

1967

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Recommended Citation

Garvin, Russell (1967) "The Free Negro in Florida Before the Civil War," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 46 : No. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol46/iss1/4>

THE FREE NEGRO IN FLORIDA BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR

by RUSSELL GARVIN

FREEDOM FOR NEGROES in a society where race was the only qualification for slavery was at best an anomaly and at worst an illusion. In either case though, freedom survived alongside slavery. Florida first acquired free Negroes early in the seventeenth century. In 1704 the Spanish governor, Zuniga, opened the territory to fugitive slaves from British plantations to the North.¹ Thus established, potential liberty across the border tempted Carolina blacks and tormented their white owners. It was hoped that the colonization of Georgia would serve as a buffer region to prevent the escape of slaves to Florida. Carolina benefited, but Georgia, once slaves had been imported, found the runaway problem its biggest nuisance,² and it remained for Georgia a continuous problem. Spanish correspondence of the period reveals a regular flow of Negroes into Florida.³ Once in the region the blacks lived as free subjects of the Bourbon king. They were soon numerous enough to be formed into companies to aid in the defense of the territory.⁴ A refuge for the Negroes, Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, was established three miles north of St. Augustine by the accommodating Spanish authorities in 1739.

1. Mark F. Boyd, "The Seminole War: Its Background and Onset," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXX (July 1951), 22.
2. Eugene P. Southall, "Negroes in Florida Prior to the Civil War," *Journal of Negro History*, XIX (January 1934), 79.
3. "Documents of Spanish Officials Bearing on the Free Negro Settlement of Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, Florida," *Journal of Negro History*, IX (April 1924), 144-95.
4. Joshua R. Giddings, *The Exiles of Florida* (Columbus, 1858), 2. See also facsimile edition with introduction by Arthur W. Thompson (Gainesville, 1964). Throughout his life Joshua Giddings was ardent in his defense of Negro rights. His stand on slavery, which he develops extensively in *The Exiles of Florida*, has been the subject of much controversy and disagreement. His fundamental thesis, however, has stood the test of time, as well as the scrutiny of recent historians. See Kenneth W. Porter, "The Episode of Osceola's Wife: Fact of Fiction?" *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXVI (July 1947), 93; Edwin L. Williams, Jr., "Negro Slavery in Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXVIII (October 1949), 104; and Edwin L. Williams, Jr., "Florida in the Union, 1845-1861" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1951), 116.

[1]

Provisions were made for military and religious instruction, and food was to be supplied by the government until a crop could be harvested.⁵ But there was no harvest. In the summer of 1740, James Oglethorpe led a group of British colonists into Florida. They attacked St. Augustine and drove the Negroes from their fort, which was destroyed. In the city the blacks found safety, and there they remained until 1763, when they were transferred to Cuba.⁶

At the same time, in the western parts of Florida, Negroes were immigrating along with those factious Creek Indians called Seminoles. Spanish law extended its protection over them and gave them the right of land ownership.⁷ The Negroes associated with the Indians can be separated roughly into two groups: those who were legally slaves, and those who were free and who served as allies.⁸

The Indians had obtained slaves as gifts from the British government or had purchased them in imitation of slave-owning whites. What to do with them once the novelty wore off posed an insuperable problem for the Seminoles. The Negroes were allowed to build their own farms, paying a moderate rent in kind to their Indian masters. A type of democratic vassalage was created completely devoid of feelings of racial superiority. Intermarriage was common. Some who possessed a knowledge of English and Spanish became useful interpreters. The most astute gained the confidence of the Indians and served as valued councilors of much influence. When necessary the males willingly fought alongside the braves for the protection of their homes and independence.⁹

Many a slave longed to exchange his position for this kind of servitude. When Georgia settlements were attacked by the Creeks, Negro escapes were given further encouragement.¹⁰ The seventeenth century slave owners could do little more than fume and

5. Southall "Negroes In Florida," 78-79; Zora Neale Hurston, "Communications," *Journal of Negro History*, XII (October 1927), 664.

6. Southall, "Negroes In Florida," 78-79; Hurston, "Communications," 664.

7. Giddings, *Exiles of Florida*, 3-4.

8. Kenneth W. Porter, "Relations Between Negroes and Indians Within the Present Limits of the United States," *Journal of Negro History*, XVII (July 1932), 325.

9. Boyd, "Seminole War," 22-23; Kenneth W. Porter, "Negroes and the East Florida Annexation Plot, 1811-1813," *Journal of Negro History*, XXX (January 1945), 12-14.

10. Boyd, "Seminole War," 22.

complain to the government. After the Revolution, a few abortive expeditions were launched to capture runaways, but these were singularly unsuccessful. The power of the Creeks effectively stood in the way of attempts to return Negroes to their owners, and the blacks worked harmoniously near the Indians. They settled on good land along the Apalachicola and Suwannee rivers and many owned large flocks and herds.¹¹

Tranquility could not last forever, however, and beginning in 1811 American raids into Florida increased. Indian and Negro property was destroyed, including two or three Indian towns, but neither the Seminoles nor Florida was conquered.¹²

Active participation in the American-British war came in 1814 when two English ships landed Lieutenant Colonel Edward Nicholls, his regular troops, Negro and Indian allies, and about 100 Negro slaves in Apalachicola Bay. At a point on the east bank of the Apalachicola, some fifteen miles upstream, the English constructed a military stronghold. Eight cannons were placed in it. From the fort, the British could control river commerce and operate against the Georgia-Alabama frontier. They also used it as headquarters to confer with the Red Stick Indians, the Seminoles, and refugee Negroes. The troops stayed through the winter, but with spring they withdrew at the request of a disapproving British ministry. The fort was left stocked with arms, ammunition, and artillery.¹³ The residents of Georgia and Alabama looked upon the fort with little equanimity. It housed 300 Negroes, including women and children, and it became known as Negro Fort. Perhaps another thousand Negroes settled "under the guns of the fort" in the surrounding area. Opposition increased until finally in July 1816, after the Spanish governor at Pensacola indicated that he could do little to stop the fort's activities, General Andrew Jackson ordered the destruction of the fort. On July 20 an attack was launched under the command of Colonel Duncan L. Clinch. Seven days later, on the morning of July 27, a battery of American vessels attacked the fort, and a hot shell found its target, exploding the fort's central magazine. The

11. Giddings, *Exiles of Florida*, 5-29.

12. *Ibid.*, 29-31.

