. 28.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

waving palms, orange-groves, flowers, and fruit, all bursting forth in tropical abundance" and they find a "dead sandy level, with patches behind them of rough coarse grass, and tall pine trees, whose tops are so far in the air that they seem to cast no shade, and a little scrubby underbrush."<sup>11</sup> Those travellers who got as far as Tallahassee, however, were unstinted in their praise, while the St. Johns river also received its due share. Even James Stirling, an Englishman who had few good words to say for anything American, referred to the St. Johns as "beautiful and interesting" and then paid it the supreme compliment. It was, he said, "more like an English river," than any he had previously seen.<sup>12</sup>

It was along the St. Johns river that most travellers had their first glimpse of a real live full-grown alligator, and they were invariably impressed. Prior to the war, men had killed them just for the fun of it; James Stirling in 1857 heard of a hunting party which had bagged seventy-five.<sup>13</sup> After the war, the commercial exploitation of the alligator really got under way, and in the 1890's Julian Ralph remarked that the main street of Jacksonville was "fit to be called Alligator Avenue, because of the myriad ways in which that animal is offered as a sacrifice to the curiosity and thoughtlessness of the crowds. I did not happen to see any alligators served on toast there, but I saw them stuffed and skinned, turned into bags, or kept in tanks and boxes and cages; their babies made into ornaments or on sale as toys; their claws used as purses, their teeth as jewelry, their eggs as curios. Figures of them were carved on canes, moulded on souvenir spoons, painted on china, and sold in forms of photographs, water-color studies, breastpins, and carvings."<sup>14</sup> Undoubtedly, this was the reason why, long before 1900, there were "hardly alligators enough to show the tourists."<sup>15</sup>

11. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Palmetto Leaves* (Boston, 1873), p. 27.

12. Stirling, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

14. Julian Ralph, *Dixie; or Southern Scenes and Sketches* (New York, 1896), p. 172.

15. Crosby, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

*Economic Development*

In addition to their opinions on Florida's climate, scenery, and alligators, the visitors also had a good deal to say about its present state and future possibilities of economic development. Their remarks on Jacksonville are typical of what they said about the state as a whole. This port of entry for travellers was a small town of 2000, counting slaves in 1860, and the war dealt it several disastrous blows. Occupied three times by Union troops and partly burned during the third occupation, Jacksonville had grass growing waist high in the streets and cattle bedded down in deserted homes when the war was over.<sup>16</sup> It is small wonder that Whitelaw Reid, who was a dyed-in-the-wool Yankee anyway, was not particularly impressed with what he saw there in 1866.<sup>17</sup> Within a very few years, however, other travellers were marvelling at the rapid progress made in the economic reconstruction of the city. By 1870, its population had increased to 7,000 and Ledyard Bill noted that the "waste and stagnation caused by the war" had disappeared. "Which-ever way we turn," continued Mr. Bill, "new buildings and stores greet our view; old ones being enlarged, streets cleaned, and substantial. . . . In short new impulses and new ideas have seized the town; and its present watchword is 'Forward.'"<sup>18</sup> Jacksonville continued to grow and progress during the 1870's and 1880's, and by 1890 it had 17,000 permanent residents and an estimated 20,000 winter visitors, enough for at least one Northern traveller to refer to it as a metropolis.<sup>19</sup>

Northern enthusiasm over Florida's urban progress was no more pronounced than their enthusiasm over her progress in the field of agriculture. Here they saw immense opportunities in citrus culture and cattle raising, but they also expanded the list of possible crops, some of which are still only in the possible

16. Brinton, *op. cit.*, p. 58; King, *op. cit.*, p. 382.

17. Reid, *op. cit.*, p. 162-7

18. Ledyard Bill, *A Winter in Florida*. . . (New York, 1869), p. 82.

19. Crosby, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

class, to include coffee, tea, cane, indigo, wine grapes, tobacco, rice, watermelons, wheat, corn, potatoes, cassava, silk, quince, figs, peaches, apricots, guava, pomegranate, citron, shaddock, coconut, plums, bananas, olives, tamarind, arrowroot, and pistache.<sup>20</sup> George Barbour's story of "two bright young New York lads" who had cleared \$1800 on an acre of pineapples was typical of the rose colored glasses with which the visitors looked at Florida's agricultural possibilities.<sup>21</sup> As Ledyard Bill put it "the capabilities of the State in an agricultural point of view are unbounded."<sup>22</sup>

### *Tourists*

In addition to the bright future in agriculture, Northern observers also saw possibilities in timber, fisheries, and the manufacture of lead pencils, but the economic opportunity which was most impressive to the Northerner was in the tourist trade. Before the war, there had been a limited number of tourists visiting the upper East Coast, most of them coming for their health. In 1857, James Stirling had referred to Jacksonville as the "principle resort of invalids on the St. Johns," and had remarked of St. Augustine that it was "chiefly noted as a resort for invalids from the North, the climate of Florida having acquired some renown as a restorative for consumptive patients."<sup>23</sup> Immediately after the war, Whitelaw Reid had suggested that Florida might again become a resort for debilitated people from the North, and for the next few years, most of those who journeyed to Florida in the winter went there for their health.<sup>24</sup> In 1869, Brinton remarked of Jacksonville that it was "a favorite residence of invalids during the winter months," so much so that the very sight of the sick "often affected one unfavorably."<sup>25</sup>

20. George Barbour, *Florida for Tourists, Invalids, and Settlers*. . . (New York, 1882), pp. 14-5; L. D. Stickney, "Florida: Soil, Climate, and Productions," *Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture for the Year 1862* (Washington, 1863), pp. 60-1.

