

Florida Historical Quarterly

Volume 42
Number 1 *Florida Historical Quarterly, Vol 42,*
Number 1

Article 7

1963

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Recommended Citation

Large, Jr., John (1963) "A Scientist Observes Florida: 1870," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 42: No. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol42/iss1/7>

A SCIENTIST OBSERVES FLORIDA: 1870

by JOHN LARGE, JR.

NO ROLL OF nineteenth century America's eminent men of science would be complete without the name of Jared Potter Kirtland. His noteworthy career was no less of an ornament to the historical recollection of northeastern Ohio than to the scientific fraternity of the country as a whole. Kirtland's endeavors led him into many areas of public enlightenment. Born in Connecticut in 1793, of deeply-rooted New England ancestry, young Jared had shown an early enthusiasm for horticulture and natural history. At the age of fifteen years he made an original scientific contribution. Later in 1815, at Yale Medical College, he received his M.D. degree as a member of the first graduating class of that fledgling institution of medicine and launched into practice.¹ The year 1825 found him among the pioneers of the Western Reserve in Ohio. His worth as an individual was there given public recognition when, in 1828, he was elected to the Ohio legislature where he served several terms. In the 1830's he became a trustee of Western Reserve and Ohio Agricultural colleges and held a chair on the faculty of the Medical College of Ohio in Cincinnati. He was appointed to assist with the Ohio geological survey and became the president of the Third Ohio Medical Convention. Kirtland's distinction further increased in the following decade when he became a founder of the Cleveland Medical College (now a part of Western Reserve University).

The doctor's creative mind found prolific expression in the writing of an impressive array of articles for professional journals. These, along with his lectures, brought him no small degree of fame in academic circles. He corresponded and came into contact with such foremost scientists as Louis Agassiz. He assisted in the founding of the American Society of Geology and Natural History and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He was a member of the American Philosophical Society and was appointed by Congress to the Board of Managers of the

1. In 1818, while in his mid-twenties, Kirtland served as a probate judge in Wallingford, Connecticut.

Smithsonian Institution. As local interest in his work grew rapidly, he organized and headed the Cleveland Academy of Natural Science and became the editor of an agricultural journal, while contributing to others. During 1853 he joined in a summer expedition to parts of northern Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Upper Canada where he indulged in natural history explorations. Ten years later, in the midst of the Civil War, the elderly physician, an ardent patriot, volunteered to act as examining surgeon for the Union troops at Columbus and Cleveland.²

By 1870 Kirtland found himself in virtual retirement. Where most men of his longevity might have settled back into a life of contemplative ease, re-living their past achievements and basking in life's twilight glow, the Ohio doctor's craving for the new and unusual in horticultural, botanical, and general scientific experiences was as heightened as ever. Accordingly, at the advanced age of seventy-seven years, he launched into preparations for a Florida sojourn.³ In a letter to a cousin, dated the 10th of February, Kirtland announced his intention to depart for the southernmost reaches of the United States without delay, to be accompanied by his ailing grandson and a friend. But as Kirtland envisioned the trip, it was to be no mere holiday for the rejuvenation of the health. Typically, he proposed to carry out an ambitious project devoted to making "extensive collections of Birds, Fishes, Reptiles, Insects, Shells & Plants."⁴

2. More detailed biographical material for Kirtland may be found in George M. Curtis, "Jared Potter Kirtland, M. D., Pioneer Naturalist of the Western Reserve," *Ohio State Medical Journal*, XXXVII (October, 1941), 971-977; Benjamin Silliman, "An Obituary for Jared Potter Kirtland," *American Journal of Science and the Arts*, XV (January, 1878), 80; J. S. Newberry, *Biographical Memoirs of the National Academy of Science*, II (1886), 129-133; Egbert Cleave, *Biographical Cyclopaedia of the United States. Ohio volume* (Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1875), 13-17; Frederick C. Waite, "Jared Potter Kirtland," *Dictionary of American Biography*, 22 vols. (New York, 1928-1944), X, 438-439; Agnes R. Gehr, "Jared Potter Kirtland, 1793-1877" (unpublished Master's thesis, Western Reserve University, 1950).
3. Cleave may have been the accepted authority for the information in several of the biographical accounts that Kirtland was in Florida as early as 1869. The evidence now indicates that he did not leave for the South until the following year.
4. The author's account of Kirtland's Florida excursion is based upon two letters: Jared P. Kirtland to Lizzie S. Potter, February 10, 1870, and Jared P. Kirtland to Mrs. Helen P. Warner, March 14-15, 1870. These are located in Container 6, Folder 3, Potter family letters, Alfred Mewett papers, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio.