13. John K. Mahon, "British Strategy and Southern Indians: War of 1812," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XLIV (April 1966), 300; Mark F. Boyd, "Events at Prospect Bluff on the Apalachicola River, 1808-1818," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XVI (October 1937), 79-81.

resulting explosion reportedly was heard all the way to Pensacola. One observer estimated that 270 men, women, and children were killed, and nearly all the rest were mortally wounded. Only three persons escaped injury. The Americans and friendly Indians confiscated all of the fort's remaining contents, the Indians receiving the greater part of the booty. Many refugee Negroes had already sought protection in the Seminole Indian villages when they learned of Clinch's movement down the river. The others were captured and returned to the Spaniards and Americans who claimed them. On August 2 the campaign against the Negro Fort officially ended.¹⁴

Runaways, however, continued to filter into Florida, and in time Indians and Negroes reoccupied many of the farms, and their settlements again served as resting places for slaves fleeing South. There were Negro villages scattered across Florida almost to St. Augustine. Contemporary accounts give estimates of well over 1,000 free Negroes in Florida in the two decades following the destruction of Negro Fort. They lived in log and palmetto huts surrounded by fields up to twenty acres in size. The greatest numbers were found on the islands of the Great Wahoo Swamp, along the Withlacoochee River, in the Big Cypress Swamp, in the St. Johns River, and on the Suwannee where their Old Town was located.¹⁵

Since Indian raids and slave escapes persisted along the Georgia-Alabama frontier, General Jackson in March 1818 led Regulars and Georgia militia into Florida. He moved against the Indians and Negroes living along the east side of the Appalachicola River, and several small villages in the area, inhabited almost entirely by blacks, were destroyed. For the next several days Jackson pursued the Indians. Finally, a skirmish was fought at Old Town on the Suwannee. Very few Indians were captured and no Negroes. Jackson could not follow the remainder into more southerly parts of the territory and withdrew. In May 1818, he declared the war at an end.¹⁶ The remaining Negroes and Indians

14. Rembert W. Patrick, *Aristocrat in Uniform: General Duncan L. Clinch* (Gainesville, 1963), 27-33.
15. Giddings, *Exiles of Florida*, 19, 47, 52, 70, 97, 282-83; John T. Sprague, *The Origins, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War* (New York, 1848), 19, 97. See also facsimile edition with introduction by John K. Mahon (Gainesville, 1964).
16. E. Dolorus Preston, Jr., "The Genesis of the Underground Railroad," *Journal of Negro History*, XVIII (April 1933), 150; Rembert W. Patrick, *Florida Under Five Flags* (Gainesville, 1960), 28; Giddings, *Exiles of Florida*, 50-55.

for the most part settled around Tampa Bay or moved south to Cape Florida where many were carried by Bahama wreckers to remote islands.¹⁷ With the end of fighting the Indians and Negroes tried hard to return to pre-1816 conditions, but raids and immigration by whites prevented this.

That part of the First Seminole War which had aimed at quelling the Indians and capturing Negroes had been a failure for the United States. Apart from those wounded at Negro Fort in 1816, few slaves had been captured. Many Negroes thus remained at liberty, increasing in numbers as they were joined by escapees from Georgia and Alabama. Their presence was tempting to whites, who ventured into Indian lands intent on capturing slaves and fugitives. The incursions were especially bad along the Apalachicola River, and probably few had escaped the Georgia raiders by the late 1830s.¹⁸

Penetration of the wilderness by farmers also served to thwart a reversion of the Indians and Negroes to former modes of living. White husbandry pushed the Indians deeper and deeper into the peninsula. In 1832, some of the tribal chiefs signed a treaty providing for emigration to western lands where the Creeks were already settled. Orders to move came three years later, but dissenting Indians and Negroes began warfare anew.¹⁹ They hoped first of all to persuade the government to grant them lands not coveted by white settlers, but if forced to move West, they wanted a treaty which would allow the Negroes to move with them. The Negroes for their part were farmers, and they were not averse to settling the land west of the Mississippi if guarantees for their freedom could be secured. The only way each group could secure its goals was to wear down the government until it made a reasonable offer.²⁰

Negroes played an important role in the resistance, and many participated in the actual fighting. According to some interpreters, they excelled the Indians as warriors. They exercised superior caution and attended to many important details.²¹ So involved

17. Kenneth W. Porter "Notes on Seminole Negroes in the Bahamas," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXIV (July 1945), 57-58.
18. Giddings, *Exiles of Florida*, 57-58, 88-93, 253.
19. Patrick, *Florida Under Five Flags*, 34; Porter, "Notes on Seminole Negroes," 58; Giddings, *Exiles of Florida*, 252.
20. Kenneth W. Porter, "Three Fighters for Freedom," *Journal of Negro History*, XXVIII (January 1943), 56.
21. Giddings, *Exiles of Florida*, 54.

were they in the Second Seminole War, that General Jesup, commanding general in Florida, in 1836 wrote the war department that the "negroes rule the Indians."²² In another letter he elaborated: "This, you may be assured, is a negro, not an Indian war; and if it be not speedily put down, the South will feel the effects of it on their slave population before the end of the next season."²³

The part played by Negro leaders in the Second Seminole War was hardly mentioned at all except by contemporary Indians. Part of the reason for this was the reluctance of a Seminole Negro, who was legally a slave, to give information to a white questioner. But more of the reason was found in the southern mind; the Negroes were considered as a body which threatened the existence of slavery in Florida and adjacent states. To picture the Negroes as individuals with human emotions could evoke sympathy in many quarters, so whenever mention was made of a Negro, particularly one who was a leader, it was usually kept brief and unfavorable.²⁴

There were some free Negroes not associated with the Indians who also participated in the Seminole War. Even though they had less to gain and more to lose than either slaves or Indian Negroes, they fought in the field and worked behind the line. Some operated as spies and secret agents to obtain recruits, supplies, and information. The general atmosphere of discontent and brooding hostility produced by all these operations kept a large part of the militia at home to guard against any sudden outbreak, thus relieving pressure on the Indians and Negroes in the field and contributing to the prevention of their utter defeat.²⁵

The Seminole War was nearing its end, and by 1841 it was believed that nearly all the Negroes that had cooperated with the Indians had been moved to the West. One observer estimates that 500 persons had been "seized and enslaved" during the war.²⁶ Many Negroes had intermarried with the Indians and half-breeds,

22. *American State Papers*, VII, *Military Affairs* (Washington, 1861), 832.

23. U. S. Documents, 25th Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 78, p. 52.

24. Porter, "Three Fighters for Freedom," 54-55.

25. Kenneth W. Porter, "Florida Slaves and Free Negroes in the Seminole War, 1835-1842," *Journal of Negro History*, XXVIII (October 1943), 421.

26. Giddings, *Exiles of Florida*, 315.

and others had been enslaved by the Indians. Whatever the relationship, these Negroes left with the Indians.²⁷ But by no means did all free Negroes live with the Indians. It is believed that there were a number of others living in Florida, but information about them is scarce.

Comparatively few free Negroes lived among the white citizens of ante-bellum Florida, and those living with the Indians were ignored by census takers.²⁸ While Florida's population quadrupled in the four federal censuses taken before the Civil War, the number of free Negroes remained nearly static: 844 Negroes, making up 2.4 percent of the population in 1830; 817, or 1.5 percent in 1840; 932, 1.1 percent in 1850; and 932, or 0.6 percent in 1860.²⁹ Compared with other states on the number of non-slave blacks, Florida ranked near the bottom throughout the ante-bellum period.

The average Florida free Negro, as shown by the following statistics from the population census of 1860 was decidedly older than either slaves or whites:

AVERAGE AGE IN FLORIDA

Year	Free Negro	Slave	White
1830	23.8	20.3	20.9
1840	24.8	21.3	21.5
1850	26.6	21.6	21.4
1860	25.0	21.3	21.2

Florida did not differ in this respect from the rest of the United States except that Florida whites were younger than most in the nation. This was due probably to the influx of young settlers. According to census reports literacy was not too low. In 1850, thirty percent of free Negro males and forty percent of the females over twenty years old could read and write, as compared with

27. Porter, "Florida Slaves and Free Negroes," 418-20.

28. The Seminole Indian Agent in 1830 attached a report to the census schedules stating that the council of that tribe refused to permit the enumeration of the Negroes residing on Seminole lands. U. S. Census Schedules, 1830, Florida, Sheet 53, p. 105.