21. Barbour, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

22. Bill, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

23. Stirling, *op. cit.*, pp. 213, 215.

24. Reid, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

25. Brinton, *op. cit.*, p. 57.



Meanwhile, however, there was a growing admixture of pleasure seekers. Bill in 1869 noted some vacationers among the invalids, and within five years, Edward King estimated that there were three "crusading to find the phantom, Pleasure," for every one who came South because of his health.<sup>26</sup> During the 1880's, the percentage of invalids and consumptives continued to decline while the tourist business boomed. As one observer, himself a Northerner, noted, the winter visitors were "usually wealthy, and equipped with more prejudices than their well-filled travelling-bags would contain," and their chief desire was to find an elegant hotel.<sup>27</sup> By the 1890's this sort of tourist had almost completely replaced the invalids. As Julian Ralph remarked in 1896, "I have seen but few persons who had the appearance of being victims of any lung disease. . . . Florida was the resort of invalids for many years . . . , but those who spent their winters there, now go to the so-called piney-woods and mountain resorts of Georgia and the Carolinas." Florida on the other hand, continued Ralph, "has become a resting place for those who can afford to loaf at the busiest time of the year - the men who have 'made their piles,' or organized their business to run automatically. As a rule, they are beyond the middle age and of comfortable figures."<sup>28</sup>

#### *Settlers*

All of the Northerners observed by our travellers, however, were not tourists. Actually one of the most interesting facts about Florida's economic development in the late nineteenth century was the large part played by Northern immigrants. We are all familiar with the names of Plant and Flagler and DeLand and Stetson and Sanford, but there were many thousands of lesser renown who also played their parts. Even discounting the natural tendency of Northern travellers to exaggerate Northern contributions, the evidence is amazing. Edward

26. Bill, *op. cit.*, p. 7; King, *op. cit.*, p. 382.

27. Barbour, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

28. Ralph, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

King noted in 1874 that Jacksonville had been rebuilt “according to the New England pattern,” and estimated that half its resident population was from the Northern states.<sup>29</sup> And at Palatka, which had “a cheery, neat, New England look,” he found most of the orange groves owned by Northerners.<sup>30</sup> A decade later, George Barbour, travelling through the state, was everywhere amazed by the number of Northern immigrants he found. At Altamonte, he found the residents were “generally cultured people from the North.” In Tampa, he noted that the new real estate developments in the suburbs were named after Northern states, and that those who settled in them were “nearly all Northern people.” In Volusia County, he was surprised to see that “nearly all the villages and settlements” were composed “of exactly the right sort of Northern stock.” It is little wonder that, with pardonable exaggeration, he concluded, “Florida is rapidly becoming a Northern colony.”<sup>31</sup>

Travellers in Florida, of course, observed Southerners as well as Northerners, and in general they were very favorably impressed. As early as 1868, Harriet Beecher Stowe was quoted in the Hartford, Connecticut *Times*: “Mrs. Stowe says the Southern people are no more inclined to resist the laws or foster the spirit of rebellion than Vermont is. Mr. Sumner and his friends will not like this testimony, but it is hers. She even ‘tested’ the real feeling of the people in her somewhat extended journeys all over Florida and found them so kind that they would even surrender their own sleeping accommodations to her. They desire only peace and the restoration of the Union.”<sup>32</sup> Oliver Crosby found his admiration increasing “for a people that have borne such grievous burdens so uncomplainingly” and testified to many warm friendships between one-time Union soldiers and ex-Confederates.<sup>33</sup>

29. King, *op. cit.*, p. 382.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 400-3.

31. Barbour, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-5, 62, 225.

32. Quoted in St. Augustine *Examiner* June 20, 1868, and in turn in Mary B. Graff, *Mandarin on the Saint Johns* (Gainesville, 1953), pp. 46-7.