The irrepressible doctor had been as busy at his home in East Rockport, Ohio, as he intended to be at his destination. "In three days," he wrote, "we have procured our tent, clothing and every requisite for camping life." He sketchily referred to their itinerary: "We go down the Ohio & Mississippi to New Orleans, thence to the Florida Keys and [will] hunt over the grounds where Audubon's Episodes were located. . . ." ⁵ From the Keys, Kirtland planned to travel with his small party "to the heads of [the] St. Johns river . . . after exploring the Natural History through the whole extent of Florida," and arrive in Jacksonville, "*the Saratoga of the South*," by late May. "We shall," he penned in jest, "travel as Naturalists . . . in fatigue dresses and fill the places of the banished Seminoles. . . ." ⁶ But upon reaching Jacksonville, "we shall meet the fashionables, and throw off our indian habits and costumes and attempt to play gentlemen." ⁷

The prospects of venturing from respectable northeastern Ohio into a relatively obscure portion of the country, as yet believed by many to be largely uninfluenced by the orderly, intellectual, and cultivated ways of New England had given Kirtland pause to reflect. But he resolved that traditional Yankee estimates of Florida as a perpetually swamp-filled and disease-infested frontier wilderness refuge for unruly Indians, escaped criminals, n'er-do-wells and, what was more intolerable, still treasonous, unreconstructed rebels of the then lately-demised Confederate States of America would not deter him. Admittedly, it was "a hazardous undertaking for an imbecile of 77 years. . . ." Still he considered it "a matter of duty . . . to engage in it [for the sake of his grandson] and . . . [would] not shrink from its dangers." Nor could he conceal his anticipation for the abundance of "interest and instruction to be derived [from the journey]. . . ." All his long life he had looked forward to exploring Florida which "circumstances" had

5. Kirtland here referred to the journals of the ornithologist John Audubon, which he urged his cousin to re-read and then to imagine "the fields and scenes of next month's operations." Kirtland added however, that he felt Audubon's "taste and knowledge" had confined the latter too exclusively to ornithological observations among the Florida Keys in the early 1830's. For Audubon's "Episodes," see Maria R. Audubon, *Audubon and His Journals* (New York, 1897), II, 345-371.

6. The venerable doctor wore a most un-Seminole full beard!

7. He confided to his cousin that "Before the latter character is played out, I hope to visit New York and New England."

previously disallowed. But, he concluded, "Providence seems now to favor it. . . ."

Over a month later found Kirtland "Becalmed in Lake St. Johns Florida," where he set aside a few moments to jot off a communication to another relative describing their passage by ship from New York. Sailing down the eastern coast, they met with a head wind and "a perfect tornado," accompanied by thunder, lightning, rain, and hail. Under conditions where more experienced seafarers would have sought a haven of safety from Nature's scourgings, Kirtland was ecstatic. A genuine storm at sea, "sublime, beautiful [and] terrific," had evidently been one of the desideratums of his life.

The tempest continued until the party debarked at Savannah. The doctor then assumed the role of sightseer and tourist where he eagerly observed, "for the first time . . . the views of a tropical land" The usual tropical "sensations" were absent, however: Kirtland stood on an icy deck with temperatures ranging in the low twenties. Ashore, frost had likewise nipped the camellias and other floral offerings in the city itself. But despite their condition, Kirtland found them "interesting objects."

While stretching his limbs in the "handsome" Georgia coastal community, the doctor occupied himself with the customary points of interest. He sought out at some great length the grave of Lyman Hall, a former governor of Georgia and one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Hall and Kirtland shared the same birthplace of Wallingford, Connecticut. But, "Alas, for human glory!" Not only had the doctor searched in vain for the grave, he was perplexed when "no one seemed to know that such a person existed." Evidently Kirtland was unaware that Hall's remains were reposing in a prominent location in Augusta. Kirtland "viewed with emotion the Monument and resting place of the brave Pulaski," the European nobleman who had given his life as a soldier for the American cause at Savannah in 1779. The monument erected to the memory of another Revolutionary hero, Nathanael Greene, was, to the doctor's satisfaction, "quite conspicuous," though bearing no inscription.

A steamer on the "inner route" transported Kirtland and his friends to Jacksonville, "a busy and thriving Yankee city," where the doctor met many old acquaintances. Within three days they had chartered "a fine yacht," winding their way southward on the

St. Johns to the inlet of Lake Harney. All the while they explored and collected specimens of natural history. Much had to be left behind, Kirtland complained, due to their inability to take and preserve it for the duration of the journey. Nevertheless, his aged eyes beheld in delicious wonderment the exotic wild flowers seen "at every landing" of their craft, the names and characteristics of which he sought out among the pages of his copy of John Darby's *Botany of the Southern States*.⁸ As for the "Birds, Reptiles, Fishes &c.," the doctor claimed a familiarity with these, "by means of scientific works."