29. J. D. DeBow, *Statistical View of the United States*, (Washington, 1854), 63-65; *Population of the United States in 1860* (Washington, 1864), 53.

seventy-five percent white women and eighty-six percent white men. In the same year sixty-six free Negroes were attending schools in Escambia, Monroe, and St. Johns counties.³⁰ Ten years later only nine free Negroes were in school.³¹

It should be explained that the term free Negro includes mulattoes, who were defined by law as "every person other than a negro, who shall have one fourth part or more of negro blood . . ." ³² Beginning with the census of 1850 officials noted this distinction. In that year there were 703 of mixed blood to 229 blacks. When contrasted to the 8:100 ratio of mulatto to Negro among Florida slaves, the disproportion is staggering.³³ Certainly legal freedom for a few blacks seemed to indicate sexual license for some whites. Indeed, it was not uncommon for a black mother to have mulatto children living with her; the census schedules abound with examples.

Only a few areas of the state had free Negroes in any concentration. Two-thirds of them lived in Duval, Escambia, Monroe, and St. Johns counties; most of the others were located in north-west Florida, particularly along the Apalachicola River and in Leon County.³⁴ Hillsborough County had few free Negroes because of the recency of its settlement and its distance from borders and other Negroes.

While the total number of free Negroes in the state remained fairly constant in the years prior to 1860, this should not be interpreted as meaning life was stable for them. Indeed, it must have been anything but tranquil. While women outnumbered men, the margin fluctuated greatly; in 1830 and 1850 there were almost a hundred more women, yet in each of the subsequent enumerations the difference almost disappeared.³⁵ The changeableness of

30. Computed from figures in *The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850* (Washington, 1853), 396-99, 405-06.

31. *Statistics of the United States in 1860* (Washington, 1866), 507.

32. *Acts of the Legislative Council of the Territory of Florida*, 6th Session, January 19, 1828, pp. 97-110. Cited hereafter as *Acts of Council*.

33. DeBow, *Statistical View of the United States*, 83.

34. "Population Schedules, Territory of Florida," *Fifth Census of the United States, 1830*; "Population Schedules, Territory of Florida," *Sixth Census of the United States, 1840*; *The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850*, 400-01; *The Population of the United States in 1860*, 50-54.

35. DeBow, *Statistical View of the United States*, 66; *Population of the United States in 1860*, 52.

their lives makes it difficult to follow a name through the censuses. For example, no name appears more than twice in any of the four relevant censuses of St. Johns County—one of the most peaceful regions for free Negroes. Only fifteen out of 200 names are the same in both 1850 and 1860 when the list included all members of a family and not just heads of families.

Why this constant change? Deaths certainly claimed many, but births served to replace the dead. More of an answer lies in the unpopularity the free Negro as a group faced from white sources. When whites chose to make it so, life became difficult in many ways. Movement away from Florida and away from the United States was encouraged and enslavement was always a real possibility. Many free Negroes had already known compulsory servitude in their lives, and they knew how easy it would be to return to this status.

Some of the free Negroes were runaways or descendants of runaways who had chosen to live among the whites or had fate choose it for them. The seventy-five to a hundred free blacks who lived along the banks of the Apalachicola River were probably among this group. However, since most lived in the old Spanish port cities, it is reasonable to assume that they owed much to the liberal Spanish laws which required a master to free any slave offering him \$300,³⁶ and which made children of unmarried black mothers free.³⁷ Legal immigration and manumission also may be assumed to have played their part in creating the free Negro population.

Immigration of Negroes was exceedingly unpopular with settlers in Florida. An early legislative act made it unlawful for any free Negro to come on his own or to be brought into the Florida Territory. A guilty offender had to put up a \$500 recognizance that he would leave within ten days, and if the bond could not be paid the Negro was to be sold out for one year's service to the highest bidder.³⁸ According to an 1828 enactment sailors on foreign or American vessels in territorial waters around Florida were specifically excluded.³⁹

36. Porter, "Florida Slaves and Free Negroes in the Seminole War, 1835-1842," 390.

37. Clarence E. Carter, ed., *The Territorial Papers of the United States: The Territory of Florida*, 26 vols. (Washington, 1959-1962), XXIII, 801.

38. *Acts of Council*, 5th Session, January 3, 1827, 81-84.

39. *Ibid.*, 7th Session, November 21, 1828, 186-87.

So important was this issue that the Constitutional Convention of 1838 could not overlook it. The drafting committee for the document which became effective with statehood in 1845 wanted to make it the "duty" of the legislature to prevent free Negro immigration.⁴⁰ The full delegation found it too extreme to charge the General Assembly with this specific task, but it still gave the legislature "power" to pass such laws.⁴¹

or the remainder of the pre-Civil War period immigration was illegal. The law of 1827 was reenacted on February 10, 1832,⁴² and that date, a decade later, was made the legal cut-off time, for the movement of free Negroes and mulattoes into Florida. All free Negroes brought into the territory after that time were to be sent out by the sheriff, and any culprit who refused to leave could then be sold into slavery for a period of ninety-nine years.⁴³ That this penalty was too harsh was immediately perceived, and in 1846, at the next session of the legislature, it was repealed.⁴⁴ The old act of 1832 remained on the books, however. Yet even in this attenuated degree, enforcement was light enough for the legislature in 1855 to pass the following act: "Whereas, Doubts have been expressed as to whether the act approved February 10, 1852 [sic, 1832], entitled an act to prevent the future migration of free negroes or mulattoes into this State, and for other purposes is in force; Therefore, Section 1. *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of Florida in General Assembly convened,* That the said act . . . be and the same is hereby declared to be in full force, operation and effect, and applies to the migration and importation of the persons therein mentioned since the date of the approval of said act."⁴⁵

These anti-immigration laws did serve to keep new free Negroes for the most part out of Florida, but they were not completely effective. Their success can be shown if the age of the Negroes born outside of the state was decidedly greater than those born in Florida; those born in other places would have entered the

40. *Journal of the Proceedings of a Convention of Delegates to Form a Constitution for the People of Florida, Held at St. Joseph, December, 1838* (St. Joseph, 1839), 30.

41. *The Constitution of 1838*, Article XVI, Sec. 3.

42. *Acts of Council*, 10th Session, February 10, 1832, 143-45.

43. *Ibid.*, 20th Session, March 5, 1842, 34-35.

44. *Ibid.*, 21st Session, 1843, 50.

45. *Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Florida*, 7th Session, December 15, 1855, 10. Cited hereafter as *Acts of Assembly*.

state in the years before enactment of the law, while Florida residents would include all born since. Thus the latter's age would be lower. Statistics computed from census reports show that this was the case. In 1850, the average Negro born in Florida was 17.2 years old as compared to 42.0 years for non-state births. In 1860, the figures were 18.4 and 41.6 respectively. The laws against entry were not totally successful. If they had been, the average age of out-of-state Negroes would be increasing, but this was not the case. Positive proof of lax enforcement is contained also in the census schedules. In 1850, there were thirty-six free Negroes under twenty-one that had been born outside Florida, and the number increased to thirty-eight ten years later.

In addition to prohibiting movement in, the legislature tried to limit manumission, but like the former law, this was also only partially successful. The first regulations on the matter allowed emancipation of any sane and healthy adult slave so long as he was younger than forty-five, which was an unlikely event.⁴⁶ Evidently this was not improbable enough; later legislation required a \$200 forfeiture for each slave freed.⁴⁷ But even with these restrictions, manumission did occur, and in 1850, twenty-two are recorded, and in 1860, seventeen.⁴⁸ While these are small numbers, they do represent two percent of the total free Negroes living in Florida at the time.

