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**TOURISM WAS NOT THE ONLY PURPOSE:  
JACKSONVILLE REPUBLICANS AND  
NEWARK'S *SENTINEL OF FREEDOM***

by JOHN T. FOSTER, JR., HERBERT B. WHITMER, JR.,  
AND SARAH W. FOSTER

**F**LORIDA tourism grew during the Reconstruction period, and it became a major force in the economy along the St. Johns River. Some of this development occurred as a result of stories about Florida published in northern newspapers and magazines. Among these articles are a series which appeared in a Newark, New Jersey, paper, the *Sentinel of Freedom*.

The interest of the paper in Florida can possibly be explained as part of its general policy. The *Sentinel of Freedom* frequently printed letters from New Jersey citizens traveling or residing in other locations throughout the world. Articles about London, Paris, Nevada, and parts of California appeared. Florida had also come to attention during the Civil War when Federal forces occupied areas along both the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, and after 1864 when northern papers sent writers south to report on conditions there. One correspondent, S., a native of New Jersey, began sending articles about the state which appeared in the *Sentinel of Freedom* and the Newark *Daily Advertiser* in 1865.

Correspondent S's four articles were followed by those of J.S.S. in 1866. Two more by other New Jersey correspondents were printed in 1866. Additional Florida articles appeared in the *Sentinel*: 1867 (2); 1868 (6); 1869 (6); 1870 (9); 1871 (2); 1872 (6); 1873 (2); 1874 (5); 1875 (13); and 1876 (3).

The authors of these articles were identified by initials, S., J.S.S., J.W.S., and M.A.C., or by pseudonyms, Beta, Kappa, and X. Despite the effort to keep these writers anonymous, something

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is known about their identities. They were people from New Jersey, either traveling for vacations or health, or who had moved to Florida to live. The identity of two authors is known. J.S.S. who wrote seven articles between January 1866, and the fall of 1868, was John Sanford Swaim, a northern Methodist minister living in Jacksonville.<sup>1</sup> J.W.S. was his son, Jacob W. Swaim, treasurer of Duval County and later a cashier for the Bank of Jacksonville.<sup>2</sup>

The Swaims were social and political allies of prominent Jacksonville Republicans, including Governors Harrison Reed and Ossian Hart. John Swaim's diary of 1866 refers to Reed or to "Reed's place" on fourteen separate occasions.<sup>3</sup> He also mentioned political activist Calvin L. Robinson on nineteen occasions. In 1866, Robinson served as a trustee in Swaim's black church, and later, after Swaim helped to found Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church in Jacksonville, both Robinson and Hart were listed as trustees.<sup>4</sup> Swaim's relationship to Hart eventually led to his participation in Hart's funeral; he spoke at graveside.<sup>5</sup> Swaim's social relationships are noteworthy since they offer clues for detecting a somewhat "hidden" agenda in the early articles published in the *Sentinel*.

Many of the articles describe Florida's mild winter climate and its beauty, topics which attracted tourists and people suffer-

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1. John Sanford Swaim was born in Chatham, New Jersey, May 1, 1806. In 1834 he was admitted on a "trial basis" as a minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church. After three decades as a pastor in New Jersey and New York, Swaim came to Florida. In 1864 and 1865 he ministered to Federal troops in Jacksonville and conducted regular services. Sporadic references to marriages performed by John Swaim appear in 1864 and 1865 issues of the Jacksonville Florida Union.

2. Jacob W. Swaim arrived in Jacksonville in June 1867. He was the third and final cashier of the Jacksonville branch of the Freedman's Bank, and held that position in 1874. He later became the cashier for the Bank of Jacksonville, and was employed in that capacity at the time of a bank robbery on April 1, 1878. See Jacksonville *The New South: Semi-Weekly*, April 2, 1878; Jacksonville *Daily Sun and Press*, April 2, 1878; Carl R. Osthaus, *Freedmen, Philanthropy and Fraud: A History of the Freedman's Savings Bank* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 231.

3. The discovery of the contents of the *Sentinel of Freedom* is the result of transcribing John Sanford Swaim's diary for 1866, which is being prepared for publication by John and Sarah Foster.

4. "A History of Snyder Memorial Methodist Church, 1870-1944," (copy in Hayden Burns Library, Jacksonville); "A Brief History of Snyder Memorial United Methodist Church, 1870-1970."