As with other Florida visitors from Northern climes, Kirtland expressed delight at the groves of fully-laden orange trees. He had arrived at the proper season to savor the perfume of the blossoms, "as deliciously fragrant, as the winds of the Spice Islands." But he was less enthused over the climate which he described as "warm, sultry and depressing to a Northern constitution" and doubted its "favorable influence over invalids. More health is here lost than gained." Kirtland decided that much he had heard about the curative and convalescent blessings of the state was sheer exaggeration. "For a pleasure trip," wrote the doctor, "especially for a Naturalist, it will perhaps pay to sojourn here a brief time - but no well to do northern family should ever think of locating in Florida." He judged that "no sanitary influences of climate" were responsible for the marked improvement in the condition of his grandson's health; rather, this was the result, Kirtland supposed, "more from exemption from care and business. . . ." The doctor again expressed gratitude to "a Kind Providence" for preserving his own constitution and "for sustaining and protecting me thus far in this journey."

Even the vicissitudes of weather along the St. Johns - from severe thunder showers which sent their craft pitching and rolling, to clear and inviting skies - did not prevent Kirtland from making an inquiring reference in his letter to "the civilized world"

8. Possibly this same small volume of Darby's *Botany* was seen by the author. A copy of *Botany* is a part of the collection of the Western Reserve University Biological Library which was acquired in November, 1900, from Kirtland's granddaughter, Mrs. Caroline P. Cutter. On the flyleaf is Darby's autograph, presumably, with the date "January [?], 1865 - from the Southern Confederacy." Darby was a contemporary of Kirtland. Both men died during the same year, 1877.

far away to the North, from which his little group had received no news for many days. He supposed that "our friends at the north" were surviving the last stages of harsh winter, while he and his companions were "melting with heat, and tortured with mosquitoes and sand flies." Added to this discomfort, each night the old doctor and his party were "serenaded with the bellowings of alligators." The problem of thirst-quenching, in the absence of any "stimulating drink," was partially solved with the advice of a rustic, or perhaps through the Yankee ingenuity of Kirtland himself. The "brackish and sulphurous waters" of the St. Johns were concocted with "the juice of the wild and sour orange," resulting in a not unpalatable beverage.

"The immense and numerous Shell-Mounds," exclaimed the doctor after he had encountered these famous archaeological curiosities along the river, "are as wonderful as the pyramids of Egypt, and perhaps as old." He speculated that these "works of art" had accumulated after the snails which had inhabited them were used as food, perhaps by a prehistoric people, "after the manner of the French . . . of this day. . . ." Groups of sand heaps likewise drew his attention. He thought them to be "the work of a race anterior to the late Seminoles - perhaps the ancestors of the first discovered Mexicans."

Kirtland took advantage of opportunities to observe examples of the human species in Florida. In an ex-Confederate state still caught up in the turmoil of Reconstruction, the doctor was optimistic over "the intelligent Southern people" with whom he had daily contact. They were understandably sad, yet "meeting their reverses with a dignified and philosophic resignation." Any bitterness and hostility which they harbored toward their conquerors would cease "if universal amnesty were at once extended to them. . . ." For the class of "poor whites," Kirtland had little use. They were "an ignorant, treacherous and unreliable race," apparently bearing little resemblance to anything in the doctor's own Western Reserve. He reasoned that they had "lost little except life" in the war, were completely lacking in "manners, morals, or intelligence" and that "the most exciting topic at present among them . . . [was] 'are they as good as the *Niggers*?' "

Kirtland sorrowed over the "numerous cases of individual suffering and impoverishment caused by the rebellion," though he took note of the Negroes who appeared happy and faithful to an

occupation, especially when they were assured of some financial reward. Toward their former masters, they were "rather shy," but, to their credit, they were engaged in learning some of the fundamentals of education while accumulating property. Florida's colored folk, Kirtland asserted, had a "dear comprehension" of the peculiar predicament of their race, but were "so monkey-imitative of the fashions, vices & Follies of the Whites and so destitute of originality," that he despaired of their making any significant contribution to "the reputation of this State" for a long while.

Kirtland lay aside his pen in anticipation of going ashore at a place called Buffalo Bluff for more exploring and collecting.⁹ Ultimately, he and his companions reached home and, within seven years from the time his Florida adventures had begun, the doctor was speedily drawing near to the close of his productive life. A scientific inquirer of distinction in Florida, he would take his place with such men as Perrine, Catesby, John and William Bartram, Michaux, Chapman, Croom, Small, Wyman, and Moore.¹⁰ His scholarly, inquisitive appearance must have caught the eye of many an observant Floridian wherever he traveled among them. As for Florida, Kirtland, the "Sage of Rockport," expressed an opinion heard as frequently then as now among those who knew of its enduring charms: it was "truly a wonderful country."

9. Buffalo Bluff lay below Palatka on the St. Johns between Murphy Island and Horse Landing in Putnam County.

10. For additional accounts of scientists and scientific explorers in Florida, see H. Harold Hume, "Botanical Explorers of the Southeastern United States," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXI (April, 1943), 289-302; Nelson Klose, "Dr. Henry Perrine, Tropical Plant Enthusiast," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXVII (October, 1948), 189-201.