Little can be definitely said about the relation of the Negroes and whites. Only a couple of specific examples come down to us. Free Negroes living in Pensacola seemed to have had the greatest amount of security. Called "creoles" because of their large portion of Spanish blood, they formed an active property-owning class, served on city juries with whites, and held a respected place in the community.⁴⁹ When many of them left the United States in 1857 because of the growing restrictions on their life, the *Pensacola Gazette* expressed a common sentiment: "It was a painful sight to see them parting from their friends and their native country to seek homes in a foreign land. They take with them the sympathy of all our citizens on account of the causes which have

46. *Acts of Council*, 1st Session, September 17, 1822, 181-85.

47. *Ibid.*, 8th Session, November 21, 1829, 134-35.

48. *Statistics of the United States in 1860*, 337.

49. Ruth B. Barr and Modeste Hargis, "The Voluntary Exile of Free Negroes of Pensacola," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XVII (July 1938), 3-4, 10-11.

led them to leave us, and also their best wishes for their future happiness and prosperity in their new home.”⁵⁰ Pensacola was an exception to the general rule, however. Whites and free Negroes did not get along so cordially elsewhere in Florida. Even Key West, another old Spanish port city, complained about the lax enforcement of the anti-immigration laws in a Grand Jury “List of Grievances,” announced December 5, 1834.⁵¹

A unique insight into the life of another class of Negroes is given by the following annotation on the last page of the 1860 census schedules for Calhoun County: “The Free Negroes in this County are mixed blooded almost white and have intermarried with a low class of whites—Have no trade, occupation or profession. They live in a Settlement or Town of their own, their personal property consists of cattle and hogs. They make no produce except Corn Peas and Potatoes and very little of that. They are a lazy, indolent, smooth afs [sic] race.”⁵²

More balance can be presented by adding up the estimates of wealth the census takers made. Negroes throughout Florida owned property - \$36,480 worth in 1850 (\$25,900 in Escambia County), and \$56,500 worth in 1860 (\$19,750 in Escambia, \$12,250 in Monroe). Martha Baxter, a Duval County Negro farm owner, had \$5,000 real estate and a personal estate estimated at \$52,000. When this is added to that of other free Negroes in the state in 1860, the total personal estate figures were \$97,985 (\$10,865 in Monroe, \$7,800 in Escambia).

Occupations of the free Negroes tended to be unskilled and semi-skilled jobs like farmers, servants, seamstresses, and laundresses. But there were also carpenters, dressmakers, barbers, musicians, overseers, shoemakers, tavern keepers, bakers, cabinet makers, brickmasons, fishermen, mariners, merchants, raftmen, midwives, teamsters, mechanics, cooks, and clerks.

Florida law continued to be harsh on the free Negro. The white legislators wasted no time in modifying the liberal Spanish law which governed the early days of the new American terri-

50. *Ibid.*, 3.

51. Jefferson B. Browne, *Key West: The Old and the New* (St. Augustine, 1912), 67.

52. “Population Schedules, State of Florida,” *Eighth Census of the United States in 1860*.

tory;⁵³ the action of the Legislative Council placed the new state on a road of strict regulation.

The specter of slave revolt obsessed Florida no less than it did the rest of the South. Free Negroes were regarded as a source of discontent for Negro slaves and as a means whereby abolitionist propaganda could be spread. To some extent the free blacks were even held responsible for the number of runaways among slaves.⁵⁴ On this subject, a Tallahassee paper in 1851 quoted the *Alabama Journal*: "The opinion in Alabama is quite equivalent, that the free negro population is the most dangerous incendiary element to our existing institution of society. Their example is prejudicial on the slaves, and the opinion is very general that the steps adopted by Virginia, to remove them, would be the best policy which could be pursued here."⁵⁵

Fear of rebellion prompted a law which made illegal "riots, routs, and unlawful assemblies, quarrels, fighting, trespasses and seditious speeches by free Negroes and Mulattoes, or slave or slaves."⁵⁶ Black gatherings to hear preaching or "exhorting" were illegal unless they were worship services held in white churches. Patrols had authority to enter any establishment where such activity was going on and disperse the "illegal assembly."⁵⁷ Control was easier when Negroes attended the same churches as whites; closer check could be kept on what went on before and after the service. In this instance, integration provided a better means of control than segregation.⁵⁸ Certain restraints were also placed on Negro commerce. Intoxicating liquors could not be sold to slaves by free Negroes, and nothing at all could be vended on Sundays.⁵⁹ In 1853 free Negroes were brought under the temperance law, and alcoholic beverages could not be given them in any quantity.⁶⁰

Weapons, of course, were under careful legal superintendence. An early law prohibited any free Negro from "hunting by firelight

53. U.S. Congress, "An Act for the Establishment of a Territorial Government in Florida," reprinted in *Acts of Council*, 1st Session, 1822, xxxvii.

54. Thelma Bates, "The Legal Status of the Negro in Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, VI (January 1928), 164.

55. Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, January 11, 1851.

56. *Acts of Council*, 6th Session, January 19, 1828, 97-110.

57. *Ibid.*, 10th Session, February 10, 1832, 143-45.

58. Jesse J. Jackson, "The Negro and the Law in Florida, 1821-1921" (unpublished Master's thesis, Florida State University, Tallahassee, 1960), 30-31.

59. *Acts of Council*, 6th Session, January 1828, 97-110.

60. *Acts of Assembly*, 6th Session, January 10, 1853, 116.

outside of his inclosure."⁶¹ There could be no good reason it was argued, for blacks to be stalking around at night. A couple of years later no free Negro or mulatto, except in St. Augustine and Pensacola, could carry any firearm without a license from a local justice of the peace.⁶² The inevitable was not far behind. In 1833 it became unlawful for any Negro to keep in his house any firearms whatsoever.⁶³ After this no Negro was permitted to be armed except for his own defense, and then under white supervision.⁶⁴

Still another way of controlling free Negroes was to place them in an inferior legal and political position. From the very beginning there was no question of political equality with white citizens. Legislation setting up the qualifications for suffrage in the Florida Territory excluded mention of all Negroes.⁶⁵ Jury duty was also prohibited to free colored persons; the congressional act setting up the territorial government saw to it,⁶⁶ and the Legislative Council wasted no time incorporating the debarment into the statutes.⁶⁷ A Negro, mulatto, or Indian could give evidence in a trial only where no whites were involved.⁶⁸ Where they could testify, any Negro who perjured himself was to have his ears nailed to posts, and he would be forced to stand like that for one hour, then his or her back was to be bared and thirty-nine lashes applied.⁶⁹ Feelings ran strong on the issue of Negroes being witnesses against whites, since that tacitly implied equality. In 1845, State Representative W. H. Brockenbrough was accused of supporting a bill which would have allowed Negroes to testify against whites. In his rebuttal, he claimed he was falsely accused, and he called the idea "shocking and absurd."⁷⁰

61. *Acts of Council*, 4th Session, December 10, 1825, 79-81.

62. *Ibid.*, 6th Session, January 19, 1828, 97-110.

63. *Ibid.*, 11th Session, March 21, 1833, 26-30.