5. Jacksonville *Tri-Weekly Florida Union*, March 24, 1874.

ing from pulmonary diseases such as consumption. Readers in January 1868, for instance, were told that while they were “battling with winter’s sudden and rigorous advent” Floridians were “luxuriating with the thermometer at from 40° to 70° and sometimes 80°, eating oranges.”<sup>6</sup> In February 1869, a letter from Florida urged, “Let the Northerner imagine to himself one of the loveliest days of early June. The foliage bursting into the freshest and liveliest green . . . the blossoms and happy birds in a genial atmosphere, contributing to new life, even in those wearied and wasted by long disease. Such a day of transcendental loveliness dawned on the 10th day of February, shedding light and gladness over this latitude.”<sup>7</sup> There were continuing reports about the climate in subsequent years. “On arriving here [Fernandina] yesterday morning, we found ourselves in a pleasant temperature of 70 degrees. Oranges, bananas, etc. are growing finely in open air.”<sup>8</sup> A Newarker noted in 1871: “We have the finest climate in the world— very pleasant in the winter, there rarely being more than a few frosts.”<sup>9</sup>

There were many references to the beauty of Florida’s springs and rivers. In 1866, a description of Silver Springs appeared, “Within the center of this solemn surrounding, we come to the margin of the spring, covering a space of some ten or twelve rods width. A way down to the depth of sixty or eighty feet are the wide chasms of the limestone rock, out of which the abundant waters seem simply to flow with perfect naturalness; so pure and transparent that a sixpence could be seen distinctly. The fishes, the pebbles, even the sands appear, and there is just sulphur and magnesia enough in the water to tinge everything with a silver hue.”<sup>10</sup>

The St. Johns River was described by a New Jersey traveler as “one of the most wonderful on this continent, if not the world.”<sup>11</sup> In 1869, another wrote: “The broad river with its luxuriant growth of trees— sombre drapery of moss upon the oak and cypress like vaulted caverns in the forest, present a fine con-

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6. “Letter from Florida,” Newark (New Jersey) *Sentinel of Freedom*, January 7, 1868.

7. “Letters from Florida,” *ibid.*, March 2, 1869.

8. “A Trip to Florida,” *ibid.*, January 4, 1870.

9. “A Newarker in Florida,” *ibid.*, June 27, 1871.

10. “Letter from Florida,” *ibid.*, March 6, 1866.

11. “A Florida Letter,” *ibid.*, May 11, 1869.

trast to the fresh green of the maple and the orange, while the deep green of the palmetto and the pine give novelty and interest to the eye of the Northerner. The countless thousands of birds of every hue and kind lend sufficient life to the scene to forbid the mind or the eye to grow weary.<sup>12</sup> Northerners were intrigued by the luxuriant semi-tropical foliage, and by the birds, small animals, fish, and alligators that could be seen as the boats moved along the waterway.

While many articles in the *Sentinel* described Florida's climate and beauty, they also noted its agricultural potential. In 1865, correspondent S. observed: "It would not be a difficult thing for a man to so arrange his garden, as that there could not be one of the 365, that he could not gather vegetables appropriate to the season."<sup>13</sup> In the fall of 1867, opportunities were noted in cultivating peaches, oranges, and lemons. "The orange culture is destined to be a great interest here. The whole St. Johns River is admirably adapted to it, and one can get a grove of 100 trees or more growing for two hundred dollars, which in six years will produce 100,000 oranges which sell at our wharf for \$2 per 100."<sup>14</sup>

Other agricultural possibilities received attention, too. "As soon as we can get a line of steamers direct from here to New York, general produce business will be the best one can undertake. We sent tomatoes to New York last May, realizing \$6 per bushel and this notwithstanding our want of facilities."<sup>15</sup> In the years that followed, there were many optimistic statements about the potential of marketing early vegetables in northern markets.

One New Jersey writer did not agree with these glowing accounts of the state's agricultural future. He stated, "The truth should be told. All of Florida is a vast sandy desert, where it is not a malarious marsh, or bushy swamp."<sup>16</sup> This sour judgement did not pass unchallenged; one retort appeared within months: "No one should come here expecting a farm ready made for them— oranges growing in golden profusion, grapes in rich clusters, strawberries in luscious ripeness, figs in sweetness, corn in taste— nor indeed, mosquitoes by the bushel. I have seen all these

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12. "Letters from Florida," *ibid.*, March 2, 1869.

13. "Letter from Jacksonville, Florida," *ibid.*, April 25, 1865.

14. "The Land of Fruit and Flowers," *ibid.*, November 26, 1867.

15. *Ibid.*

16. "Impressions of Florida," *ibid.*, February 15, 1870.

except the last, but they were the result and reward of talent, skill and perseverance."<sup>17</sup>

The contemporary impact of these New Jersey articles is open to speculation. Tourism was growing rapidly in northeast Florida, and the *Sentinel of Freedom's* articles strongly, and on occasion, eloquently reinforced it. In the area of tourism the *Sentinel's* impact was probably the greatest. A lengthy article in July 1868, about St. Augustine helps to explain the presence of New Jersey residents in that location the following year. "At one time not less than ten [persons] from Newark were stopping at the Florida House."<sup>18</sup> "Throughout the State Jerseymen may be found at almost every hotel and boarding house."<sup>19</sup>

In the same period, Jacksonville experienced rapid economic growth. One writer in the spring of 1869 expressed the belief that "real estate in this city has doubled in value within the last twelve months."<sup>20</sup> John Swaim counted "two hundred and sixty" dwellings under construction "at one time."<sup>21</sup>

Yet the *Sentinel of Freedom* did not limit its stories about Florida to merely a publicity campaign. Many articles were written by New Jersey men and women who had come to Florida to live, people who had concerns and insights different from tourists. The *Sentinel* published such works as well, and consequently the newspaper remains a repository of knowledge about Florida. The following excerpts about Florida towns and cities were written by correspondent S. and John Swaim.