33. Crosby, *op. cit.*, p. 109, 125.

There were some places, however, where Northerners were not completely accepted. In the words of George Barbour, it was "entirely useless . . . for the Northern immigrant to expect to become an intimately familiar guest and neighbor of the old residents and aristocrats of the South." But though one could not expect intimate friendship, continued Barbour, "in health and sickness, in trouble or disaster, you will always receive kindly attention, care, and assistance from these excellent people, if you at all deserve it."<sup>34</sup>

*The Florida Cracker*

In addition to their observations on the aristocracy, our travellers all made reference to the so-called Florida cracker. James Stirling had noted in 1857 that society seemed to be divided into a wealthy, dominant class and a poor white class.<sup>35</sup> The poor whites lived among the pines, where most of them had a few cattle and hogs running wild, raised a little patch of corn, and just barely existed. Whitelaw Reid, who was very much prejudiced against the South, was quite sympathetic toward these simple folk. "Of course, the Government will never think of interfering with their little plantations," he wrote. "Surely, they meant no harm, and knew no better than to fight for their State, as they were told!"<sup>36</sup> Perhaps the best concise description of the Florida "cracker" was that of Edward King who referred to them as a "soft-voiced, easy-going, childlike kind of folk, quick to anger, vindictive when their rage is protracted and becomes a feud; and generous and noble in their rough hospitality. But they live the most undesirable of lives, and surrounded by every facility for a luxurious existence, subsist on 'hog and hominy,' and drink the meanest whiskey."<sup>37</sup>

*Negro*

The negro, of course, was of great interest to all Northern

34. Barbour *op. cit.*, pp. 229-30.

35. Stirling *op. cit.*, p. 222.

36. Reid, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

37. King, *op. cit.*, p. 420.

travellers, and their impressions here fell into two general categories - one, that he was practically useless so far as the state's development was concerned, and the other, that through freedom and education he might be a valuable asset as a laborer. None of our travellers wrote polemics on racial equality; indeed after observation of the Florida Negro, they seemed to assume inequality without question,

As Oliver Crosby put it, the Negro problem would "assume a new form to even the most rabid abolitionist, after a residence in Florida." The Northerner would soon learn, continued Crosby, "how utterly shiftless and devoid of all honor the average Southern darkey is." As for the Negro, he generally preferred to work for his old master "rather than to be driven by the impetuous Northerner, who they suspect wishes to get more work out of them than is agreeable to their indolent nature." Crosby did feel, however, that the Negro was as necessary for manual labor "as the Irishman is at the North" although he felt it would be ages before as a rule he would be a "thrifty honest laborer."<sup>38</sup>

George Barbour, on the other hand, felt that the Negro would not "play a permanent or prominent part in Florida." The Northerners and Westerners, he felt, would not tolerate their shiftless ways. He criticized Negroes as "always uncertain, indolent, and negligent, unless closely and incessantly watched;" "given to falsehood and petty theft;" and in his opinion, "their only praiseworthy quality" was "their easy good nature." Barbour's suggested solution to Florida's labor problems was the importation of Chinese coolies.<sup>39</sup>

As one might imagine, most Northerners with such low opinions of Negro labor had absolutely no confidence in the radical reconstruction government of Florida, and many of them, although they voted Republican in national elections, joined

38. Crosby, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-3, 125.

39. Barbour, *op. cit.*, pp. 227, 238.

with the Southern conservatives in their campaigns for white supremacy, Negro disfranchisement, and racial segregation.<sup>40</sup> Though Northerners who remained at home might deplore these activities, those who moved to Florida were firm in the opinion that they would change their minds about the 15th amendment if they ever came South "where it really meant something."<sup>41</sup>

Even Mrs. Stowe, whose book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, had contributed much to the sectional bitterness which caused the War, definitely did not favor racial equality, though she did have confidence in the Negro's ability to furnish Florida's labor. To prepare the Negro for the part he must play in society, she advocated industrial education, and she tended to blame his shortcomings not on hereditary racial characteristics but on the environment to which he had been subjected under slavery.<sup>42</sup>

These then were the views of Northerners visiting Florida in the 19th century. They enjoyed the climate; they were enthusiastic about the economic possibilities; and their sociological and political opinions were not a great deal different from those of the Florida natives. As time passed, the second generation immigrants became Floridians, and there were ever-increasing migrations into Florida from the North. Each successive wave of migrants was conditioned in part by its Florida environment. The tropical climate, the long and beautiful coastline, and the presence of the Negro had just as great an effect on Northerners moving South as did the aridity, the treelessness, and the presence of the wild Indian on Easterners moving West into the Great Plains region.

It has been customary for Americans to think always in terms of the Western frontier - the pioneer in buckskin with his rifle and his axe, or the cowboy with his ten gallon hat and high-heeled boots, or the dirty old prospector with his straggly beard, or the two-gun desperado holding up the stage to Laramie. It

40. King, *op. cit.*, p. 419.

41. Crosby, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

42. Stowe, *op. cit.*, pp. 279-321.

is true that these characters are more dramatic than the middle-aged middle class city dweller clearing land for a grove in Orange County or the sport-shirted Northern businessman putting up a hotel on Florida's lower east coast; but the migrants to Florida were nonetheless pioneers, and the frontiers they were exploiting were no less significant than those in Wyoming or Arizona.

The history of American expansion has too long been written in accord with the pessimistic statement of the 1890 census that the frontier had evaporated. It should be rewritten to include a chapter on the southward moving frontier, which only in the twentieth century has exploited what is truly Southern Florida and which may not yet have exhausted all the possibilities there. And in this chapter there should be a footnote to remind us that although Florida was the first of the forty-eight states to see an attempt at colonization, it was one of the last frontiers to be developed; and that although it has a long and interesting history, the accomplishments of the past one hundred years dwarf those of the preceding three centuries.