64. *Ibid.*, 18th Session, February 25, 1840, 22-23.

65. *Ibid.*, 1st Session, August 12, 1822, 9-12; *The Constitution of 1838*, Article VI, Sec. 1.

66. U.S. Congress, "An Act for the Establishment of a Territorial Government in Florida," reprinted in *Acts of Council*, 1st Session, 1822, xxxvii.

67. *Acts of Council*, 2nd Session, June 29, 1823, 110.

68. *Ibid.*, 1st Session, August 31, 1822, 33-46

69. *Ibid.*, 6th Session, January 19, 1828, 97-110.

70. W. H. Brockenbrough, *Wm. H. Brockenbrough's Vindication* (n.p.,n.d.), 4.

One of the few rights free Negroes did have was property ownership. An 1828 letter from the commissioner of the General Land Office to the secretary of the treasury reports that one free person of color had had his claim to preemption suspended because of race. Feeling that this was unjust, the commissioner wrote, "I know of no law of the U . States which prohibits a free negro from *purchasing* lands, unless there be some express law of the Territory by which they are excluded from *purchasing*, I perceive no reason why a patent should not be issued."⁷¹ The law did not forbid property ownership and it was relatively widespread.

Of more concern and less certainty was the Negro's right to own himself. Whenever a free Negro was apprehended as a slave, the burden of proof of his liberty rested with him; he was presumed slave.⁷² Indiscriminate seizure was not allowed though, and if anyone should be convicted of stealing or selling a free person, he was to suffer death without benefit of clergy.⁷³ The law was later reconsidered and the penalty lightened; the maximum punishment became a \$500 fine and standing in the pillory for not more than three hours.⁷⁴ Anyone sold into slavery, though, could appeal to the governor for pardon. Freedom was actually achieved by this method in 1842, and again ten years later.⁷⁵

Debt further jeopardized the Negro's liberty; his person served as ultimate security. A lender could get a court to issue a writ of *capias ad satisfaciendum* against a defaulting Negro for the money and all costs thereon attached. If the judgement was not paid, the officer issuing such a writ would "advertise the sale of the services of such defendant or defendants, to any such person who will pay or discharge such execution . . . for the shortest space of time . . ." at public auction. The Negro could then be sold and held as a slave subject to the same penalties, treatment, and duties which could be exacted from slaves. Should the Negro try to escape, his time would be doubled and continued to be doubled at every instance of attempted runaway.⁷⁶ Continuous residents since

71. Carter, *Territorial Papers*, XXIII, 1047.

72. *Acts of Council*, 3rd Session, December 30, 1824, 289-92.

73. *Ibid.*, 1st Session, September 17, 1822, 181-85.

74. *Ibid.*, 5th Session, January 19, 1827, 34-49.

75. Jackson, "The Negro and the Law in Florida," 27.

76. *Acts of Council*, 10th Session, February 4, 1832, 32-33.

transference from Spain were exempted.⁷⁷ The same procedure could be used when fines for misdemeanors had been levied against free Negroes.⁷⁸

The black man had to be kept in his place. Florida law prohibited mixed marriage; any such marriage was null and void and any children were "regarded as bastards and incapable of . . . receiving any estate . . . by inheritance." Any white man fornicating with Negroes was to be fined up to \$1,000, and he was disqualified from exercising any office of profit or trust in the territory, serving as a juror, or giving evidence in any case against whites.⁷⁹ No black could use "abusive and provoking language to, or lift his hand in opposition to" a white person except in cases where the offender was "wantonly assailed and lifted his hand in his or her own defense." Punishment was up to thirty-nine lashes.⁸⁰ After 1855, whites and Negroes were prohibited by law from playing card or dice games with each other.⁸¹

Free Negroes were subject to head taxes. At first they were brought under the general twenty-five cent head tax for all males in the state,⁸² but in 1832, this was raised to a punitive level of \$5.00 on all free persons of color over fifteen years of age.⁸³ Seven crimes were made capital offenses in the first laws of the territory: arson, burglary, manslaughter, poisoning, murder, rebellion, and rape.⁸⁴ Later on, even the attempt of that most "heinous of crimes" against white femininity would doom a Negro to be "cropped, branded, or suffer death."⁸⁵ In 1848, punishment was compounded on free Negroes convicted of a felony when they were required either to pay the expense of prosecution or to be sold temporarily into service for that purpose.⁸⁶

In 1842, it was stipulated that guardians were to be placed over all free colored persons who were not living in the territory prior to its cession to the United States. The judge of the county court was to issue a certificate, at a fee of one dollar a head, to

77. *Ibid.*, 13th Session, February 13, 1835, 315.

78. *Ibid.*, 10th Session, February 6, 1832, 75.

79. *Ibid.*, 10th Session, January 16, 1832, 4-5.

80. *Ibid.*, 6th Session, January 19, 1828, 97-110.

81. *Acts of Assembly*, 7th Session, January 6, 1855, 62.

82. *Acts of Council*, 2nd Session, July 4, 1823, 140; *ibid.*, 6th Session, January 10, 1828, 49-50.

83. *Ibid.*, 10th Session, February 12, 1832, 128-29.

84. *Ibid.*, 1st Session, September 17, 1822, 181-85.

85. *Ibid.*, 7th Session, November 21, 1828, 174-90.

86. *Acts of Assembly*, 3rd Session, January 7, 1848, 111.

“proper and discreet” guardians who would enjoy full privileges of master except regarding property. The entire slave code would be applicable except again in the matter of property ownership.⁸⁷ Although the act was repealed the next year,⁸⁸ a similar statute was enacted in 1848.⁸⁹ Even more strenuous efforts to enforce the law came after 1856. Negroes without a guardian were to be fined not less than \$10.00.⁹⁰ Anyone convicted of buying or selling to a free Negro without the written consent of his guardian could be fined \$100 to \$500.⁹¹

There was only one more step to be taken. An act of 1859 provided that a free person of color over the age of fourteen could choose his own master or mistress and become a slave. To make the loss of liberty more attractive, such a master would be prohibited from selling the slave, and he could not allow him to be taken for debts or judgements against his property. Any free Negro found by a judge of probate to be “of idle and dissolute habits” could be sold for a term of years to the highest bidder.⁹²

The guardian requirements struck Pensacola’s free Negroes most harshly. Sympathetic white friends offered to become guardians as a legal formality. Many followed this course, but others found even this too degrading. Some free Negroes, believing that they would never be able to improve their position, sailed for Mexico in April 1857.⁹³ They left behind many others to face the trials of war and the uncertain triumph of victory.

This then is what is known about the free Negro in pre-Civil War Florida. It is a precious little. We see through the past darkly a group without a face. Outlines of the visage appear, but time has clouded the details. That freedom was thought worth a struggle is evident from the life they lived among the perils of the Florida swamps and in the jungles of the white man’s law. That many gained much against great odds is signaled by the century-old census registers. But that unobtrusiveness was the key to survival shows up in their anonymity. That most were kept from living a whole life is shouted by the silence of history.

87. *Acts of Council*, 20th Session, March 5, 1842, 34-36.

88. *Ibid.*, 21st Session, February 22, 1843, 50.

89. *Acts of Assembly*, 3rd Session, January 8, 1848, 27.

90. *Ibid.*, 8th Session, December 23, 1856, 27.

91. *Ibid.*

92. *Ibid.*, 9th Session, January 15, 1859, 13-14.