At the end of the Civil War, Jacksonville appeared as a place of desolation. Four different Federal occupations had left scars: "Entire blocks were naught but piles of blackened bricks. The long avenues of evergreen shade trees that once arched the streets from end to end, were broken into sections, the vacant places showing only the charred trunks of the proud magnolia and live oak. The Protestant Episcopal and the Catholic churches were gone. The famous Judson House, the Buffington and Merchant's Hotels, the spacious warehouses and splendid stores were all swept away. Fences that enclosed gardens and court-yards have

17 "Letter from Florida," *ibid.*, August 16, 1870.

18. "Letter from Florida," *ibid.*, March 23, 1869.

19. *Ibid.*

20. "A Florida Letter," *ibid.*, May 11, 1869.

21. "Letter from Florida," *ibid.*, July 6, 1869.

gone to kindle soldier's fires or to make a floor for his tent. It was ruin everywhere. The wooden pavements were either burned or had rotted away and heavy army wagons worked the streets up into heaps of sand.<sup>22</sup>

Palatka had also been hard hit by the war: "Palatka has suffered severely from the effects of the war. Many of its pleasant homes have been burned, some are falling down, despoiled of yard fences. In every part of the town we met with charred stumps or we see the heaps of blackened bricks indicating the site of residences. Desolation and ruin seem to be the order that prevails. Of the sawmills that were running before the war, two have been rebuilt and are just beginning business. There are two or three stores, besides some few candy shop looking affairs, one of which displayed upon an open window shutter, in chalk letters, 'Flour, salt and sirrip sold here.'<sup>23</sup>

Sumterville, south of Ocala, was also visited by John Swaim: "The country, heretofore along our journey sufficiently wild, becomes emphatically so. The town stands right in the original forest. A few trees only are cut down, stumps and logs and long grass occupying the line of streets that are to be. The courthouse is unpainted and dilapidated; two stores and some five dwellings, without paint or even whitewash, constitute the town. One man, under constant protest of a feeble looking wife, undertakes to entertain the travelers occasionally journeying through the country. We fared better than we had reason to expect from the unpromising surroundings of the rudely constructed 'hotel.'<sup>24</sup>

Some of the articles described the residents and their behavior. After emancipation, for instance, one observer believed that many planters "did not know how to direct free labor . . . The same old plantation slang phrases; the same imperious voice and manner are still used in giving orders, and the newly made freedman feels he has title to other treatment, resists the indignity."<sup>25</sup> Conflicts began which resulted in calls to the provost marshal.

One article commented on the qualifications of blacks in the Florida legislature. "It would certainly be a mistake to suppose

22. "A Floral Town in Florida," *ibid.*, May 2, 1865.

23. "Observations in Florida," *ibid.*, March 27, 1866.

24. *Ibid.*

25. "Florida after the War," *ibid.*, September 5, 1865.

there is no practical talent there. There may be very few polished experts in parliamentary practice, but there is a good deal of that which is an excellent substitute therefore— sound sterling common sense."<sup>26</sup>

There was a motive behind this observation and the early articles in the *Sentinel*. Of the sixteen articles published between early 1865 and the fall of 1868, ten conclude with John or Jacob Swaim's initials. In addition the four articles in 1865 signed by correspondent S. are probably the elder Swaim's as well. It is known that he was in Jacksonville, where they were written, and several phrases appearing in the 1865 articles reappear in Swaim's 1866 materials. The 1865 articles also reflect a knowledge of flowers, one of his preoccupations.<sup>27</sup> A Jacksonville city directory listed Swaim owning a floriculture business in 1871.<sup>28</sup>

The purpose of the articles seems to have included more than attracting tourists. Florida needed capital, and New Jersey had many monetary resources. Plus, if Northerners could have been added to Florida's large black electorate, it raised the possibility of being able to control the state. "We want a few thousand more Yankees to out vote them [traditional white Southerners] and hold them as a helpless minority, and we can manage things for the real advantage of the country."<sup>29</sup>

It is in light of this statement that the *Sentinel* materials must be interpreted. They represented a direct attempt by a portion of Jacksonville's Republican community to encourage economic growth while furthering their own political and social objectives. "We want more men; active energetic, wide-awake men in order to hasten the work of Reconstruction and make more permanent its resultant civil and religious institutions."<sup>30</sup> To interpret these letters and articles as the equivalent of modern advertisement is to miss part of Florida's history.

26. "Letter from Florida," *ibid.*, July 7, 1868.

27. "A Floral Town in Florida," *ibid.*, May 2, 1865.

28. *Webbs Jacksonville Directory* (New York, 1871), 38.

29. "Letter from Florida," *Newark Sentinel of Freedom*, September 29, 1868.

30. "Letter from Florida," *ibid.*, January 7, 1868. A statement written by John Swaim.