93. Barr and Hargis, “Free Negroes of Pensacola,” 4, 11-14.

“OLDSMAR FOR HEALTH, WEALTH, HAPPINESS”

by GLENN A. NIEMEYER

The Florida real estate boom of the mid-1920s brought unparalleled publicity to Florida. From Jacksonville to Key West city streets were clogged with cars and trucks bearing northern license plates. Swamps were drained and lots on “Venetian canals” were offered for public sale at fantastic prices. Elaborate advertising campaigns, boasting such names as William Jennings Bryan, attempted to lure the Northerner away from snow and ice and into the “Sunshine State.” According to Frederick Lewis Allen, it was “the most delirious fever of real-estate speculation which had attacked the United States in ninety years.”¹

In 1924 and 1925 the real estate mania reached its peak; the whole of tropical Miami seemed to have become one “frenzied real-estate exchange,” and throughout the state this scene was repeated several times over. But the tide was short-lived; just when deflation was inevitable, two West Indian hurricanes struck Florida. The first hit the Gold Coast on September 19, 1926, dashing the water from Biscayne Bay into Miami homes and dampening the hopes and enthusiasm of buyer and promoter alike.² However, by then fortunes had been made and lost in land speculation. Some had purchased wisely, timed their investment perfectly, and profited handsomely; others had miscalculated, antedated popular frenzy, and lost considerable sums of money. Ransom E. Olds, the successful manufacturer of the Oldsmobile and Reo automobiles, was one of the latter.

Since the 1890s Olds had vacationed each year at his winter home in Daytona Beach. As an annual visitor he was impressed with the gradual but marked growth of Florida and the possibilities offered by the state’s climate and soil. On several occasions he had investigated tracts of land with a view towards buying them as a speculative investment.³ While Olds’ interest in Florida

1. Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday* (New York, 1944), 191-92.

2. William E. Leuchtenberg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932* (Chicago, 1958), 184.

was primarily speculative, as evidenced by his earlier inquiries into land investment, he envisioned the establishment of an agricultural and industrial settlement which would attract people of ordinary means.⁴ On several occasions he had indicated his desire to make life more comfortable for people with a modest income, particularly those who worked for him. In this, Olds was echoing the view of many American businessmen of the time. They believed that with the cooperation and assistance of the captains of industry, life for the common people could be made more orderly, and the unrest generated by the organization of labor and the activities of radical groups could be seriously curtailed. For Ransom Olds, all of these objectives, speculative investment, social experimentation, and benevolent capitalism would be combined into one venture, his design for a planned community in Florida.

Olds acquired the site for his projected community in 1916 through an exchange of property. Richard G. Peters, who owned 37,541 acres of undeveloped land on Tampa Bay, proposed to trade his property to Olds for cash and for an apartment building in Chicago. After some negotiation, Olds, on December 17, 1915, notified Peters that pending a trip South to investigate the land, he was offering \$75,000 in bonds; \$200,000 in cash, and the apartment building valued at \$125,000 in exchange for the Florida acreage.⁵ His offer was accepted ten days later, and by March 1916 final arrangements for acquisition of the property had been concluded.⁶

To Olds, the Peters' property seemed to be an ideal location for his anticipated settlement. Located in Hillsborough and Pinellas counties, it was proximate to the west coast towns of Tampa, Clearwater, St. Petersburg, and Tarpon Springs and was located on the Tampa and Gulf Coast division of the Seaboard Air Line Railway System. Besides the advantages it had for cattle, dairy, and general farming, the pine lumber and timber resources on the property were thought sufficient to make it a safe

3. J. H. Thompson to W. S. Vincent, December 21, 1912, Ransom E. Olds Papers, Michigan State University Museum, East Lansing, Michigan.
4. Interview with Bernice Olds Roe, daughter of Olds, February 9, 1962.
5. Ransom E. Olds to Michigan Trust Co., December 17, 1915, Olds Papers.
6. J. H. Thompson to Kleinhans, Kappen & Uhls, March 3, 1916, *ibid.*

investment and an opportunity for large profits, particularly at the low price of approximately \$10.65 per acre. When asked by Douglas F. Conley, Olds' agent, for his opinion of the site, A. C. Clewis, president of the First Savings and Trust Company of Tampa, offered the following appraisal: "It has great advantages over any other large tract in this State, because of its water frontage on Old Tampa Bay, the hard surface County Roads and railroads through it, and the fact that on the West, North and East sides are settled and rapidly developing property. In my opinion, these lands will for many years continue to rapidly enhance in value and the purchaser should reap very large and satisfactory profits from his investment, when its resources and possibilities are developed."⁷

Only a month after acquiring the tract, Olds formed the administrative machinery to handle its development. The Reo Farms Company, a name soon changed to Reolds Farms Company, was organized in April 1916, and capitalized at \$1,000,000. Olds became board chairman, and Fred E. Cook of Glass, Cook, and Atkinson, a general insurance and real estate firm in Detroit, was named president. The other officers were S. S. Glass, vice president; E. T. Larson, secretary; Charles E. Ecker, Olds' private secretary and counselor, treasurer; and William E. Balles, sales manager. Reolds-On-The-Bay was the first name chosen for the community, but it was then changed to Oldsmar.⁸

Plans for the new town were drafted by architects and city designers, and workmen were hired to construct a luxurious hotel with private bathing beach, boat houses, and gardens. Dock facilities were built along ten miles of waterfront, while "choice bungalow sites," selling for \$1,000 to \$1,500, occupied the rest of the land facing Old Tampa Bay. "Town lots" could be purchased, varying from \$500 to \$2,000 depending on size and location. Contractual terms were set at fifteen percent down, ten percent to be paid on the balance each year, and the mortgage to carry six percent interest. There was also a bank, post office, electric light plant, saw mill, artificial ice factory, garage, railroad depot and freight house, churches, schools, and stores. Communal improvements included street lights, telephones, a

7. A. C. Clewis to D. F. Conley, December 13, 1915, *ibid.*

8. "Oldsmar for Health, Wealth, Happiness," Reolds Farms Co., Automotive History Collection, Detroit Public Library.

waterworks system, and transportation facilities. Sidewalks and curving drives, bordered by rows of palms and flowering oleanders, were laid out, and several hundred acres were set aside for golf courses and recreation areas.⁹

Tracts, usually twenty or forty acres in size and suitable for farming, fruit-growing, and cattle and poultry raising, were laid out beyond the residential area for a community of "little farm dwellers." Prices were established according to the following schedule: wild lands satisfactory for fruit or vegetable farming, \$25.00 per acre; uncleared farm lands adjacent to the town, \$50.00 per acre; uncleared farm lands fronting on the Tampa-Oldsmar-Clearwater highway, \$75.00 to \$100 per acre; uncleared properties fronting on the shore of Old Tampa Bay, \$100 to \$300 per acre; and uncleared properties opposite the Seaboard Air Line Railroad station, \$300 per acre. The company would clear any piece of land and prepare it for cultivation, build a residence and other buildings to meet the wishes of each purchaser, build fences and dig ditches, drill a well, furnish machinery, and supply livestock from Elbamar Farms, Olds' ranch near Grosse Ile, Michigan. The cost of clearing land ranged from \$30.00 to \$50.00 per acre, and an average forty acre tract could be cleared and equipped with new buildings for approximately \$7,000. Payment could be made on terms; the first installment was twenty-five percent of the total contract, with ten percent to be paid each year on the balance which carried an interest rate of six percent per annum.¹⁰

"On forty acres properly handled," the company advertised, "a man should be able to make better than \$3,000 a year with less work and worry than in the North on 120 acres." To prove the truth of their claims and to demonstrate agricultural possibilities, the company built a model farm. It included a large herd of cattle, some blooded bulls, horses, mules, swine, tractors, farm machinery, and agricultural implements. Experimental plots were planted with Irish potatoes, turnips, cabbages, rutabagas, lettuce, beets, celery, and citrus fruits to determine yield. "It is hard to see," the literature stated, "how anyone can fail to make money at Oldsmar if he is an earnest worker and attends

9. *New York Herald*, April 1, 1917, clipping, Olds Papers.

10. "Instructions to Agents," Reolds Farms Co., *ibid*.

to business." Company cooperation would come in the form of a creamery, packing house, and stock yards.¹¹ "Oldsmar for Health, Wealth, Happiness" was the company's favorite caption in their broadsides, and in planning the town, none of the three, seemingly, was neglected.

An extensive publicity campaign aimed at enticing Northerners was initiated after the essential work had been completed. Advertisements describing Oldsmar as a "veritable garden spot for all kinds of fruits and vegetables" were placed in Detroit and other Michigan newspapers, and a network of agents, each with his own territory, was organized. Brochures were mailed upon request to persons planning a trip to Florida; special excursion trains with through Pullmans were chartered from Detroit to Oldsmar for anyone interested in purchasing a farm site or a lot. Commenting on the first year of operations, Fred Cook wrote: "The Reolds Farms Co. and its customers have spent and are spending large amounts of money to help make Oldsmar a popular winter resort, as well as a prosperous farming and fruit-growing center. As a result, Oldsmar is making more progress in one year, than some other places make in ten. The right kind of people are going there, that's why."¹²

Providing work for the residents was important to the success of Oldsmar. Some attention had been given to this matter by Olds when he planned to establish a saw mill, planing mill, tannery, and brush factory.¹³ Another opportunity to bring industry to Oldsmar was presented to him in December 1916. Henry and John Kardell, agents for the Reo automobile in St. Louis, had perfected a small tractor which they wanted to market, and they approached Olds with the idea of accepting the presidency of a \$1,500,000 corporation they intended to organize. Olds informed them of his interest but said that he would be unwilling to become an officer unless they would establish their plant at Oldsmar. The advantages of this location were several: its proximity to Alabama, one of the largest iron-producing states; money could be saved in heating costs; and there was the oppor-

11. "Oldsmar for Health, Wealth, Happiness," Reolds Farms Co. Automotive History Collection, Detroit Public Library.
12. Fred L. Cook, "Florida Is Attracting Thousands of People from Michigan Cities," newspaper and date unknown, Olds Papers.
13. Victor Sellers, "Oldsmar, Florida," Chamber of Commerce, Oldsmar, Florida, in the possession of the author.

tunity to use the tractors every day, "while at a northern point they would be froze up six months of the year." Olds also "called their attention to the labor situation, ordinarily labor down there can be had for about \$1.65 per day as against \$3.00 per day in the North." The Kardells were interested, and agreed to go "to Tampa in the near future and look the situation over."¹⁴ They were evidently impressed with what they saw, and after several delays, they came to Olds in October 1917, with the offer to locate at Oldsmar if he would take a "fair sized interest with them."¹⁵ Their proposal was accepted and Fred Cook was sent to St. Louis where final arrangements were made for the move of Kardell Tractor and Truck Company to Oldsmar. A plot of ground was reserved for the plant, and construction of the factory buildings was started. One newspaper commented on the move: "This is really an innovation for the state of Florida and may be the beginning of a new era for that state, putting it in the manufacturing column."¹⁶

Olds was anxious for the tractor company to locate in Oldsmar because of the difficulty he was having clearing out the pine stumps and scrub or saw palmetto; he hoped the company would help him solve this problem. Stumps and troublesome roots had been removed by hand, but this method was slow and expensive. In 1915, W. S. Vincent, owner of the Pensacola Seed and Nursery Company, had invented a power stump puller which he wanted to manufacture, and he had turned to Olds for financial assistance.¹⁷ Olds found that Vincent simply had a "hoisting device on wheels," and that there was nothing very new about his invention.¹⁸ Olds, however, utilized Vincent's idea, and less than six months after the tractor company had located in Oldsmar, he announced that he had a gigantic machine that would pick out the "big stumps as though they were bushes" and pile them up in "great windrows to be burned." Further soil preparation was done by a "wheel root thresher" that Olds had invented and patented. This machine could pick up about twelve inches of top soil, elevate and screen it free from small roots,

14. Olds to H. J. Person, December 20, 1916, Olds Papers.

15. Olds to F. L. Cook, October 17, 1917, *ibid.*

16. "Truck Plant Is Moving to Olds' Florida Town," newspaper and date unknown, clipping, *ibid.*

17. W. S. Vincent to Olds, October 16, 1915, *ibid.*

18. Olds to Vincent, October 19, 1915, *ibid.*

sift it, and then drop the soil ready for planting. Olds planned to manufacture the two machines as soon as experimental tests were completed. Some urgency was attached to this ambition; Olds realized the success of his community depended on the attraction of residents. If he was unable to provide work, either in manufacturing or farming, the community would suffer. Thus, the tractor company held the key to the future of Oldsmar. Olds knew that to establish an agricultural-industrial colony and to realize a profit from his investment, the land needed to be cleared and work had to be provided.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, Olds saw an opportunity to stimulate Oldsmar through publicity. Couching his intentions in patriotic terms, he announced in March 1918 that he was "bending his efforts" toward clearing land quickly and extensively since he thought the world might be "threatened with famine": "I am doing all in my power to get out 37,000 acres of land around Oldsmar under cultivation as soon as possible, in order to do my bit. I can see no reason why Florida should fail to be the garden spot of the future. It has the climate to produce three or more crops a year on plenty of good land, and Florida should be able to yield food enough to supply many of the northern states as well as some of the foreign countries, and thus help to win the war."¹⁹

There is little evidence to dispute the sincerity of Olds' statement other than the record of his past activities and the stated purposes for initiating the development of Oldsmar. For Olds, this was a business venture with a tinge of social experimentation. Like all of his financial interests, it was measured on the same scale—the ledger sheet—and from all indications the debit column exceeded the credits in the Oldsmar account.

From its inception Oldsmar was anything but promising. Olds' correspondence reveals no mention of even moderate growth, much less spectacular progress. Despite the money that was pumped into land clearance, site development, and general construction, progress lagged and the number of people who moved to Oldsmar fell far below expectations. Olds' letters to his manager, Harry J. Person, disclose his increasing concern for trivia and his irritation with Person's direction, all of which suggests an accumulation of problems.

19. Tampa *Daily Times*, March 2, 1918, clipping, *ibid*.

Communications between Olds and government officials during the spring of 1917, a year after operations had begun, reflected his growing awareness that the Oldsmar enterprise would need a stronger stimulus if it were to succeed. On April 23, 1917, seventeen days after the United States declared war on Germany, Olds addressed a telegram to President Wilson:

Having been solicited by a shipbuilding concern for a location on my lands on the North Shore of Old Tampa Bay, Florida, and having refused to sell nearby timber to parties claiming to be agents of a foreign government, the thought came that at this time our government might desire this for a navy yard. If such a thing is feasible and the government will agree to establish a navy yard there, I will be pleased to donate the land for the yard and the timber on ten thousand acres of virgin Florida forest for use in connection with Government shipbuilding at this yard.²⁰

The President thanked Olds for his "generous and patriotic offer" and referred the matter to the secretary of the navy.²¹ When little encouragement was received from this quarter, Olds turned next to Howard E. Coffin, a former Olds employee who had helped form the Hudson Motor Car Company. Coffin, now with the Council of National Defense, referred Olds' offer to the Emergency Fleet Corporation of the United States Shipping Board. The assistant general manager of the board, F. A. Evstis, informed Olds that the government had authorized construction of as many wooden cargo-carrying vessels as possible in the near future: "The need for these ships is very great. I feel that if we should fail to get the ships we should pretty certainly have to fight Germany alone." In the same letter he disclosed that his commission was not erecting government shipbuilding yards; they planned to award contracts only to established private firms.²²

Following this response, Olds received a communication from the navy department in answer to his request for an inspection of the Oldsmar site. Olds did not want to commit himself to his original offer unless he had some assurance that contracts would go to shipbuilding concerns that might be established on his property.²³ Rear Admiral J. M. Helm, in his letter of

20. Olds to Woodrow Wilson, telegram, April 23, 1917, *ibid.*

21. J. P. Bennets to Olds, April 26, 1917, *ibid.*

22. F. A. Evstis to Olds, April 29, 1917, *ibid.*

23. Olds to navy department, April 25, 1917, *ibid.*

April 30, stated that "owing to urgent additional duties assigned to members of this Commission, it is not possible to foresee when it can inspect sites in the vicinity of Tampa." He advised Olds to forward a map of the land and any available information concerning it,²⁴ and Olds agreed to have the blueprints of a navy yard site made.²⁵

On the same date of his communication to the navy department, May 4, Olds again wrote to the shipping board, noting that he had invited the New York Yacht, Launch & Engine Company, a firm from which in the past he had purchased pleasure craft, to move their plant to Oldsmar. He stated also that "another Company is planning on organizing in the near future" and might "establish themselves near Tampa." On the basis of these possibilities, he queried, "Am I to understand that you are in a position to award contracts to reputable shipbuilding concerns that might establish themselves on this property?"²⁶ On May 8, the shipping board advised Olds that specifications for the "proposed wooden fleet" were still unfinished and they were uncertain when their plans would be completed.²⁷ Faced with this indecision, Olds terminated his attempts to obtain a shipyard for the Oldsmar area. From the outset his proposal at best was a speculative one. His offer to the New York Yacht, Launch & Engine Company was unrealistic and premature, while his plans for a new shipbuilding concern to establish itself were apparent only on paper. Never did his negotiations proceed beyond the point of talk.

Certainly Olds had expected some advantage to accrue from this shipyard scheme. A naval yard or a shipbuilding firm in the area would have enhanced the growth of Oldsmar through the development of industry, attraction of residents, and general economic stimulation. But this did not materialize. Neither did his hopes for the tractor company, which had produced only 2,000 machines in eight years of a less-than-satisfactory operation. Olds then attempted to salvage what remained of his elusive opportunity. He erected a foundry and machine shop, while at the same time completing his earlier plans for a planing mill,

24. J. M. Helm to Olds, April 30, 1917, *ibid.*

25. C. E. Ecker to Helm, May 4, 1917, *ibid.*

26. Olds to United States Shipping Board, May 4, 1917, *ibid.*

27. Evstis to Olds, May 8, 1917, *ibid.*

tannery, and brush factory. He constructed a thirty-room hotel with shops, the Wayside Inn; invested \$100,000 in a wildcat oil well; and announced a gift of five dollars to each resident child who would use the money to start a bank account.²⁸ These improvements and further investments, however, failed to give the sick town the boost it needed. By 1923 Olds had poured \$4,500,000 into the community, but, in spite of his endeavors, Oldsmar failed to yield the profits he had hoped for and had been assured were possible. Probably he was misguided, and most certainly his undertaking was ill-timed. The Florida real estate frenzy was still in its infancy, and only the maturity of the 1920s would bring to others the profits he had envisioned. For that error of judgment Olds was to pay handsomely.

Disillusioned by the failure of his town, which in 1923 had an approximate population of only 200 inhabitants,²⁹ Olds began to dispose of his interests during the business slump of the early 1920s. The first deal that he made was to trade the almost finished Oldsmar race track for the far-from-complete Fort Harrison Hotel in Clearwater.³⁰ In 1923 he exchanged the unsold platted portions of Oldsmar and a "large amount of cash" for the Bellerive Hotel in Kansas City, which had cost \$2,500,000 to erect.³¹ The last of his holdings, the tractor company, which included six acres of property, railroad siding, and "other facilities," was finally sold early in 1926 for \$100,000.³²

For Olds the entire Oldsmar venture was a disappointment. His dream of an agricultural-industrial workmen's colony failed to materialize because it lacked a sense of realism. Few employed people either wanted or could afford to give up their security for an uncertain future. During World War I and the difficult recession period which followed, this was especially true. Only when the land boom of the middle twenties occurred did Florida experience the prosperity and development he had anticipated. Olds foresaw the economic possibilities of land promotion in the

28. Sellers, "Oldsmar, Florida."

29. Federal Writers' Project, *Florida, A Guide to the Southernmost State* (New York, 1944), 521.

30. Clearwater *Sun*, July 14, 1957, clipping, Olds Collection, R. E. Olds Co., Lansing, Michigan.

31. *Automobile Topics*, LXVIII (January 27, 1923), 110.

32. *Ibid.*, LXXXI (April 17, 1926), 895.

state, but he erred in his timing. The result of that miscalculation was an accumulated net loss estimated at \$3,000,000.³³

The same air of misfortune that characterized Olds' efforts has clouded the later history of Oldsmar. The next person to take an interest in developing the town was Harry E. Prettyman, an energetic St. Louis promoter, who constructed a yacht basin, a 1,000-foot pier which jutted out into Old Tampa Bay, and a casino which housed the Chamber of Commerce, a dance hall, showers, club rooms, and an auditorium. Prospective buyers by the bus load were brought to Oldsmar and were entertained at barbecues eaten amid oriental surroundings.³⁴ The land boom which had been gaining momentum for several years became sensational in 1924, and quick profits were readily realized from rapid sales. But all of this was short-lived. The crash of 1926 that caused Florida real estate values to collapse took its toll in Oldsmar. The bright specter of a rising economy turned out to be nothing more than a falling comet, and once more Oldsmar sank into the doldrums of an earlier period. There it has remained. A city of some 1,500 residents today [1967], its single attraction and revenue source is the race track, Florida Downs, formerly Sunshine Park.³⁵

Since its beginning, a lack of foresight and initiative, caused more recently by factionalism, has hindered the progress of Oldsmar. Civic indebtedness which has lingered from the depression of the 1930s, the failure of plans for an industrial park, and the potential surrender of its city franchise to return to unincorporated status, are only a few examples of current problems.³⁶ Burdened by internal obstacles, Oldsmar, then and now, has been unable to rise above them. This, along with its name, is the legacy left by Olds.

33. Interview with Mrs. Gladys Olds Anderson, daughter of Olds, February 8, 1962.

34. Sellers, "Oldsmar, Florida."

35. *Tampa Tribune*, August 23, 24, 25, 1966.

36. *Ibid.*